

# Become the bridge

## LEADERSHIP THAT UNITES THE GENERATIONS

“I really need your help,” said Susan, the human resources executive at one of my consulting clients.

The anxiety in her voice was clear, and I knew that whatever the problem was that prompted her call, it was serious.

“Over the past year, we’ve hired some great new talent, but we’re having trouble integrating them into the team,” she said. “Most of the new people are younger — some of them were even hired directly from college — and now they’re having tremendous conflict with our senior people. The tension between the generations is escalating. If we don’t do something soon, we’re going to have a crisis on our hands.”

After two hours of brainstorming, Susan and I agreed to take the entire team off-site for an open dialogue that I would facilitate, hoping that we would find answers to the challenges undermining this valuable team.

From the moment we began the off-site meeting, tempers flared. The senior members of the team, mostly composed of the baby boomer generation, portrayed the new team members as lacking respect and a strong work ethic. The new team members, all of whom were members of the millennial generation, accused the seniors of being inflexible and unimaginative.

Susan’s assessment had been right — this was a team in crisis.

After taking a much needed break, I reassembled the entire team into pairs — one senior teammate with a newly hired one — and gave them a radical assignment. For the next hour, they were not allowed to discuss any of their differences. They were only allowed to dis-

cuss the characteristics that they both wanted to see in the team. When the hour was over, each pair would explain what they had found in common and, more importantly, why each characteristic was personally important to both of them.

As soon as the first pair finished their report, I knew we would find the answers we needed. Pair after pair described characteristics that bridged the generations, and as they explained why each characteristic was important, their passion and commitment to see the team succeed were clear.

Soon, they had a list of shared characteristics that exceeded their differences, but they also had something far more valuable — an understanding that, while their approaches might be different, they actually wanted many of the same things.

### **Leadership that is authentic.**

While the baby boomers wanted leaders whom they could respect and trust, the millennials wanted leaders that were “real.” What they discovered was a common desire to be led by individuals who would tell the truth even when it was difficult, who would acknowledge their mistakes, and who were genuinely passionate about the company and their team.

**Work that matters.** Initially, one of the greatest differences was the boomers “work ethic” contrasted with the millennials perceived desire to only do tasks that were interesting or appealing. In the end, both generations discovered that what they really wanted was a

sense of contribution — to see the connection between their work and the team’s ability to reach its goals. As one of the boomers summarized, “Every one of us wants to feel valued and to know our work is important.”

**Companies that stand for something.** In the wake of recent scandals, both generations were passionate about working for an organization they could believe in. This meant having a clearly defined set of corporate values and ensuring that the company’s actions were consistent with them. But it also meant going beyond simply making a profit to supporting service to the community and preservation of the environment as part of the company’s mission.

### **Lives that can be balanced.**

For both generations, flexibility was essential. While they agreed on the importance of making a significant investment in their jobs, they needed the ability to creatively balance that investment with priorities such as family and health.

As the day came to an end, this divided team was now joined through the understanding of all the team members had in common. Whatever challenges remained, they knew they would meet them together.

Look deeply today at the people on your own team and you will likely find that the things you share outnumber your differences. Start now to focus on authentic leadership, integrity, inclusiveness and flexibility, and you will become the bridge that unites the generations. <<

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