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Generation Diversity in the Workplace

Hype Won't Get You Results

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Why Generations Matter — And Why They Don't

Dealing with diversity in the workplace means (in part) understanding and relating effectively with people who are different than you. This typically generates discussions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. These are critical conversations. Organizational success is becoming increasingly dependent on the ability of employees and managers to deal with differences along these identity lines.

There is one particular slice of diversity, however, that has been getting considerably more attention over the last several years: generational diversity. Beyond mere life stages, generational differences are based on broad variations in values that developed based on the contrasting environment and social dynamics each generation experienced as they were coming of age and becoming adults. In the workplace, these differences seem to be generating clashes around work/ life balance, employee loyalty, authority, and other important issues.

The collective response to these clashes has been a wave of education. Generational "experts" have developed books, articles, keynote speeches, and interactive workshops to help educate managers about who these generations really are and how you can recruit, retain, manage, fire, reward, and discipline them.

There is great value in educational programs like these, but they reveal generational diversity to be a double-edged sword. Yes, the differences are real, and they are important. They are likely to show up in the workplace, and knowledge of the differences will help you navigate the conflicts that come up and help you create a workplace environment that is respectful of differences. But this knowledge can be dangerous when it leads to stereotyping and a rush to change organizations in order to fit the generalizations, rather than the specific needs and interests of those who work there. For some reason, we seem prone to taking the sound bytes about generations and applying them, context-free, to our organizations. We need more discipline in how we apply this knowledge, and the key to that discipline is communication.

Managing "generational diversity" is only partly about knowledge, and it is mostly about communication.

Only organizations that can build the discipline of communication and intentionally apply that discipline across generational lines will be successful in creating strategies for renewing their organizations as the generations come and go.[1] This is not about "answers." It is about continuous conversations that lead to better decisions. The hype around generational differences misses this point. I know that we all want "answers" to these challenges. It can be frustrating to deal with the complexities of multiple generations in the workplace. But success will come from a disciplined approach to this topic, not the bullet points from a keynote speech.

This book lays the foundation for that more disciplined approach.

Chapter 2 provides a synthesis of the research and theory about generations that has been written in the last few decades. Yes, this does include some bulleted lists providing big-picture generalizations about the four different generations that share today's workforce, but it also addresses the complexities and contradictions within the generations and challenges the reader to more deeply understand how generational differences and life-stage differences interact. Chapter 3 then challenges you to put that information on generational differences to the "so what?" test. The existence of generational differences is acknowledged, but there is not agreement about what to do with them. This chapter examines how these differences can be applied in organizations—from designing new products and services, to developing organizational processes and systems, to dealing with inter-generational conflict among employees.

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Finally, Chapter 4 brings the focus back to you and your organization. What do you need to do differently and, more importantly, what do you need to rethink in order to make generational differences an asset to your organization? Specifically, what do you need to rethink regarding knowledge, conversations, and leadership in the context of generational diversity?

Who Are the Generations?

A generation is a group of people within a particular society defined by age boundaries—those who were born during a certain time period. Researchers refer to this as a generational cohort—a set of peers, rather than a specific family generation. People in a cohort share similar experiences growing up, and their values and attitudes, particularly about work-related topics, tend to be similar, based on those shared experiences during their formative years.

If this definition sounds vague (what constitutes formative years? How can millions of people across the nation "share experiences" just because they are alive at the same time?), that is because it is. Generations are fuzzy things, and the few researchers that have been very serious on this topic do not always agree on definitions. The more you read about generations, the more confusing it can be. For example, in two separate publications about generations, I have seen researchers define "Generation X" in very different terms. Arthur Brooks, in his William E. Smith Institute report, defines Generation X as those born between 1965 and 1975.[2] William Strauss and Neil Howe, on the other hand, put it at 1961 to 1981.[3]

So which is it? Was generation X a ten-year generation, or a twenty-year one? Unfortunately, there is no objectively correct answer. If you look beyond the headlines in the books, articles, and reports that come out, you will find vastly different justifications for those cutoff points.

In the first case (Generation X as a ten-year generation), Brooks was looking specifically at demographic data. He defined the Baby Boom generation based on the actual years of increased birth rates in this country (1946 to 1964, a common definition). That makes Generation X (as he defined it for his research) those who were born during the sharp decline in birth rates that followed the boom, which was between 1965 and 1975. In this case, as is true with much of the research on generations, the distinction among generations becomes statistical rather than based in history or social issues. There is no "theory" explaining why someone born in 1963 is a Baby Boomer but a 1965 baby is a Generation Xer. It just happens to be where the trend in birth rates shifted.

Strauss and Howe take a different approach. They are among the relatively few researchers who actually provide a theoretical basis for their identification of different generations.[4] First, they argue that generations for the most part should be defined in roughly twenty-year increments, which is the length of a typical life stage (youth, they argue, is from age 0 to 21, rising adult from 22 to 43, etc.). Life stage is critical, because it is during early adulthood (including the transition from youth to adulthood) when most people establish their core values and beliefs about the world.

Generational theory, as mentioned above, assumes that different generations end up with substantially different values because the social context during which they set their values (when they are coming of age) is different from one generation to the next. Setting your values during the 1960s results in one generation's view (in that case, Baby Boomers), but doing so during the 1980s would produce a different perspective (Generation X).

Of course, even if you accept that generations should be based roughly on life stage cycles (expect a new generation every twenty years or so), we still do not know where to draw the lines between one generation and the next. In every single year in history there are millions of people "coming of age." Brooks' choice of 1965 was based on demographic data, but why did Strauss and Howe choose 1961 as the cutoff point?

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In their historical analysis, they have identified significant "social moments" in history that, due to their weight and significance on the culture, mark the boundaries between generations. According to their historical research, these social moments help define specific generations in this country, dating back to the 1600s.

For example, the combination of the Great Depression and World War Two was one of these social moments, according to Strauss and Howe. The people who were coming of age and into their "rising adult" stage during this time are now known as the "silent generation." Their experience of the hardship, sacrifice, and instability of those times are reflected in this generation's approach to work, loyalty, retirement, and other workplace issues.

Strauss and Howe also argue that the "revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s, when many Baby Boomers entered adulthood, was also a major social moment in this country. The social, political, and economic realities of these two different time periods produced two very different generations. It is the weight of those social moments that causes the lines between the generations to be drawn where they are.

Other authors are not as historically inclined or, in all honesty, as disciplined in their analysis as Strauss and Howe are. Many authors use the literal boom in birthrates to describe the baby boom, without any kind of sociological explanation, and then describe other generations in contrast to the Boomers, using dates that at times seem random. Generation X is often only ten years or so in duration, whereas the generation prior to the baby boom can be identified to span as long as forty years.

These inconsistencies have caused some to challenge the notion that generational differences are, in fact, relevant. They argue that the different "generations" are merely descriptions of differences based on life stage. For example, they are not surprised that the silent generation is identified as favoring stability and security—that is simply normal for the elder stage in life. And when Generation Xers were labeled cynical slackers, they were simply living out a pattern of criticism that all emerging adults face from their immediately elder generation.

I think these challenges suffer from the same undisciplined analysis that we see in some generational authors. Yes, life stage is an important factor in understanding generational differences. But when you look more carefully at the history of the generations, you will see that each generation experiences the different life stages differently. For example, the Baby Boomers played out their youthful rebellion in a much different way than the generation that preceded them. Early adult rebellion was much more tame among the Silent generation, who lived through a youth of scarcity and insecurity. Their eventual salvation (victory in World War Two) was brought to them through a command-and-control culture. They did push back against the establishment, but in a different (and less noticeable) way than the Baby Boomers.

A disciplined approach to generations does not, however, require extreme precision when it comes to start dates and end dates. These are very high-level social phenomena, involving millions of people and long-terms social trends. So insisting that someone born in 1962 must be a part of the Baby Boomers is futile. History should guide the cutoff points, but even so, the starting and end points for generations are at best an approximation. For simplicity's sake we draw dividing lines at specific years, but we should remember that among the literally millions of people born within a few years of any generational dividing line, they are probably fairly evenly split in terms of the generation with which they most identify.

I have also noticed that more and more researchers recognize that those born in the first half of a generational cohort often exhibit differences from those born in the second half. The more you dig

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into the demographic data, the more finely you can slice the differences. While generational trends are important and valid, they do not, of course, preclude the existence of variations or differences within any particular generation. To preclude those differences is a mistake known as stereotyping (more on this later).

In summary, generational cohorts in this country are rooted in historical trends and powerful social forces that have tended to produce noticeably different attitudes and values from one generation to the next, on a cycle of approximately twenty years. While each generation continues to grow and change as they mature through different life stages, their unique generational identity tends to reveal itself in the way they deal with their different stage-related challenges. Because generational differences are forged during the time a generation comes of age, they revolve around core values and conclusions that generations have drawn about the way things are, or the way things "should be." This tends to generate conflicts that are especially hard to resolve, because the different sides of a generational divide often fail to understand the other side's perspective at a very core level.

So although knowledge of generational differences will not by itself resolve generational differences in the workplace, it will help enrich cross-generational conversations in the workplace, which are increasingly common now that there are four generations coexisting in today's workforce in the United States. The historical analysis of Strauss and Howe provides the basis for this discussion of the generations. It is important to make the connection between social forces in history, and the distinct generational identities they create. I will, however, incorporate elements of other research as well, since the Strauss and Howe study was published in the early 1990s, so their coverage of Generation X and the Millennials is speculative. While my choice of generational time spans is intentional and based on theory, the specific names I have chosen for each generation was not based on a rigorous analysis. Since this field is still developing, there is disagreement on what to call the generations. In this book, I define the four generations in today's workplace as follows:

Generation	Born	Age in 2007
Silents	mid-1920s to early	1940s 60s to 80s
Baby Boomers	early 1940s to early	1960s 40s to 60s
Generation Xers	early 1960s to early	1980s 20s to 40s
Millennials	early 1980s to early	2000s(?) 0s to 20s

Silents

The Silent generation is the oldest generation in today's workforce. Even the youngest members of this generation have already passed the sixty-year-old mark, so most of this generation has retired or works on a part-time or consulting basis. Those still working full time, however, are likely in positions of considerable power, at the top of the hierarchy or leadership structures.

Unlike the Baby Boomers, there is great variation in the names given to this generation. I use the term "Silent" generation based on Strauss and Howe's analysis, but others have referred to this generation as Matures, Veterans, GIs, Builders, or even the "Greatest" generation. One reason for the imprecision is, quite frankly, that discussion of generational issues in this country has focused on the Baby Boomers—all other generations have been given a variety of names. In short, this generation is often effectively defined as "anyone who was older than a Baby Boomer."

But if you look at the social forces that define the generations, you will find that all of the people referred to as Silents, GIs, Veterans, Matures, etc. were in fact shaped by two of the most significant events in U.S. history: the Great Depression and World War Two. As generational researchers point out, however, not everyone who came of age during that time experienced these events the same way.

Strauss and Howe define the Silent Generation as those born between 1925 and 1942, distinguished from what they call the GI generation (1901 to 1924). Both generations experienced the sacrifice,

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chaos, and hardship of both the Depression and World War Two during their coming of age/young adulthood. But it was the older, GI generation who actually became the heroes of the War, restoring order and stability to society. The Silent generation, on the other hand, desperately wanted to be the heroes, but even the older members of that generation who did serve in the war, rarely got to see heavy action that would give them "hero" status.

Instead, this generation simply suffered through the hard times. Their parents told them what to do and expected them not to question. They instilled in their children a fear that at any moment they could get the devastating news of their father's job layoff or the death of a loved one overseas. It was a time of great instability, and it was restored, both during and after the war, by the safety of large, hierarchical, and standardized institutions. It was the command-and- control model that ruled the military during the war and the post-war manufacturing industry that returned prosperity to the country.

The Silent Generation had their rebellious youth at a time when this country was celebrating its GI war heroes, which was not a time that was supportive of being critical or drawing attention to oneself. Some have even called the Silent generation the "Tweener" generation, since they existed in between the heroes of the GI generation and the countercultural forces of the Baby Boomers. This is not to say, however, that the Silent Generation accomplished nothing—far from it. This generation experienced a consistent increase in their standard of living throughout their entire lives, and many of the leaders in areas like the civil rights movement or the feminist movement, came from this generation.

In terms of workplace behavior, the sacrifice and instability of the Silents' younger years created some values and attitudes about work that are different from subsequent generations. The Silents are often held up as the example of "work ethic," and they tend to expect gratification or rewards to be delayed. The Silents trained only once for a career, because they usually stayed with it. It was a fairly linear view of the main stages of one's life: first education, then work, then leisure. In their youth they went to school or an apprenticeship to learn a trade. Then they entered their career and more often than not worked there until they retired, at which point they could focus on leisure.

The work environment they joined as they got their first jobs (in the 1950s) was very hierarchical, tended to draw a sharp line between work and family life, and frowned upon socializing across authority lines. Many Silents brought these values with them throughout their career. This generation is often described as unable to handle change, although that may be more life-stage related than generational. It is true that they value stability having survived the turmoil in their early years, but from an organizational perspective, they also saw the need for change, to improve processes, and to do the impossible. It is true that they value supporting the cause or the organization (rather than the individual). If they disagree with the party line, they will rarely voice their opposition openly.

Like all generations, they are apt team players, but they may define "team" differently. They tend to see themselves on very large teams, with a clear, hierarchical structure and a strong, central authority figure. They also value highly specialized and differentiated roles on the team.
Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak focus their generational analysis on the workplace and provide helpful lists of both the assets and the liabilities that each generation brings to the workplace. Here are their lists for the Silent Generation[5]:

Assets:

- Stable
- Detail oriented
- Thorough
- Loyal
- Hard Working

Liabilities:

- Inept with ambiguity and change
- Reluctant to buck the system
- Uncomfortable with conflict
- Reticent when they disagree

Baby Boomers

The actual "boom" in births in this country is identified by demographers as 1946 through 1964, and many authors on generational issues define the cohort using those years. Researchers that tie social and historical factors into the generations, however, tend to move those years back by a few. Strauss and Howe place the Boom generation as those born between 1943 and 1960, and that is the figure that I use. Although people born between 1961 and 1964 are part of the demographic boom, their experiences and their eventual attitudes do not line up close enough to the other Boomers to be considered part of that generation.

The reason for this is that people born after 1960 are less likely to have a strong personal connection to the era we simply refer to as "the sixties." This was the major social moment that forged the Baby Boom generation. Unlike the social moment that created the Silent generation (the Depression and World War Two), the sixties were more of a "spiritual awakening," to use Strauss and Howe's language. They argue that historically there has been a pattern of alternating "civic" crises and "spiritual" awakenings that have forged the generations.

So social factors seem to be a better criterion than birth rates. Besides, it is not the large numbers that define this generation, although the sheer size of the Boomer generation certainly has drawn our society's attention (dominated our attention?). When the Boomers went through their rebellious youth, our culture was focused on youth and rebellion. Now that the Boomers are heading into retirement, major items on the social agenda include health care, social security, and the definition of "retirement."

But it was the social elements of "the sixties" (which includes part of the 1970s, frankly) that defined this generation. During these rebellious times, the Boomers worked hard to move against the essence of the GI generation: they focused on spiritualism over science, gratification over patience, and self over community.[6] Their introspection generated a lot of attention on spirit, principles, and ideals, although there was more room for individual expression and understanding of those ideals. In fact, this focus on self was critical for Boomers during their rising adulthood phase, and is partly why this generation is often labeled as self-absorbed. Boomers tended to excel in occupations that called for creative independence (like the media), but were unable to build consensus or mobilize as a unit like their GI predecessors. The Boomers did have a war during their young adulthood (Vietnam), although they are arguably bound more by their collective efforts to avoid it, than they were for fighting it.

Unlike the Silents, the Boomers did not see nonstop growth in their standard of living. The early Boomers experienced the growth, stability, and prosperity of the 1950s, and these people give the Boomers their reputation for being workaholics and achievement- oriented. It was the Baby Boomers who invented the sixty-hour work week. But over their lives they experienced setbacks in major social metrics, including income, test scores, and crime rates.

There are some important paradoxes within the Boomer generation. While they are known for being self-absorbed, they are also known for their commitment to teamwork and group harmony. Although they are known for being driven to achieve and work hard, they are also known for their commitment to self development. Even their reputation for challenging the command and control model of the previous generation has not always matched the experience of those who report to them. Their 1960s battle cry of "don't trust anyone over thirty" seemed to change once the Boomers themselves

moved into middle age.

According to Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, the Boomers offer the following assets and liabilities in the workplace[7]:

Assets:
- Driven
- Service Oriented
- Want to Please
- Good at relationship
- Good team players

Liabilities:
- Not budget minded
- Reluctant to go against peers
- Judgmental of those who see things differently
- Uncomfortable with conflict

It is hard to describe the impact Boomers have had on the workplace in a casual way, because at all stages of their careers they have been exerting influence based on their great numbers. That is, perhaps, where their focus on teams comes in. Some argue that since they moved up the ranks in great numbers, they were forced to work with their peers in order to get things done. It also harkens back to their rebellious youth when they were able to be part of some kind of "movement."
As we will see in the next section, however, these ideals were challenged by the next generation to enter the workforce—Generation X. Just as Boomers challenged the Silents, Xers challenged the Boomers and often found themselves left out of the collegial, harmonious teams that Boomers espoused. Their quest for harmony in the workplace often creates an avoidance of conflict or can even lead to groupthink.

Generation Xers

Although Boomers have dominated the generational landscape, it was the emergence of Generation X into the workforce in the early 1990s brought the overall issue to the mainstream's attention. As soon as a critical mass of Xers had entered the workforce, their contrasting approach became the subject of articles that described the differences—with some suspicion and frustration. Born mostly in the 1960s and 1970s (Strauss and Howe say between 1961 and 1981), Generation X has been struggling its whole life to stay out of the shadow of the Baby Boomers.
Raw numbers are a big part of this. Although birthrates during the early years of Generation X years were close to boom levels, the "baby bust" between 1965 and 1975 is significant. For example, being born in 1967, my elementary and middle school classmates and I seemed to be on the cusp of the demographic shift. Each school we attended prior to high school was either closed or consolidated within a few years of our departure, as enrollment numbers dropped dramatically.

The small numbers compared to Baby Boomers gives Generation X a smaller voice. It contributes to the Boomer perception that Gen Xers lack competence or impact. There has been discussion among the association community lately that Generation X poses a huge problem, because they are not "joiners"—obviously an important part of the business model for voluntary associations. It turns out, however, that part of this perception is driven simply by numbers. Where there are fewer Generation X members joining associations, it is often because there are far fewer people available to join. Interestingly, the one association-specific research report on this issue claims that while there are fewer people joining, the percentage of the Generation X population joining associations is actually greater than the Boomer rates when they were the same age.

The negative and disappointing aura around Generation X is not merely because they are not Baby Boomers. Like other generations, they have been shaped by the particular forces in history they

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faced while growing up. While many were born in the optimistic and idealistic times of the 1960s, by the time they came of age, they were looking at a different picture: the Iran hostage crisis, the energy crisis, Three Mile Island, rampant inflation, and the first wave of corporate downsizing in America. As Strauss and Howe put it, "at every turn, these kids sensed that adults were simply not in control of themselves or the country."[9]

Generation X grew up during a prolonged decline in the educational system, although the reports often blamed the students themselves for the decline. The major changes going on in the adult world in the 1960s and 1970s had a huge impact on this generation. Divorce rates skyrocketed during this era, and there was a huge increase in the number of women in the workforce. One impact of these trends was the creation of the first generation of "latch key kids," who came home from school to an empty house and took care of themselves.

Because of the perceived failure of their parents' institutions, and the laissez-faire approach to parenting they received, Generation X is now known for its independence. Self employment is a goal of a higher percentage of Generation X, compared to other generations. Linked to that is a fundamental distrust of authority. Boomers have labeled Generation X as cynical, but Xers would likely describe that more as intelligent skepticism. Title and appearance mean less to Generation X. Respect is conferred based on behavior.

This clash with authority obviously has implications for the workplace, particularly when a very populous Boomer middle management is forced to supervise Generation X. The primary complaint of the Boomers was of the Xers' poor work ethic (slackers). In fact, the work ethic of Generation X is different, although that does not mean that they are not hard workers. But they do not define work as "self fulfillment" as Boomers did, and they do not trust corporate institutions enough to put in their time or "pay their dues" the way older generations did.

Generation X is also the first generation to grow up with computer technology. Although they were not as immersed as the Millennials are today, they embraced personal computers and, later, the Internet as a natural part of the working world. This has also generated a more flexible approach to work and working hours compared to both the Boomer and Silent generations.

Being left alone has also impacted the way Generation X views work and family, however. Having survived their latch-key experience, they are more likely to push back against the Boomer norm of the sixty-hour work week (at least when they are only getting forty hours of pay). As Generation X became parents themselves, they led the charge for work-life balance in the workplace.

Of course, as the Xers move into more senior positions, I expect this position will soften a bit. I doubt they will completely abandon the work-life balance notion, but when they get into positions with more and more responsibility, the number of hours they put in will increase. Perhaps the "balance" is now coming through the ability do still do work, while not being at work (via the blackberry, the Internet, and the mobile phone).

Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak note the following assets and liabilities for Generation X:[10]

Assets:
- Adaptable
- Technoliterate
- Independent
- Unintimidated by authority

Liabilities:
- Impatient

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- Poor people skills
- Cynical

Millennials

The newest generation to enter the workforce has been named the Millennials (or, alternatively, Nexters, Generation Y, the Net Generation, etc.). Before we talk about any of the social forces that impacted their development and what kind of workers and citizens they are, I must make one point perfectly clear:

No one, including the Millennials themselves, understands the essence of this generation. It is simply too early to tell.

We certainly have some early indications. We watched them grow up, and we see them in the workforce now, in increasing numbers, but this time period reminds me very much of the early 1990s, when Generation X was first being identified. We tended to come to quick conclusions about Generation X based on what we saw as they first entered the workforce. The labels of "cynical" and "slacker" had an element of generation in them, but they were also based on a Boomer reaction to the next generation in early adulthood life stage. Middle managers in every generation have looked down upon their new, next- generation direct reports. Fifteen years later, when all of Generation X had reached adulthood, we were able to discern a more complete and accurate picture. We must remember this lesson when looking at Millennials.

That doesn't mean we should wait before talking about this generation. In fact, this section on Millennials is much longer than the previous three generations, because the information is still emerging. There is more to explore, with fewer clear conclusions. It is useful to examine the possible make-up of this newest generation, but all analyses (including this one) must be taken with a grain of salt and, more importantly, must be re-examined on a regular basis over the next twenty years in order to capture the more complete picture of this generation as it emerges.

Because Millennials are still young, the researchers have yet to determine the precise dividing years of this generational cohort. The oldest of this generation were born in 1982, according to Strauss and Howe, and most people tend to describe Millennials as those born in the 1980s and 1990s (up to the new Millennium, of course). Some will include those born in the early 2000s, although I think it is impossible to identify the end point of this generation until we are further down the historical timeline.

Despite the youth of this generation, there is already a major social force that most agree will be definitional for this generation, and that is the Internet. That is why they are sometimes referred to as the Net Generation, or N-Gen. While Xers adapted quickly to computer-based technology, the Millennials did not have to adapt. Millennials knew what the verb "to click" meant before they even knew how to read. The availability of computers that were connected to the Internet (many with high-speed, connected all the time) is taken by many in this generation as a given. As a result, the Millennials feel more instantly connected to the rest of the world than any generation before them.

But saying Millennials are "Internet" babies is not enough. They are children of entirely different Internet compared to what the Xers first experienced in the 1990s. The Internet of the Milliennials is popularly referred to as Web 2.0. The first version of the Internet focused on publishing. It represented an explosion of information and knowledge resources. Where we used to have to make trips to several libraries to find the information we were looking for, now we merely needed to type in some good search terms, and we will get more information than we can use. The Internet, in its first iteration, was billions of pages of information, suddenly at our fingertips.

Web 2.0 is different. It still gives us access to all that information, but the new Internet is much more dynamic and user-focused. Tools of Web 2.0 include blogs and wikis—web pages that are created,

real- time, by the users of the Internet, not just the owner of the particular web domain. As one user develops content, another can modify it or, in the case of blogs, at least comment on it or link to it. The information on the Internet has become a series of conversations, rather than merely a static set of published pages. Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), the online encyclopedia, has been written entirely by users, and according to the site, thousands of changes to the content are made every hour.

And the Web 2.0 dynamic is not limited to informational resources. The most popular websites among the Millennial generation (as of this writing, at least—it will surely change) are places like MySpace and Second Life. In these online environments, conversations happen, people "meet," networks are expanded and developed, and in some cases products are developed, bought, and sold, all in a virtual environment. The Millennnials are building an Internet that allows them to instantly connect to very large numbers of people across the world in order to accomplish significant tasks, without the necessity of in-person interaction.

In an online report written about the new culture of participation on the Internet, Steve Borsch quotes Josiah, a twenty-year-old college student, describing his use of the Internet:
My use of the net is unique (but increasingly less so) in that I don't go actively finding information so much as I've used technologies like syndication and instant communication to set up a stream of information that comes to me, 24/7.[11]

When he found it difficult to find the information, he simply found people who had the expertise and worked with them to create an application that would solve the problem. As Borsch points out,
This is not an unusual response for Josiah or many others: if something they need or want is not available, they simply figure out how to create it on their own. In fact, this behavior calls out a fundamental difference between those living in a participation culture vs. those who have come before.[12]

The Internet, however, is not the only influence on this generation. Another factor that will likely have a profound impact is the abundance of the American society today. Like the early Boomers, the early Millennials grew up during a time of extensive economic growth and prosperity. But the abundance of the turn of this Millennial is staggering. In A Whole New Mind, Dan Pink argues that the rampant abundance in today's society is actually pushing us away from material pursuit. Regardless, though, the abundance is clear:

- Today the United States has more cars than licensed drivers.
- The self-storage industry (which obviously did not exist during the Great Depression) is now a
- $17 billion industry
- The United States spends more on trash bags than ninety other countries spend on everything.[13]

As that last statistic indicates, this abundance cannot automatically be equated with progress, and not all in our society share in this abundance equally, by any means. But the big-picture abundance will clearly shape the Millennial generation. Youth today are spending more than the youth of previous generations, and advertisers and marketers target them more specifically and frequently than the youth of previous generations. The material abundance, combined with the information abundance of the Internet, may be creating a generation that more quickly assumes resources will be available when they are needed.

As in previous generations, the trends in parenting that Millennials experienced as children is being identified as a shaper of this generation. While the "latch key" experience of Generation X children has been used to explain their fierce independence and relative disdain for authority in the workplace, the Millennials are having quite a different experience. Their parents (a mix of Boomers and Xers) have perhaps over-compensated in the opposite direction. Millennial children tend to live very structured, protected, and over- scheduled lives.

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In a world of "play dates," intensively organized after- school activities, and constantly working parents, Millennial children have grown up mostly being told what to do, told where they would be, and, in many cases, driven there by parents and caregivers.

It is unclear what impact this intensive attention will have on Millennials as they enter adulthood, but some have already characterized the Millennials as having a greater need for structure and supervision in their jobs.14 Others have noticed that the over- involved parenting has actually extended into the workforce, where the parents of at least one (unlucky) Millennial actually called their child's supervisor to take issue with a slightly negative performance review the child had received.15 In addition to over-protection, the parents of the Millennials are also the first parents to be routinely referred to as "friends" by their own children. These informal, collegial relationships can backfire, however, as it could lead to the atrophy of core interpersonal skills. "Difficult" bosses or customers can stump the Millennials, who are used to friendly and supportive interactions.16

Finally, as they did with the previous generations, Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak posit their view on the assets and liabilities of Millennials on the job:17

Assets:
- Collective action
- Optimism
- Tenacity
- Heroic spirit
- Multitasking capabilities
- Technological savvy

Liabilities
- Need for supervision and structure
- Inexperience, particularly with handling difficult people issues

So What? Applying the Knowledge

Unlike many authors, I did not provide a tidy table at the end of the previous chapter summarizing the attributes of the four generations in today's workplace, highlighting their similarities and differences. I apologize. I understand this is a lot of information to process and retain—and a table would help—but I left out the summary table for an important reason:

Encapsulating the differences among generations gives the false impression that knowledge of these differences is going to solve your problems.

The truth is, it won't. Knowledge is only the first piece to this puzzle. Research on generational differences is by its nature a high- level analysis, and that limits its direct applicability to your very specific workplace problems. Generational differences are very real sociological dynamics, but they apply to entire segments of the population—tens of millions of people in this country. Although we tend to personify these generations by discussing the generational "personalities," you must remember that these generalizations cannot be applied to individuals.

Yet this is how so many people use this knowledge, and it is nothing less than stereotyping. We become aware of a broad cultural generalization, and then when we interact with someone from that cultural group, we change our behavior towards them based on the generalization we assume to be true, rather than trying to find out whether or not it is true in the first place. That's the trick with generalizations.

They are "true" in the sense that there are a large number of people in that group who exhibit that trait or characteristic, but they never predict whether or not it will be "true"

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for a particular individual.

An example from the world of statistics will help illustrate. When statisticians discuss probability, they express it as a number between zero and one. If an event has a probability of zero, it will never happen, and if the probability is one, then it will happen every time. The classic example is flipping a coin—heads or tails. Statisticians know that the probability of the coin landing on heads would be 0.5 (50% in layman's terms).

But what if I take a coin, flip it, and then hide the result from you. With the coin still covered, I ask, "What is the probability that this coin landed on heads?" If your answer is "0.5," then you are like most people—and you are wrong.

Remember, the coin had already been flipped, so the heads or tails question was no longer a question of probability. That coin either landed on heads, or it didn't. When I lift up my hand and you see that it landed on tails, you would then discover the correct answer to the question, "what is the probability that it landed on heads?" would be zero. The probability of a hypothetical coin flip landing on heads is 0.5, but once an actual coin has been flipped, it either is heads (probability of 1.0), or it isn't (probability of 0.0).

The same applies to individuals from the various generations. Yes, generational differences are real. When you examine the sociological data you will see certain similarities or trends among Baby Boomers or Generation Xers. But when you get an individual or even a group of them in the room, or in your office, or purchasing your product, you must remember: those individuals have already been "flipped." They either are like their generational personality—or they aren't (and more likely represent some kind of mix). And there is really no way to know their personality ahead of time. You simply have to ask them.

That is how you start to put the generational puzzle together—by engaging in more effective conversations among your employees, your customers, and your stakeholders. It is what I call the discipline of conversation, and it is sorely lacking in areas where generational differences exist. We want to make the right choices as we face numerous decisions related to creating products, services, and organizations that leverage generational differences. Yet we rarely create genuine conversations that will help generate better answers. We simply read what others write about generations and try to force- fit their answers to our organizations and contexts.

When you can build the discipline of conversation into areas that touch on generational differences, you will make better choices. The rest of this chapter examines how to apply this concept in three different areas of organizational life: (1) developing and marketing products and services; (2) designing organizational processes and systems; and (3) resolving conflict among employees in the workplace.

Products and Services

In recognition of generational differences, many companies are customizing some of their offerings to appeal to specific generations. In 2001, AARP made a major change to one of its most cherished member benefits, its magazine. In its internal research, AARP had found that Modern Maturity was very important to its members, consistently being cited as a primary reason for members renewing their membership. But at that time, the Baby Boomers were just starting to hit retirement age (the oldest were in their mid-fifties), which meant they were eligible for AARP membership. AARP had its sights set on this target market of 76 million, and it wanted to make sure its products and services were tailored appropriately.

Specifically, they had some concerns that a magazine called "Modern Maturity" would not appeal to the youth-focused Boomers.

On the other hand, they did not want to disrupt the success that Modern Maturity was having with AARP's older members, so they decided to launch a new magazine, just for the Boomers, called My Generation, while continuing to publish Modern Maturity at the same time.

The new magazine was designed specifically with the generational stereotypes in mind. "The magazine will respond to what media-savvy boomers want in a publication—a user-friendly magazine with a distinctly different point of view that is irreverent, smart, funny and informative," said Hugh Delehanty, the Editor of Modern Maturity, as the new magazine was set to be released.[18] "It will talk to boomers in a language and style they can identify with, and demonstrate a fresh approach to address their concerns," he said.

The strategy would be to keep this magazine aimed at the Boomers as they age, eventually eliminating Modern Maturity and introducing a new magazine for Generation X when they get to retirement age. It sounded like a great idea—designing products to match the needs and interests of different generations, rather than expecting them all to be satisfied with the same thing.

There was just one problem: it didn't work.

Two years after its launch, AARP retired My Generation because it failed to attract enough attention from readers and advertisers to justify the cost of producing and marketing a separate title for Boomers. In the end, executives at AARP concluded that the readers were simply more connected to the AARP brand than the new "My Generation" idea, even if they were Boomers.

AARP did, however, end up changing their magazine. Given their brand analysis, they renamed it AARP the Magazine, but their experience and research did indicate that different people want different things from the magazine, so they decided to produce three different versions each month: one for readers in their fifties, one for readers in their sixties, and one for readers seventy years old or older.

It represented a change in philosophy (or at least spin), as Editor Delehanty now claimed, "The oldest baby boomers are 57 now, but you don't miraculously change at age 58.... Essentially, what we have done here is segmentation by life stage."[19]

Much of the content of the three separate versions is the same, but they are able to customize large portions or add features that are particularly relevant based on the age groupings. In one article about personal finance, the edition aimed at fifty-year-olds focused on investing, while those in their seventies read about savings. For a separate article about fitness, they had experts develop three separate exercise routines, customized by age group. One section of the magazine publishes "personal essays," where a fifty-something talked about lying about going to Woodstock, while her seventy-something colleague wrote about living with pain.

So does this mean that generational differences are meaningless, and life-stage issues are more important? No. This merely reveals the danger of generational stereotyping. It is "true" (at a high level) that Baby Boomers are youth-oriented and feel a sense of connection to the 1960s. But when the actual members of AARP chose which magazine to read, those connections did not drive their behavior as much as age-focused issues did, in combination with other factors. Those AARP members who were Baby Boomers had already been "flipped." So knowledge about their generation alone did not lead to a good decision (i.e., launching a magazine that failed).

But the knowledge itself was not irrelevant. The content that AARP included in its new age-targeted magazine certainly drew on knowledge they had of the Baby Boomer generation. More importantly, however, they gathered that information and knowledge through research and conversations with actual AARP members from the Baby Boomer generation to help them make the decision

(AARP is well known for its emphasis on research—it has two hundred staff members dedicated to research).[20] Their broad knowledge of generational differences would be critical in analyzing the information they got from conversations with members, but it was through ongoing conversations that they really were able to solve a problem and create a magazine, as the editor says, that "is trying to connect with readers on a deeply personal level."

Systems and Processes

Generational differences are especially challenging to organizational systems and processes, which by definition are about uniformity and consistency. We create "standard" ways of doing things, partly for efficiency's sake, and partly to ensure fairness in the organization. Standardization prevents us from having to reinvent the wheel each time, and if we treated every individual differently, we would increase the risk of favoritism or discrimination.

So when organizations develop systems and processes for things like recruiting new staff, conducting performance reviews, or creating benefits packages, we understandably move toward standardization and uniformity (efficient and fair). More importantly, the systems and processes we create are usually created by the people in charge, who tend to be from one or two generations. As younger generations move into the workplace, this often places strains on systems that, from their perspective, don't seem to make sense.

One area where this strain has been apparent in recent years is around benefits offered to employees to support work/life balance. A lot has been written about Generation X's focus on worklife balance, in comparison to the Baby Boomers, who are credited with the invention of the six-tyhour work week. Some companies have created new benefits or changed their systems to meet the needs of Generation X employees. They offer more extensive family leave, flexible work hours, or on-site daycare centers to make it easier for employees to have more time with their families. As one Generation X employee at a large pharmaceutical company said,

If Abbott wasn't flexible, and if they didn't have the day care center, I think my family would have suffered. Right now, I feel I have the best of both worlds, because I can have a fulfilling career and I can have a fulfilling family life and feel like I am spending enough time at both places.[21]

By offering flexible benefits, the company can appeal to multiple generations. Some companies are even now providing benefit "credits" to employees, that they can "spend" on different levels of benefits or different benefits entirely, depending on their priorities. Some may apply more of these credits to areas like retirement benefits, while others may opt for more extensive health coverage. Other companies have changed their reward systems to include more frequent (but smaller) rewards, based on their analysis of the younger generations' expectations about rewards and performance reviews.[22]

But is that a generational issue? Remember, the specific employees in your organization have already been flipped. If they choose higher retirement plan benefits, it could be related to their generation's values or attitudes about retirement—but it could also be a life-stage issue (they might be facing retirement in a few years!), or it could be for some reason you have not even considered. Flexibility as an overarching concept makes sense if you want to create a workplace that more successfully retains people across generations, but the precise nature of that flexibility will only be determined through ongoing research and conversations with the people involved.

Another systems issue that is continually linked to generational diversity is technology. Organizational processes and systems typically develop incrementally, over time. That means that most of the systems we use today for things like communicating to stakeholders or recruiting new employees or volunteers were originally developed before computers and the internet started to dominate our lives.

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One of the defining characteristics of the younger generations in the workforce, of course, is their relationship with technology. The Millennials, in particular, have been saturated with computers and the Internet their entire lives, so as they enter the workforce, many organizations are starting to change their "standard" business processes (like communications and recruiting) to incorporate computer technology in ways that is more appealing to younger workers.

The United States Army, for example, has developed an internet- based recruiting tool that is surprising to some: a computer game.

"America's Army" is an online, interactive video game that has become very popular. Over 4 million people had registered online to play the game by October 2004—making it one of the top five games in the world at the time, according to the Army News Service.[23] Although the Army collects no personal information on game players (so they can't try to directly recruit any of those four million people), they have gained access to possible recruits by holding game tournaments organized through colleges and universities. The Army does not have statistics about how many people have actually joined because of the game, but officials have "plenty of positive anecdotes and say it can only help in a very difficult recruiting environment," according to the Washington Post.[24]

In addition to gaming, Millennials have shown great interest in "Web 2.0" technologies, like blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites. Many organizations are moving into these areas in order to more effectively recruit the younger generations. The popularity of sites like MySpace and YouTube are changing the way organizations do recruiting. As one blogger noted in October 2006,

It is well known that one of the first steps that a Human Resources department takes after receiving a resume from a recent college graduate is to head over to MySpace and Facebook and learn more about the candidate. A bad or negative profile on these social sites can mean the end of the application process for many students.[25]

Organizations are also now posting recruiting videos on YouTube. As one employment services company noted,

The newest group coming up cut their teeth on nothing but video games; static text is not catching their attention as much as something that moves. Video allows you to stand out from the crowd, and appear cool at the same time.[26]

But remember, it is easy to fall victim to generational hype, particularly when it is tied to an already over-hyped issue like social media and Web 2.0. It is certainly valuable to engage your target audience in ways that are appealing to them. You need to be sure, however, that those ways are actually appealing—and not just the ways you think are appealing. Despite the endorsement of MySpace quoted above from October 2006, by February 2007 there were indicators that MySpace was on the decline. The blog from the magazine Fast Company had an entry titled "MySpace is Starting to Suck," and the first comment on that post only questioned the choice of the word "starting."[27]

Once again, the challenge is to be in constant dialogue with the relevant stakeholders in order to determine how you should modify systems (like recruiting) based on generational differences. At the very least, flexibility should remain important. Technology has certainly enabled organizations to communicate through multiple media quickly and cheaply, so it makes sense to explore areas like social media when doing recruiting. Ignoring the trend would be a mistake. But you must actually engage your target audience in some kind of ongoing conversation in order to determine the specifics of your strategy. If you are relying exclusively on a room full of Baby Boomers—or even mix of Boomers and Xers—to come up with the "answers" about how to recruit the next generation of employees, you are likely to fail.

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Staff Conflict

Decisions about marketing products or recruiting staff lend themselves to the generational analysis because the targets of those decisions are, in fact, large groups. But even in those cases, I have illustrated the importance of engaging in continuous conversation with stakeholders and avoiding the pitfalls of relying on generational stereotypes. So it should be no surprise that the application of this high-level knowledge about generational differences to very specific workplace conflicts and disputes is even more challenging.

Yet so often that is what we do in organizations. Much of the literature tempts us with tips and tricks to manage multigenerational teams more effectively. Remember: the people in your organization have already been "flipped." Even when the behavior of people in the office matches the generalizations in the literature, that doesn't mean you can base solutions to the specific problems based on the literature. Consider the following scenario, in which two peers on a work team from different generations are engaged in a sticky conflict.

Dan v. Mary

Mary and Dan are peers on a small work team within a larger organization. The team conducts research and produces reports on that research for clients, and it is one of the most productive teams in the company. Mary and Dan, however, have become increasingly frustrated with each other, and their interpersonal issues are now threatening the productivity of the whole team. They both agree that there is a problem, but they each define it very differently.

Mary's View

Mary derives great satisfaction from her work and enjoys being on this team. But since Dan came on board, that has changed. Unlike the other members of the team, Dan keeps mostly to himself. His interaction with other team members is almost exclusively by email, and he is one of the first people in the division to really take advantage of the telework policy. It seems like every time Mary walks by Dan's office, it is empty. And when he is in the office, he never does anything with the rest of the team. Mary cherishes the group lunches, the happy hours after work, and the occasional weekend bike ride with other team members. In addition to having fun together, they end up generating some great ideas to guide their research in those interactions.

It's clear that Dan only puts in the minimum. His work isn't awful—not bad enough to get him fired—but not the caliber that Mary would expect in this team. Mary has made great efforts to include Dan in the team activities, but he refuses. He also rarely comes to team meetings any more, despite the fact that she reminds him of his absences (and the boss, through the magic of cc:). At this point she has given up on him and is forced to do complicated work-arounds any time his work and her work intersect on a project.

Dan's View

Dan, as you might imagine, sees things differently. Dan also loves this job. The content of the research is a perfect next step from what he was studying in school the year before. He is very passionate about this work and grateful to find a job that allows him to do it. He is also grateful for the flexible policies of this organization, because it allows him to spend more time at home with his young daughter. He also values the ability to leave the office when he needs to examine primary source data for the research, and to do the analysis from the quiet of his home office.

The problem, however, is the constant interference he is getting from Mary. For some reason, she demands that he become part of the little social club that she and some of the older team members have created. He tried to be a sport and go to these events at first, but they just aren't fun, and they don't help him get his work done. He has even been forced to withdraw from almost any "meeting" that Mary and her friends set up in the office. These meetings are 90% chat and 10% substance, and Dan does not have time for that. It is hard to simultaneously be a high performing employee and a good father these days, so he has no time to waste.

That's where knowledge of generations can help. When two people get locked into opposing positions, they often simply repeat their positions over and over again ("You need to come to more meetings... Oh yeah? You need to use email more... Oh Yeah? You need to come to more meetings...). To break the cycle, you need to facilitate the conversation so each side has a chance to explore why they hold their positions (both their own positions and the other party's). Dan needs to understand why Mary gets so much value out of the meetings, or why she prefers meetings without a structured agenda. And Mary needs to understand why Dan prefers telework and why email communication works best for him.

Some of the answers to these "why" questions can be rooted in generational differences. If Dan and Mary were aware of the generational tendencies they were exhibiting, it might take the edge off of their conflict. Dan and Mary are likely not aware of how deeply their preferences run. They probably don't see how some simple workplace behaviors connect to deeply held values—values whose difference stems from the different contexts in which Dan and Mary grew up. By introducing these generational ideas, it adds some relativism to what was previously a very absolute discussion. Both Dan and Mary were upset with each other because the other person was not behaving "rationally," or was not doing things like "normal" people do. Generational differences bring to our attention that there is not always an absolutely "right" way to do things. This creates space for more creative negotiation.

In conflict situations, when you become aware of the values or deeply held beliefs that are at the source of the other party's behavior, it can sometimes help to ease the negative judgments you have made about them. You still don't like the behavior, of course, but there is less of a condemnation of the individual, since there now appears to be come consistency or "reason" for why they are acting that way. From this place, it is easier to negotiate an agreement around the behavior, because you realize that it is the behavior that requires agreement—not the core values or beliefs.

But as I said at the beginning of this book, generational knowledge is a double-edged sword. Application of that knowledge in this same case could actually make things worse. The key is ensuring that the generational component of the discussion stays relative and flexible. As soon as you turn to generational issues to provide rigid explanations or, worse yet, specific solutions to the problem, then you can take Mary and Dan farther away from a solution.

If a supervisor (or either Dan or Mary on their own) introduces generational issues as the source of a solution, or as a simplistic explanation of either side's position, the response by Dan and Mary is likely to be even more defensive. Even if Dan is analyzing this situation as a typical Generation Xer, he will resent someone else who comes in and tells him why he feels the way he does.

Too often, that's how generational knowledge is applied. "Oh, you're a Boomer so you like..." "Well, of course you react that way— you're from Generation X!" Statements like these only fan the flames of the conflict, because they shut down conversations and they make people feel stereotyped. They present closed conclusions about the way someone is, rather than an open inquiry into that person's experience. When you approach problem solving from this perspective, you end up telling people what to do, rather than having them determine their own solutions. In conflict situations it is critical that the parties themselves generate the solutions. When solutions are imposed externally they are almost always subverted or ignored during implementation.

Now What? The Power of Rethinking

Issues of diversity in our society run deep. They run deeper than most training programs or publications on diversity like to admit, in fact. It seems we are afraid to acknowledge the depth of these issues. Instead, we tell ourselves a more comfortable story that in fact, we already understand diversity. We convince ourselves that we understand, for the most part, the issues of race, gender, or sexual identity we face in the workplace. Harmony and success, therefore, become merely an issue of competent implementation.

Yet in the few instances that I have witnessed truly harmonious relations across identity/diversity lines, the success only came about when everyone in the system began to think about these issues in a profoundly different way. They achieved a much deeper level of understanding before they could implement anything successfully.

The same is true with generational diversity. The information in this brief book is important (as is the information in all the books I read in researching this book), but it will not bring you to that deeper level of understanding. To reach this next level, you need to start rethinking the issue of generational diversity. This book is just a start. Hopefully it has provided you with a basic overview of what generational diversity is and how it shows up in the workplace, but the challenge is now on you to rethink some critical issues related to generations. Specifically, there are three areas to focus on: knowledge, conversations, and leadership.

Knowledge

The first level of rethinking is the realization that your own generation has impacted your view of the world in more ways than you think. Your core values and views of "the way the world is" were given shape when you came of age, and they usually feel fairly absolute. When you see how different generational contexts create much different views of the world, it adds some relativity to that picture. It can help you to better understand your own biases, perspectives, and blind spots. As in all diversity issues, self-knowledge drives progress and effectiveness.

As you continue to explore the nuances of generational diversity, be sure to take the time to challenge your own thinking about the issues. Get clearer on exactly what you think, and why. The goal is not to read the literature to decide what generation you are, or to change your thinking to match your generational profile. It is simply to challenge assumptions you make, to uncover your own thought processes and patterns, and to shine the light on areas of your thinking that have previously been ignored. Use this topic to gain a better understanding of who you are.

Of course, there is still much to be learned at the macro level as well. It is important to follow the developments in the generational research, because this field is still so young. As I warned earlier, you should take all reports on generational differences (including this one) with a grain of salt—this is not an exact science, and the varied approaches that the authors take to the subject and to the research can generate quite different conclusions. So while you will unlikely find the "truth" about this topic, it is important to stay on top of the knowledge that is being generated.

This is particularly true when it comes to the younger generations. Conclusions that anyone draws about a generation that has yet to turn forty years old should be read with skepticism. We have seen the write- ups of Generation X change significantly from the early 1990s, when Generation X was just entering the workforce, to today, when they are starting to reach upper levels of management. The millennials are in a similar position today. It is useful to follow the research about this younger generation, but remember to stay on top of the developing research, because the conclusions are guaranteed to change. No matter what you are reading today about generations at the macro level, it is critical to rethink the conclusions on a continual basis.

But the most important part of the knowledge question lies at a level in between the micro and the macro. Between self-knowledge and knowledge about societal trends is the knowledge of what is happening within your organization or system. The biggest knowledge challenge related to generations that you face today is at this middle level. What impact do generational differences have on your staff interactions? How can you make your products or services the most attractive to your actual, multi-generational customers (and not merely attractive to their generational profiles)? This is likely where the biggest gap in your knowledge exists, so it should be a priority area for rethinking.

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Conversations

The key to increasing your knowledge, however, lies in the quality of your conversations. That was apparent in the example I provided in Chapter three with the conflict between the Boomer and the Xer on the work team. But it goes beyond interpersonal conversations. In order to leverage the knowledge of generational differences, organizations need to create much more powerful conversations at every level of the system. This will require some capacity building, and it will require some new faces at the table.

On the capacity side, I have yet to find an organization that does not need to improve the way it has conversations, particularly about complex or emotionally charged topics. Issues of identity, including the generational side of identity, are almost always complex and emotionally charged. You must help employees and stakeholders develop the skills to work through conversations like these. This means developing basic skills in communication and conflict resolution. It means gaining facility in tools and frameworks, like the "ladder of inference,"[28] so you can slow the conversation down when you need to and explore how others see the world. This means increasing your tolerance for inquiry and open-ended conversations, because the most important and difficult issues you face today are rarely wrapped up in tidy "answers" or lists of ten tips. These capacities require active and ongoing attention. Most organizational cultures expect these abilities to simply develop on their own over time, and that is a myth. If you want to tap into the power of generational differences, you will need to spend time, money, and attention on increasing the capacity for conversations at all levels of your system.

On the participation side, organizations will also need to rethink whom they include when they have the conversations. Let's assume an organization accepts the fact that in order to leverage generational diversity, they will need to have better conversations across the system, I fear they will then seek to have those conversations with the same people who were having all the conversations previously. My favorite example is strategic planning. Groups realize that demographic shift is going to affect their operations and their strategy, so they bring together that one Board of Directors, or that single senior management team—all of whom are from one, or at most two generations—and rely on that group to both define and solve the problem.

That is not enough. They need the wisdom and knowledge that can only be generated from multigenerational conversations to inform their decision making. That small group may still end up being responsible for deciding, but the work leading up to the decision must be based on broader conversations. It goes against most organizational norms and cultures to expand the process like that, but it is critical if you want to be ahead of the curve on generational issues.

Leadership

Of course, this also poses a challenge to that small group of people who are responsible for making the decisions. Authority in organizations has traditionally been the charge of the one or two oldest generations in the workforce. This authority, by the way, has also been traditionally mislabeled "leadership," but leadership is much more than authority. Regardless, right now, for the most part, authority (and much leadership) rests in the hands of a large group of Silents and Baby Boomers. There is nothing inherently wrong with this—it makes sense that those with the most experience have positions of authority. Not necessarily because they "paid their dues," as this is a source of generational conflict, but because they have the wisdom of their experience to guide them. That wisdom enhances their leadership.

But as generations grow through their life stages, leadership models change. The Silent generation certainly had to work through the challenge Boomers brought to the strict command-and-control leadership model. The Boomers didn't quite achieve a revolution on that front, but they can certainly be credited with helping to institute more team-based activities in organizations, and there are examples of some radically "flat" organizations in the business world (most notably, W.L. Gore and Associates, the makers of Gore-Tex29).

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So what impact will Generation X have on leadership? It is not that simple any more. Part of what we need to rethink here is the notion of a linear progression of leadership models that each generation introduces, fighting a battle with the generation that preceded them. Today's leadership model will change (and that change will encounter resistance), but I expect the new model will begin to be developed more cross-generationally. The function of leadership does not exist solely at the top of the hierarchy, which means that leadership is, by definition, the responsibility of multiple generations. Conversations about new leadership models, therefore, are more likely to involve multiple generations than in years past.

This trend will be reinforced by the demographics as well. Generation X is a relatively small generation, sandwiched between the two largest generations in American history. It seems unlikely that they will take over the leadership positions, or the spots on the Boards of Directors in a dominating way. The Boomers will likely stay longer than in previous generations, and the Millennials will likely be moving more quickly into those positions. With three generations sharing leadership positions, it is certain that a new model will emerge—one that will likely challenge the values and assumptions of all three generations.

What's Next?

Of course, rethinking—as difficult as it is sometimes—is not effective unless it is paired with action. Once you have finished this book, take the time to do two things.

First, create some kind of structure to help you in the rethinking process. This can be as simple as keeping a written journal to give you time and space to think about these ideas, or it can be as complex as an organizational group that meets regularly to discuss the issues. Rethinking challenges the status quo, so it needs support structures.

Second, start doing something differently. Even before your rethinking has generated any solid conclusions, begin experimenting. Invite people to your meeting who have traditionally been excluded. Take time to have a more expansive conversation instead of relying on your assumptions. Not all experiments will work, but don't let that stop you. You will need the momentum from the experiments that do work to ensure that lasting change does happen.

And that is one thing all generations across time can agree on: change is a given.

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Notes

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White Paper

About the Author

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