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Leading a Multigenerational Workforce: Bridging the Divide as Age Diversity Grows

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Cross-generational leadership requires the prioritization of shared values, continuous learning, and employee-led workplace flexibility.

A historic six-generation workforce is on the horizon. With Gen Alpha preparing for their first occupations and older Americans extending their career spans, these distinct groups could soon be working side by side:

- The Silent Generation (1928-1945)
- Baby Boomers (1946-1964)
- Generation X (1965-1980)
- Millennials (1981-1996)
- Generation Z (1997-2009)
- Generation Alpha (2010-present)

This growing age diversity promises a unique blend of perspectives, skills, and experiences that can drive innovation. However, it also presents the challenge of leading a multigenerational workforce with contrasting ways of thinking—an issue that could generate division without effective intervention. To unleash the full power of diversity, top-performing executives are embracing people-first cultures that inspire harmony across generations.

Broadening Modern Perspectives on the Generations

Businesses have long harnessed generational insights to understand and predict employee behaviors. As the reports often go, baby boomers are loyal yet resistant to change, while millennials crave meaningful work but are prone to job hopping. The behaviors of each age group *are* inherently affected by formative events, but executives too focused on expected behaviors risk a flawed leadership approach.

People are not one-dimensional—and generational research does not always consider the complexities of individual identities, from age to gender and education levels. Notably, Pew Research Center recently admitted the difficulties of isolating circumstances that affected everyone from those that impacted specific age groups. Trying to identify concrete generational needs and navigate stark differences is an uphill battle; embracing points of sameness allows leaders to drive connection and collaboration with one unified strategy.

This is where cultural alignment comes in. When leaders build a culture centered on a core mission, vision, and goals, employees gain a framework that guides their objective decision-making. Regardless of their *generational* values, team members can evaluate and push forth ideas according to the *company* values, mitigating conflict and increasing productivity.

Bridging the Age Divide with Continuous Learning

Cultural alignment can streamline operational processes, but it doesn't encourage collaboration on its own. Most Americans simply don't socialize with other generations due to perceived hierarchies and cultural norms. Breaking the status quo requires cross-generational leadership that eliminates these barriers, one step at a time.

Fostering a culture of continuous learning is key here. When knowledge-sharing is prized at all levels of the organization, members of the workforce are more likely to seek opportunities to collaborate with diverse employees and grow.

Mentorship programs are valuable for building trust between generations. Older, seasoned employees are encouraged to impart their extensive knowledge, strengthening their connection with younger employees (while contributing to your long-term talent pipeline). At the same time, they gain exposure to new ways of thinking and doing that drive their own innovations.

These programs can also tackle stigmas by breaking stereotypes. For example:

- Employees who recently experienced a career change could be connected to younger mentors with more industry experience.
- Cross-generational employees of similar skill levels could be connected through a peer-to-peer mentorship program, fostering a sense of community.

Leaders can also encourage collaboration by forming cross-functional teams. Broken silos build bridges, creating an environment in which each individual is essential for their specialized skills, and every employee's knowledge is equally prized regardless of age. Innovation flourishes in workplaces where all ideas are truly heard.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training can set the foundation for success in all these initiatives. When employees are prepared to recognize and overcome unconscious biases, they are primed to challenge their own assumptions about specific age groups during collaborations. This allows for more openness to learning from other generations, which is key to successful knowledge-sharing.

Embracing an Employee-Led Experience

A unified workplace drives efficient action and professional growth. However, maintaining that momentum and unlocking the benefits of age diversity requires strong retention

strategies.

So, how can companies get members of all six generations to remain fully engaged? Once again, it's important not to prescribe incentives for different age groups based on generational research alone. Employee expectations may surprise you. For example, baby boomers at "retirement age" may increasingly anticipate a steady career ahead of them and expect long-term career pathing that includes meaningful post-executive roles.

The road to retaining a multigenerational workforce, therefore, requires a considerable amount of flexibility and personalization at the individual level. A willingness to accommodate preferred communication channels, schedule changes for parenting and medical needs, and beyond can show a company's loyalty to employees at all stages of life. This equitable approach equips members of each generation with the resources they need to excel in their careers—which you can pinpoint by establishing feedback loops and open-door policies that encourage employees to share their needs.

What are the biggest challenges you face in leading a multigenerational team? How do you plan to accommodate the growing diversity of needs *within* each generation?