

Trans-generational MVPs: A Category of Employee and Student for All Times

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The latest cohort of young people in the workplace, the Z generation, is defined by Pew research as those born after 1997. Some commentators are already saying "...move over Zs, the alpha generation has arrived!" Staggeringly, perhaps for the first time ever, five generations can potentially populate a single modern workplace, so it is important to reflect on the stereotypical images that may be painted of these different generations. Pigeon-holing may have some benefits but is potentially misleading and managers might want to consider three characteristics of individuals and the workplace that are trans-generational.

People, Potential, PROCESSES and Performance

Peter Drucker is one of those names in the business world that tends to make you sit up when you read or hear it... I hope this is one of those moments. He suggested that "...the biggest constraint on performance is not the people but the processes..." In a results-driven business environment, Drucker's point is an intriguing one since the focus on performance moves the gaze away from the individual and towards the processes that lead to individual success or failure. Leaders might then ask themselves is process performance being measured and, if so, to what extent are the metrics being used "fit for purpose" and suitably aligned with the values of the organisation? Furthermore, to what extent do their recruitment and selection processes fit

their strategy and appropriate to achieve their objectives?

The debate on performance and leadership encouraged the business consultancy McKinsey to explore the meaning of talent and forecast the organisational "war for talent" in which competing organisations, even in different industries, battled to attract the most promising potential employees or graduates. Organisational processes act as enablers or hindrances to successful individual and organisational performance and ought to be examined and evaluated more deeply. In this way, individuals might be able to build resilience to change and leaders can gain insight to the type of mindset required throughout the organisation. Consequently, rather than business leaders managing generations, there might be greater reflection on the organisation processes in attracting, developing and retaining individuals with the right type of mindset.

Growth MINDSET

In the developed nations and increasingly in emerging nations, workers, managers and leaders are finding themselves in a new paradigm. The homogenous workplace of the past, lived and led by many Baby Boomers, might have encouraged group think, common language, "old boy" networks and other seductive characteristics in which businesses flourished. However, this model for successful businesses and people has reached its sell-by date. Globalisation and more widespread education have encouraged not only diversity but also, slowly but surely, the inclusion of women and minorities in leadership positions. As the workplace and higher education melting-pots becomes more complex, leaders are thinking outside the box in defining the characteristics for successful employees, students and outstanding performers.

McKinsey first suggested the war for talent in 1997, but perhaps the real battle-front that organisations face today is not for talent within the different generations, but for mindsets across generations and their underlying values. People and organisations, particularly in education, ought to focus on learning and the concept of a “growth mindset”, much researched by the Stanford University professor and psychologist, Carol Dweck. This term, focused at the individual level, might be the workplace equivalent of the learning organisation, continuous improvement or the Japanese term “kaizen”. This concept sparked a great deal of western interest and encompasses managers and employees at all levels of the organisation. The growth mindset as defined by the Neuro Leadership Institute is “the dual belief that skills and abilities can be improved and that improving your skills and abilities is the purpose of the work you do”. This appears to be a virtuous cycle when applied to institutions of learning but will be greatly influenced by organisational values and culture. Easy to write about the right mindset but it requires a huge organisational effort and will be profoundly difficult to create and sustain. The hazard of an organisation not encouraging a growth mindset is that a fixed mindset fills the vacuum and leads to employee and organisation stagnation. Steven Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People encourages readers to adopt his second habit to “Begin with the end in mind”. Perhaps, thirty years on from this iconic business book, a 21st century habit is to “Begin with the end in mindset”.

VALUES, values, values

Why is it that leaders might look to different generational features as a means of deciding how to manage? Once again, Peter Drucker might have a response “... what gets measured gets managed...” Measuring data directly through age, generations, earnings etc. is easy to quantify, justify and pigeon-hole, even if the entity being measured

is inappropriate or even harms the purpose of doing so. More challenging to measure is the less tangible characteristic of growth mindset and furthermore the underlying values that, paradoxically ought to be the glue and the lubricant for any organisation. Defining the metrics for a predisposition to learn or for potential ethical leadership seems too problematic for systems and processes to take on.

The challenge for leaders is to devise recruitment and selection processes that reflect organisational values and, at the same time, filters out candidates who can manipulate the process and undermine the organisational values. Founder and former CEO of Zappos, Tony Hsieh, tried to protect the values of his business and hired employees on their cultural fit rather than on traditional recruitment and selection criteria. For example, selection methods attempted to explore a variety of behaviours that emphasised the core values of the organisation rather than the skills and competence required of the job. Even after selection, the firm offered handsome financial incentives urging new hires to leave the organisation at the end of their two-week training if they felt that Zappos was not the right place for them!

Not all organisational leaders will have, or need, this type of decision-making courage. People in the workplace from any generation are content to continue doing what has been done before – and why not? Success comes in many forms as measured by current performance metrics – so that fixed mindset, dubious values and “black mist” processes are common and proven to be successful in many organisations. However, a potential move at pushing back against dinosaur practices is to develop MVPs in the workplace. That is, create transparent internal processes that values and recognises those stakeholders with a growth mindset and who practise the values that embody those of the organisation. Leaderships’

challenge is to role-model these MVPs, embed them in their organisations and create an environment in which 21st century employees are not so much categorised by their generation but more so by MVPs.