



How to lead the generations

*“You will find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view.”
Obi-Wan Kenobi*

The world is a boundless and interwoven organism; a multifaceted conglomerate augmented across space and time in all aspects of what we call reality. How to deal with it is one thing, but another is what this article will be all about. This article was produced to provide the reader with an understanding of the ever-rolling expanse of human generations, and in particular, the application of this into understanding, accepting, managing and leading across the generations. If you are a Star Wars fan, you may find yourself in one generation of Star Wars to another, depending on when you were born. However the case, just like the generation gaps and expanse we see in our colleagues and leaders, there will always be connectivities, similarities and differences that can either create a great organisation together or divide and demolish the team and the individual, in any situation.

This generational divide has changed the application and effectiveness of leadership. In the current situation, we have four generations coming together in the workplace, all from very different worlds. A logical person would realise that leadership from one world could not possibly be propitious in another. However, the world of business is not always logical. Driven by political and profitable forces, it can come into conflict with the doctrine of contrasting individuals or groups. Throw into this the mixture of four age generations of humans, and it becomes a volatile universe of proficiency and tragedy.

Being open-minded with integrity, empathy, appreciation and respect can inform our perceptions of what is necessary to understand leadership between the four different generations: **Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z**. This article should give you a clear understanding of the four generations and how to lead them in their life-long needs.

So what are the four generations we find in leadership now?

Baby Boomers is a term that describes a person from about 1945 to mid-1960s, whose ideas were shaped by women's liberation, civil rights, rock 'n' roll music, and hippie values for a better work-life balance with secure employment (DLO, 2010). Their leadership formed styles that reflected such criteria.

Generation X (GenX) is a person born between mid-1960 and 1980-81 (Brown et. al., 1997). This generation saw the world become a more dangerous place with international hostilities. Young people at this time became more independent and cynical, as money and financial security grew substantially through a material and pleasure-orientated form. Their leadership 'promoted a more collaborative leadership style that decentralised power and gave a voice to employees at different organisational levels' (DLO, 2010, p. 23).

Millennial is a person born between 1980-82 and 1999, and is also labelled as GenY, GenMe and netGen. According to the research by Anderson et. al. (2017, p. 245), 'Millennials are painted as the "selfie" generation'. They embrace technology and are highly comfortable communicating with others around the world in multiple media and text methods. This generation has been raised to be full of self-confidence. The combination of confidence and tech-savvy attitudes does not adapt well with traditional leadership styles. Millennials are spontaneous, interactive, and value highly collaborative leadership styles that are non-hierarchical (DLO, 2010).

The upcoming generation after the Millennials is labelled as **Generation Z** – people born around 2000 up until now, 2017. It is clear that Millennials have a focus on 'me', while GenZ is about 'we'. The GenZ characteristics are far more complex and multi-dimensional through information, connectivity, creative entrepreneurship, and social justice (Hope, 2016). To lead this generation, the emphasis must be on self-reflection, more than just group work or facilitated learning, so that is practical and at their own pace.

In most recent times, Millennials have outpaced Generation X as the largest age group in workforce since early 2015 (Brownstone, 2014). Some GenX and Millennials have moved into leadership roles; meanwhile, Baby Boomers avoid abdication in their long-term leadership roles which correlate with their generational discourse.

We all have needs and they last a lifetime.

What does lifelong mean?

How do we lead these generations together?

The answer is simple – you have to learn how to do it. Therefore, you have to be a lifelong learner yourself, and lifelong learning is something you have to produce as a leader; all due because of the smear of generations across our workforce and leadership teams.

The council of the European Union (EU) described a lifelong learning approach as an essential policy strategy for the development of citizenship, social cohesion, employment, and for individual fulfilment and specified the principal aims of lifelong learning as follows:

‘ – to build an inclusive society which offers equal opportunities for access to quality learning throughout life to all people and [to provide] education and training provision [that] is based first and foremost on the needs and demands of individuals,

- ... to ensure that people's knowledge and skills match the changing demands of jobs and occupations, workplace organisation and working methods,
 - to encourage and equip people to participate in all spheres in modern public life ... at all levels of the community, including at European level'
- (European Commission, 2002, pp. 4-5).

This may give the impression that this learning society is just one big idea, but actually it is more of a centralisation to meet together about a range of different and competing ideas. This is the dilemma we have today, where the application of this lifelong learning ideology is ignorantly misplaced when applied to the smudged blending of human generations. Any leadership without appreciation for generational diversity in any workforce can create distrust, acrimony, vexation, preponderance, misconceptions, subordination and malevolence. If you do not pay attention to the generational lifelong needs and application of universal, lifelong learning described by the EU, you may end up falling into the traps of moral dissonance and neutralisation as mentioned and identified in my previous two articles about leadership; but let's not go there!

All of this is a bit like Star Wars – Jedi, the Dark Side and how we can see the age-old divide of Star Wars generations because whether we like it or not, our own childhood matters and resonates within each and every one of us. Just ask Sigmund Freud and Lev Vygotsky.

What is the difference between the Star Wars generations?

Star Wars first began in 1977.
 Followed by *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980.
 Finishing with *Return of the Jedi* in 1983.

The second trilogy of Star Wars began with *The Phantom Menace* in 1999.
 Followed by *Attack of the Clones* in 2002.
 Ending with *Revenge of the Sith* in 2005.

The third round of trilogies began with *The Force Awakens* in 2015.
 Followed by *The Last Jedi*, to be released in 2017.
 Concluding with *Episode IX*, to be released in 2019.

(Wikipedia, 2017a)

These dates have a distinct correlation with the four age group generations. You can see that Generation X are interwoven with the first trilogy, Millennials with the second and Generation Z with the third.

Some of the qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, ethnographical data from sources around the world on different generations seem to replicate the same discursal debates when critiquing quality and performativity, based on one Star Wars judgement to another.

Such debatable Star Wars issues may be that:

- The first three movies were better than the others.
- The true essence of Yoda was more authentically real in the Jim Henson Muppet form in the original Star Wars trilogy, compared to the digitally-animated Yoda in the second trilogy.

- The computer-animated scenes in the second trilogy are terrible.
- The entire first trilogy just looked so fake.
- The ideology of Star Wars is about civil rights and liberation.
- You should watch the Star Wars movies in their correct sequential order, or release order when they were made.
- Star Wars is about rebels vs the establishment [re: world politics and conflict].
- The latest trilogy is the best, the rest sucks.

As you can imagine, the list goes on...

What were the Baby Boomers watching if it wasn't Star Wars?

Rear Window (1954)

Robin Hood (1952)

To Catch a Thief (1955)

James Bond: 007 (1962-65)

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

The War of the Worlds (1953)

(Wikipedia, 2017b)

Even when we take a further look back into leadership across the generations (pre-Gen Z), you can see the quantitative, positivist paradigm analysis of differences as described by Salahuddin (2010, in Andert, 2011, p. 73).

**TABLE1
MOST ADMIRED LEADERS AS RANKED BY THE GENERATIONS**

Characteristic	Veteran	Baby Boomer	Generation X	Millennial or Nexter
Ambitious	2	10	10	8
Caring	4	4	3	10
Competent	1	1	4	1
Determined	9	9	5	2
Forward-looking	10	2	5	5
Honest	3	5	1	4
Imaginative	6	6	7	9
Inspiring	8	3	9	7
Loyal	7	7	2	6
Self-controlled	5	8	6	3

Source: Salahuddin, 2010, p. 5

From the numerical melange above, it is evident that there is no 'one fits all' type of leadership that can successfully dictate a whole workplace. Leadership today can watch Star Wars on VHS, CD and .mp4 or via Internet streaming. We have to let those who think the computer-generated Yoda is worse, as good or better than the real-life Muppet Yoda be accepted as a citizen of the Star Wars community.

Lifelong learning, as previously mentioned, has to resonate from all avenues of leadership. The only way to begin attaining this lifelong discourse is to ensure authentic leaders are chosen – leaders who can transform their own self and their own leadership knowledge and skills on a continuing, reflective basis. To be a good leader in this generational interfusion is to understand and apply four concepts that constitute the elementary backbone for the leadership needs of all generations.

These four concepts are crucial to transforming your leadership to accommodate the needs of today:

The value of transparency

The most effective leadership today is collaborative, non-hierarchical and transparent. Transparency is an important concept to build and maintain good relationships, especially in times of uncertainty. Transparent leadership 'helps to increase employees' feelings of safety as well as their job satisfaction [...] foster loyalty' (DLO, 2010, p. 24). Leaders without transparency find their employees have little trust or loyalty, which results in behaviours such as consistent absenteeism. Have integrity and be an authentic leader, not a moral-neutralising leader.

Innovative leadership

Common traits of innovative leaders are: excellent communication skills, ability to motivate others and create a motivated environment, ability to collaborate with others and a real interest in involving, supporting, coaching and developing those around them. Innovative leaders can combine creativity with discipline by bringing new ideas and ways of working into a structure that can determine how change is realised. However, innovative leadership cannot depend on the individual – it must be embedded within the organisation (Bell, 2010).

Changing our mental maps

Drucker (1999, in Balda and Mora, 2011, p. 19) raises concerns about leading Millennials by stating that 'making knowledge workers productive requires change in attitude, not only on the part of the individual knowledge worker, but also on part of the whole organisation'. If the leader can be empathetic to the diversity of generational thought, great success can emerge. Get to know your staff and fellow leaders to gain a deeper level of understanding of what can drive productivity.

Valuing diversity

Studies by Graham et. al. (2015) have suggested that with an all-Millennial workforce, virtual environments with visual representations using transformative and transactional leadership affect quality and achievement. Millennials will actively seek leadership opportunities as well as demonstrate a complex relationship between the value of altruism and their desire for personal rewards (Balda and Mora, 2011, p. 19). Altruism in leadership could be related to care, appreciation, concern and well-being of self and others. This could be seen as a type of servant leadership; however, it more so is linked to service leadership. This is what they expect: alternate in your leadership approach. Mutual respect and valuing diversity creates a holistic view of the leader across the generations.

Conclusion

It is crucial that the modern leader leads by example, not by force, specifically because of such a need to understand the very diverse workforce. Care and acknowledge diversity. Leaders need not to focus on being the perfect leader but to primarily focus on developing transparency by being genuinely empathetic with virtuous integrity. Being an Ostrich in leadership with your head in the sand won't get you anywhere. Today's successful leader has to be the opposite. They have to be attentive, receptive and base their decisions on the actual situation rather than theories and abstract ideas, because that is how you can become creative, innovative and transparent. The diverse generations' needs will arise from this foundational element of creating lifelong learning and being a lifelong learner. This is how leadership across the generations can be relevant, productive, respected and maintained in a world of endless Star Wars movies.

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