



INTERGENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Flourishing by embracing generational differences

“If you’re old enough to make the decision, you’re old enough to deal with the consequences.” I’ll never forget the first time I heard this instruction from my father. I was six years old, and, to my parents’ chagrin, I had defied their rules and failed to get home from playing with my friend next door before the streetlights came on.



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

While I genuinely lost track of time, I can be honest and admit that my choice to stay and finish the video game was based on the fact that I didn’t think it was a big deal to come home on time. As you might imagine, that day I learned that our choices always have consequences. More importantly, I learned about honoring my word, being respectful of others and the value of courtesy and respect (and that I didn’t like being grounded). ►

The power of multiple generations coexisting and collaborating can accelerate the transference of knowledge, spark (re)invention and help our communities stay on the front foot in marketplaces and faith spaces where change is increasingly the only constant.



Photo courtesy of Camp Berea



Photo courtesy of Camp Wyldewood

You might be asking yourself, “What does any of this have to do with generational diversity?” And you’d be right to wonder. You see, at the heart of that saying, and so many others that my mother and father would repeat throughout my childhood, is that they were looking to pass down values, lessons learned and important ideas that their parents and grandparents had passed to them, from generation to generation.

This is an age-old practice that many of us can probably relate to. And yet, when it comes to the tensions between generations — especially in the workplace and many faith spaces — many of us, if we’re honest, find ourselves more flummoxed than encouraged.

Because many camps and conference centers employ people ranging from baby boomers to Gen Z (and possibly a few from the silent generation), it’s important to recognize that each generation may find frustration with the other. And yet, they all have something of value to contribute to the organization. Collaboration and effective leadership between the generations can bear fruit that blesses not only the ministry, but also the individuals working there.



Problems vs. Opportunities

We’ve all most likely seen the memes and reels across social media highlighting the differences in generations. Countless books and articles have decried younger generations and the disruption each has brought to their communities. Millennials and Gen Z, more recently, have each dared to bring new ideas, challenge existing norms and push for change.

Whether in workplaces, faith spaces or broader society, younger generations have proved malcontent with the status quo, much to the irritation of older generations. However, while this may seem like a new phenomenon, this is, in fact, a timeless story.

Baby boomers discarded the elder generations’ ways of thinking. Gen X did the same to the boomers. And so on and so forth; rinse and repeat. Are millennials and Gen Z (and soon enough, Gen Alpha) the problem? Or the older generations?

In his book, *Think Again*, author Adam Grant spoke to what I believe is at the root of this generational dysfunction. More precisely:

“Part of the problem is cognitive laziness. Some psychologists point out that we’re mental misers: we often prefer the ease of hanging on to old views over the difficulty of grappling with new ones. Questioning ourselves makes the world more unpredictable. It requires us to admit that the facts may have changed, that what was once right may now be wrong. Reconsidering something we believe deeply can threaten our identities, making it feel as if we’re losing a part of ourselves.”

In short, every time we consider a new idea, belief or value, we are vulnerable to having an identity crisis as we reconsider the things we’ve experienced, learned and come to believe. So, what is one to do?

Rather than see other generations as a problem, let us imagine the worth and value they offer. In fact, I’d suggest that the increasing generational diversity of our communities can help our organizations find the flourishing to which we’re all aspiring. How, you ask? By modeling what I call intergenerational leadership. ►

The intentionality of seeking out and embracing shared experiences offers us the opportunity to test and (re)build the “muscles” needed to develop healthier cross-generational relationships.



Photo courtesy of Camp Berea



Defining Intergenerational Leadership

In my doctoral research, I set out to explore the points of tension that exist amid and because of growing generational diversity in our communities. I suggested that a new model of leadership is required to move our organizations from failing to flourishing and realize the potential offered, i.e., intergenerational leadership.

Defined as a process whereby an individual utilizes their ability to understand, relate to and navigate cultural differences across generational cohorts to serve, influence and inspire a group of individuals to grow and achieve common goals, intergenerational leadership is built on four distinct competencies:

1. Emotional intelligence
2. Generational intelligence
3. Cultural intelligence
4. Servant leadership

In short, by increasing our social capacity and generational awareness to better navigate cultural differences and positively serve others, we maximize our ability to lead, leverage and (dare I say) love those entrusted to our stewardship as leaders.

Research presented in *Harvard Business Review* and *Forbes* is clear on the opportunities that diversity offers our spaces — innovation, creativity, market share, etc. Unique to generational diversity, the power of multiple generations coexisting and collaborating can accelerate the transference of knowledge, spark (re)invention and help our communities stay on the front foot in marketplaces and faith spaces where change is increasingly the only constant.

As former Philadelphia Mayor W. Wilson Goode Sr. suggested in my research, “When the generations work together and communicate with one another, the world is a better place because everyone is pulling in the same direction and communicating for the advancement of humankind.” ►

Fear is often the greatest obstacle that prevents us from reaching out across differences, especially generational ones.

How to Lead Intergenerationally

First, *seek out shared experiences*. Part of our challenge is that many of us have lost the ability to simply understand and communicate across the cultural differences relative to different generational cohorts.

As Christena Cleveland suggested in her book, *Disunity in Christ*, cultural isolation is what comes most naturally to us. If you think about it, and if you're honest with yourself, often our friend groups, the people around us at the grocery store, even the congregations we worship in and with, tend to look like us, believe like us and live as we do. In Dr. Cleveland's words, "We tend to cling to like-minded group members and keep others at bay."

To realize the benefits of greater generational diversity first requires that we hang out with and get to know other generations that are different from our own. In sum, the intentionality of seeking out and embracing shared experiences (e.g., meals, mentoring, etc.) offers us the opportunity to test and (re)build the "muscles" needed to develop healthier cross-generational relationships.

Second, *pursue courageous conversations and cultivate gracious spaces*. I know that's two suggestions. However, they're two sides of the same coin. Fear is often the greatest obstacle that prevents us from reaching out across differences, especially generational ones. Fear of being rejected. Fear of saying the wrong thing. Fear of being judged. And yet, it's these courageous conversations that offer us the most powerful opportunities.

I love how Brené Brown puts it in her TED Talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change." However, exhibiting vulnerability demands courage, and fostering it also requires that we work to create what I call gracious

spaces. These are environments where we leave room to say the wrong thing and ask "dumb" questions while extending grace and assuming the best of one another. These gracious spaces thus create the safety required for us to move toward one another and nurture deeper, healthier more productive relationships.

Ultimately, when we are courageous enough to be vulnerable, to share, ask questions, dare to be curious and open to learning what we don't know, *and* extend each other the grace to not have it altogether perfect, we position ourselves to learn and grow.

Finally, *demonstrate compassionate empathy*. At the end of the day, we are all emotional beings. Our combined knowledge and lived experiences shape how we see, perceive and react to the world and others around us. So much so, that Paul Ekman argues in his book, *Emotions Revealed*, that "emotions can override ... the more powerful fundamental motives that drive our lives: hunger, sex and the will to survive."

Our emotions are so powerful that things like fear and shame can easily prevent us from reaching out or constructively engaging with differences, whether that be people or ideas. Exhibiting empathy is what we are often coached to do — imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes. However, as Dr. Ekman suggests, empathy is not enough. Rather, we must model compassionate empathy that not only helps us to understand the plights of others but also, ultimately, provokes us to respond to them, to aid them, to embrace them as we would ourselves.

When we aim to demonstrate compassionate empathy, we stop seeing other generations as a threat and begin to dream with, appreciate and value them, their ideas, their values and even their beliefs as representing potential — potential for us, for our organizations and the world.

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Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

Seeing the Potential

While it is true that younger generations are causing much disruption, if we only see the chaos in their wake and not the opportunity they represent, we are missing out on the potential that generational diversity offers us.

As a millennial who finds himself no longer the ire of older generations (thank you Gen Z), I believe that the rapid and ever-increasing swirl of change around us foreshadows potentially catastrophic futures for our communities and organizations. We're already seeing this play out as more churches are closing their doors and more organizations are struggling to remain in the black than ever before. And while younger generations may have access to more information than any previous generation in human history, they still lack (but desire) the wisdom that only age and experience can bring.

To realize the flourishing that we desire (for us and our organizations), we must discover how to lead, learn and live in ways that positively leverage the possibility of generational diversity. In doing so, I believe that we will often find that the consequences and benefits of our choices to reach out, extend a hand and embrace one another despite the cultural differences that exist across our distinct age groups will far outweigh the costs. ■



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