The Multigenerational Advantage

Three Strategies to Leverage the Strengths of Each Generation
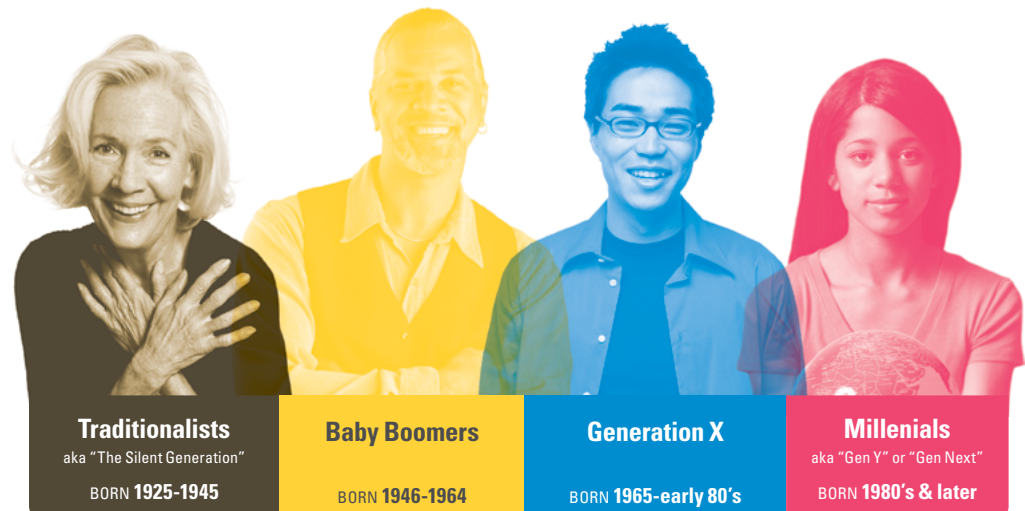
a fierce white paper

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INTRODUCTION: FOUR GENERATIONS UNDER ONE ROOF

Millennials are entering the workforce at a steadily increasing rate. Experts project they will comprise anywhere from 35%[1] to nearly half the workforce by 2014[2]. At the same time, Baby Boomers and Traditionalists, whether by choice or financial necessity, are postponing retirement, and more Generation Xers are moving into leadership roles. The result in many industries is four generations with very different experiences and skill sets working alongside each other for the first time. The need to break down barriers, learn from each other, retain knowledge and collaborate is profound.

Meet the Generations

| Traditionalists aka "The Silent Generation" BORN **1925-1945** | Baby Boomers BORN **1946-1964** | Generation X BORN **1965-early 80's** | Millenials aka "Gen Y" or "Gen Next" BORN **1980's & later** |

Note: Birth years are approximate. There is no consensus on the exact years of the genenerations.

While much research exists about the unique characteristics of the different generations, forward-thinking organizations are more focused on creating a synergizing work environment for all generations. Inclusive cultures are no more

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[1] U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014 projections.

[2] Meister, Jeanne C. and Karie Willyerd. "The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop, and Keep Tomorrow's Employees Today" *HarperCollins Publishers — World Leading Book Publisher*. 2010. www.harpercollins.com/books/2020-Workplace.

limited by age than they are by learning style, gender or belief system. Rushing to accommodate only the latest generation is shortsighted. Competitive advantage is achieved when leaders leverage the strengths of different generations, provide up-to-date resources and tools to benefit all employees, regardless of age, and create a culture that encourages people from different age groups to communicate openly. The transparent nature and knowledge-sharing possibilities of the third millennium make it easier than ever for the multigenerational workforce to intersect and learn from each other.

PROBLEM

If organizations focus exclusively on accommodating one generation, they risk alienating other generations and losing sight of the big picture. Rather than shifting to meet each generation as it comes, how will leading organizations build long-lasting structures to cull the diverse knowledge, strengths and skill sets of a multigenerational workforce? What tools and techniques best encourage employees to interact openly and collaborate? In other words, how will cutting-edge organizations gain the multigenerational advantage?

SOLUTION

This white paper examines three strategies progressive organizations use to leverage the knowledge and experience of different generations.

1 **Replace One-Way Communication with Multi-Dimensional Information Flow**

2 **Encourage Strategic Partnerships through Traditional and Reverse Mentoring**

3 **Enhance Engagement and Build Accountability through Delegation**

1 **Replace One-Way Communication with Multi-Dimensional Information Flow**

Modern technology has forever changed the flow of information. Formerly impossible connections now exist. The phenomenon of social media has resulted in much of the population expecting to have a voice in decisions or at least be able to offer feedback once decisions are made. In addition, many people now seek creative stimulation through the continual exchange of ideas and feedback.

Hierarchical information sharing, flowing only from the top down, has been replaced with multi-dimensional information sharing. Likewise, organizations in the 21st century are nimble, and information flows across an organization rather than originating only from the top, a much narrower viewpoint.

The Corporate Lattice

Many business leaders, including HR, Organizational Development and Leadership Development and Training professionals, now view the corporate ladder as a lattice. Career progression is no longer limited to putting in time and moving up to the next rung; career journeys are personal.[3] They are impacted by numerous factors, including life phases, the desire to achieve a well-rounded overview of a company or discipline, or the possibilities created through technology. However, the corporate lattice not only describes career progression, it also represents the modern workplace as a whole, in terms of communication, knowledge flow and decision-making.

According to a recent study, *Six Key Trends That Increase Employee Productivity and Engagement*, 97% of professionals polled believe even when they "know they're right," exploring other points of view will help them make better decisions. Yet only 49% feel their organization encourages employees to seek out other viewpoints. The other 48% are limiting their viewpoint and possibly alienating potential supporters by relying on a confined vision of reality.

One way to break down silos, explained Susan, CEO of Fierce, Inc., is to seek out solutions from across an organization. "For example, if I'm the head of Marketing," said Bock, "instead of just looking down my own ladder, I'm going to look across the lattice of the organization. Rather than asking for input from people who share my perspective and experience, the question becomes how to embrace and leverage the different vantage points, including those of different generations."

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Susan Scott, Fierce, Inc.

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[3] Benko, Cathleen and Anne Weisberg, "Living in a Lattice World: The Challenges of Aligning the Workplace to the Changing Workforce" *Harvard Business Press*, Boston Massachusetts. 2008.

Beach Ball Realities

Reality is complex, and the examination of it is elusive without a concrete model. The team model at Fierce creates powerful internal think tanks through the analogy that organizations are like beach balls. Each brightly colored stripe represents the reality of a different individual—realities that are influenced by a multitude of factors. Factors may include, but are not limited to, a person's department, their physical location, their generational group, their project teams and their past experiences. Professionals all stand on different stripes, and the view is different depending on what stripe they are on. The CIO may look down and see a blue stripe. A person in the IT department may see green, someone from Public Relations, yellow. Each perspective reveals a different reality. Yet no one viewpoint owns the truth. The beach ball represents the collective truth of the overall organization.

Interrogating reality by gathering input and investigating the view from the various stripes supports knowledge flow, battles knowledge hoarding, builds trust, improves cross-collaboration, creates a culture of inclusion and brings fresh ideas and expertise to the multigenerational workforce.

"Very few individuals actually fit into the complete category of their generation... Most professionals identify with characteristics from multiple generations, resulting in far more than four stripes on the generational beach ball."

Kim Bohr, Fierce, Inc.

From a generational standpoint, the stripes represent different generations or tendencies. "However, very few individuals actually fit into the complete category of their generation," explained Kim Bohr, Executive Vice President of Client Development at Fierce. In fact, there is not even a common consensus on the exact birth years that constitute the different generations. "When asked," continued Bohr, "most professionals identify with characteristics from multiple generations, resulting in far more than four stripes on the generational beach ball." The key to getting to know what each individual's stripe looks like is simple. Ask people. Authentic conversations gain clarity and connect the stripes.

2   Encourage Strategic Partnerships through Traditional and Reverse Mentoring

The conventional apprenticeship model is dead. All of the generations are becoming more comfortable with interactive dialogue and contributing ideas both in the workplace and to strangers through virtual communities and networks. As a result, new employees are less likely to feel engaged if expected to follow someone around taking in information without contributing.

In addition, Millennials, the largest growing new population in the modern workplace, have grown up with technology and bring new skill sets to most organizations. According to most studies they also bring a strong desire to share their experience early on and make a difference.
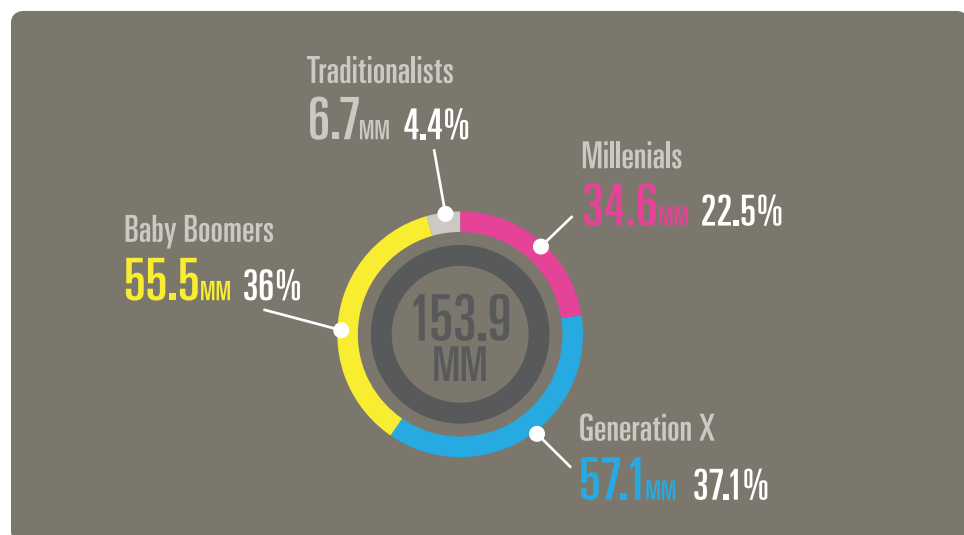
What is Reverse Mentoring?

In traditional mentoring, a more senior employee (in terms of experience or role) mentors a newcomer. Reverse mentoring flips the experience and positions the more junior person as the mentor.

Pairing traditional mentoring with reverse mentoring builds strategic partnerships and connects organizational players from different generations. Strategic partnerships bring advanced technological savvy and the latest techniques from the recently educated while retaining industry knowledge, cultivated wisdom and observation from more experienced professionals. The combination of reverse mentoring and traditional mentoring helps bridge knowledge and generational gaps.

Two-Way Conversations

Successful mentoring partnerships require candid, two-way conversations with clear-cut definitions of roles and responsibilities. Senior executives may desire feedback from employees who have "front line" experience or are talking directly with customers. Newcomers may be looking for guidance on professional development or industry insights. Whatever the goals, the outcome of reverse and traditional mentoring is guidance through partnerships that would not otherwise exist.

2010 US Labor Force by Generation

Traditionalists
6.7MM 4.4%

Millenials
34.6MM 22.5%

Baby Boomers
55.5MM 36%

153.9 MM

Generation X
57.1MM 37.1%

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

One side benefit of strategic partnerships is the knowledge retention of both veterans and newcomers. However, the overall goal is more enduring. By creating

connections among the generations, professionals of all ages are aligned for long-term collaboration and continual learning.

3 Enhance Engagement and Build Accountability through Delegation

As the workplace becomes increasingly mobile and sophisticated, technology has the potential to create distance between Generation X, Millennials and their supervisors. While workplace conversations may not always be face-to-face, they still need to take place. One way to remain connected while instilling independence is through effective delegation conversations.

The Gift of Autonomy

"People want to take ownership, especially if they are good at their jobs. Delegation conversations ensure individuals know where and when they have the authority to make decisions and act."

Aimee Windmiller-Wood, Fierce, Inc.

The ability to delegate is a learned skill that once mastered allows professionals and leaders to build skills, confidence and personal accountability in their team members and direct reports. Delegation sometimes gets a bad reputation and may even be viewed as dumping responsibilities on to others. Yet true delegation is about building autonomy, not passing off tasks. It is about empowering people to develop skills and offer fresh perspectives and insights.

"People want to take ownership, especially if they are good at their jobs," said Aimee Windmiller-Wood, Director of Training at Fierce. "Delegation conversations ensure individuals know where and when they have the authority to make decisions and act."

One Fortune 500 leader in the high-tech industry stated he was able to build competency on his team when he began to focus on the idea of delegation as responsibilities rather than tasks. By stepping back and empowering his reports to create their own success and follow their own paths to achieve goals, he was able to build personal accountability in his reports. He was also able to let go of tasks that had been on his plate for years. One of the reasons he had held on to the tasks for so many years was that he still enjoyed them. He also knew they were no longer the best use of his time.

Building Leaders

Not only do delegation models improve conversations, they also provide employees with a clear roadmap of professional development, including the steps they must take to progress. Employees who grow in position and take over key responsibilities play an important part in building a healthy talent pipeline. When employees take on increased responsibility, they grow as professionals. In turn, skilled delegators are able to lead instead of micro-manage. The time saved provides delegators the opportunity to drive growth in their own careers and take on more challenging projects.

Effective delegation conversations allow Millennials, and other newcomers to the workforce, to bring new insights and experience autonomy early in their careers. As a result, the organization as a whole benefits, and newcomers from all generations establish a deeper connection to the big picture.

CONCLUSION

How do four generations come together in a way that enhances relationships and builds connections while retaining the strengths of each generation and the specific attributes of individuals? The answer is clear—through effective communication and the learned skill of fierce conversations.

Organizations encourage fierce conversations when they embrace 3 key strategies:

1 **Replace One-Way Communication with Multi-Dimensional Information Flow**

2 **Encourage Strategic Partnerships through Traditional and Reverse Mentoring**

3 **Enhance Engagement and Build Accountability through Delegation**

Inclusive and powerful work environments depend upon business structures and tools that encourage all employees, regardless of age, to speak openly and learn from each other. Conversation models ensure people are learning the most up-to-date information and cutting-edge ideas from each other. The tools and resources of the third millennium make it easier than ever to bridge gaps and strengthen the competitive advantage of the multigenerational workforce.

Policies and Procedures, resource manuals and communication documents go out-of-date quickly and frequently do not reflect reality; fierce conversations unveil the real state of the workplace. Reach across the organizational lattice and connect with people in real time to discover up-to-date visions of reality.

Pave the way for a fast-moving and hyperconnected workforce rather than running to keep up.

About Fierce

Fierce, Inc., is a leadership development and training company that drives results for business and education by developing conversation as a skill. Traditional programs are impersonal, complicated and disconnected from concrete results. Fierce creates authentic, energizing and rewarding connections with colleagues and customers through skillful conversations that lead to successful outcomes and measurable ROI. Tailored to any organization, Fierce principles and methods translate across the globe, ensure individual and collective success, and develop skills that are practical, easy-to-learn and can be applied immediately. Fierce, Inc. is certified as a Women-Owned Business by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council and the Astra Women's Business Alliance. Please find us in Seattle and online at www.fierceinc.com.