

Generational Diversity in the Academia: Ramifications and Challenges for Educational Leaders

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A vast majority of existing literatures and researches pertaining to generational diversity in an academic environment have always capitalised on pedagogical aspects and the interplay of each generation's distinct culture and characteristics in a teaching and learning context. While such focus is undeniably necessary, another area that requires to be circumspectly investigated is the manner by which generational diversity affects workplace interactions and relationships in an education oriented workplace context. This paper explores this possibility by looking at comparable researches conducted from other industries and its parallelism with an education focused workplace is inferred. Furthermore, the three diversity management paradigms proposed by Thomas and Ely (1996) was utilised and its implication to educational leadership is propositioned.

Keywords: education, leadership, generational diversity

A generation is characterised by Solnet and Hood (2011) as a group of individuals who “*share similar social or historical experiences, which affect the way members view and interpret the world*”. These mutual experiences will serve as a determinative element to an individual in terms of the manner they make sense of their environment and situations which will then be resultant to the values, attitudes and behaviour they manifest at home, workplace and other social circumstances. As a consequence of the behaviour they exemplified, individuals from other generations will then perceive, make sense and personify an image and stereotypical representation of that cohort while looking through their own generational lenses.

This paper will look into how generational diversity is being understood in the tertiary education workplace. Due to a perceived deficiency of literature focusing on intergenerational employee dynamics in a higher education environment, studies and researches undertaken in other workplace context and general, non-industry focused literatures will be used and its parallelism with a tertiary teaching environment will be discoursed. The three diversity management paradigms discussed by Thomas and Ely

(1996) will be analysed and its applicability in dealing with generational diversity will be explored.

As I am in the process of writing this manuscript, I am being made aware of the existence of my own cultural orientation that may affect the manner I will be discussing my arguments. Being a part of Generation Y, a generational cohort that is also being covered by this essay, I may be looking, discussing and giving my commentary on generational diversity in a voice and vantage point inherent of the generational segment I represent.

It is hoped that through this academic exploration, a deeper understanding and appreciation of the significance of managing a staff focused generational diversity in an educative workplace context.

What is Generational Diversity?

Researches have been undertaken and found existence of significant inter-generational divergences in work attitudes, habits and values of individuals engaged in the field of healthcare (Manion, 2009), government service (King, 1998), manufacturing (Yu and Miller, 2005) and hospitality (Gursoy, Maier and Chi, 2008).

However, there is a dearth of information and research data about the dynamics of generational diversity in the tertiary education environment. Most of the research studies undertaken that look into generational diversity in the field of education focus mainly in the context of a classroom instruction and learner-teacher relationship rather than inter-employee dynamics.

We are currently living in extremely fascinating era as this is the first instance that four generations are represented in the workplace (Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y). Furthermore, it is equally interesting to emphasize that this dynamics will be much complex if the unique nature of a tertiary education organisation will be regarded. Instead of merely having a typical workplace scenario where four generations are interacting and concurrently working together, in the case of a tertiary education workplace, the forthcoming years will see the fifth generation, the Generation M (those born from 1995 onwards) commencing their tertiary education studies. Notwithstanding the fact that this fifth generation will be on the “user” side of the learning transaction, the high level of interactivity, engagement and learner-teacher contact distinctive of education organisations will certainly add in to the complexity of generational diversity in an academic setting.

The Generations: Key Characteristics, Approaches towards Work and Leadership Traditionalists

Born between 1920-1945 (Warner and Sandberg, 2010), traditionalists accounts for the smallest proportion of the current workforce as most of workers from these cohort have retired or on their way to retirement. However, in the field of tertiary and higher education, anecdotal evidence will show that it is not uncommon to see academicians who are past retirement age but still connected with teaching institutions. Across all industries, most traditionalists who are still employed occupy high level senior management positions and maintain considerable influence (Deloitte Consulting, 2008).

Judging from the years this generation was born, two global circumstances may have largely influenced their worldview. The first is

the Great Depression of the 1920s-1930s where worldwide recession, economic slump, financial downturns and mass unemployment occurred which is then followed by the Second World War. From this, it can be inferred that a typical traditionalist was born, lived and raised during the deepest recession and economic gloom in history and has witnessed or joined the most widespread war the world has ever seen.

Having experienced these global events and having lived during challenging times steered the traditionalists to be hardworking, conservative and cautious (Tolbize, 2008). They place importance and base their judgment and decisions on history and what has worked in the past (Notter, 2002). Taking into account their military background and bringing it in the context of a workplace, traditionalists value loyalty, teamwork, hierarchy, formality and display a “command and control” type of leadership style (Tolbize, 2008).

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers or sometimes called the “Me” generation were born during the years 1945-1960 (Buahene and Kovary, 2003). This generation obtained their name from the baby boom and unprecedented high fertility rates that occurred in countries like the US, Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand (Makunovich, 2000) following World War II. Being a child of war veterans or having been brought up by a generation that has experienced wars and its consequence on a first hand basis, this generation was strongly loved and doted on by the community and has basked and enjoyed being in the centre stage of society and depicted as “*representing as they did to the Veterans, the symbol and fruit of their victories and the hopes for the future they fought to preserve*” (Zemke, Raines and Filipczak, 2000, as cited in Deloitte Consulting, 2007).

Due to this generation’s fortune to be born during the post World War II economic expansion and prosperity, Baby boomers grew up in a traditional, nuclear family setting (Makunovich, 2000) during a positive and optimistic time period. Owing to their sheer size, this generation has learned to take advantage of and leverage their immense numbers in order to challenge, influence

change and even bend conventional systems to suit according to their own needs (Deloitte Consulting, 2008). A similar observation was made by Zolli (2006) when he wrote “Boomers have never met a life stage they didn't want to remake in their own image.”

In a workplace setting, Baby boomers are embodied to be highly competitive and hardworking (Kupperschmidt, 2000, as cited in Lyon, Duxbury and Higgins, 2005). The highly competitive character can be explicated by the fact that baby boomers came from a substantially large generational cohort and thus, there is a necessity for them to fight head to head with others for jobs, promotions and opportunities (Gibson, Greenwood & Murphy, 2009, as cited in Hannay and Fretwell, 2009) most possibly in order to fulfill the image and expectations attributed to them by their traditionalist parents who sacrificed a lot of things in order to advance their welfare. Baby boomers places great importance to their career and see it as a symbol and extension of their value and worth (Warner and Sandberg, 2010).

This generation is presently employed in top senior management and decision making roles in the work place while older members of baby boomers have entered retirement. It is a concern that massive retirement of this generation, which should be anticipated in the forthcoming years, will result to a significant deficiency of skills in the labour market (Mountford, 2009). On the other hand, some literatures are proposing that most baby boomers are recreating the concept of retirement and continues to hold on to their jobs (Brewnstein, 2011, Briand, 2009 and Gettler, 2011).

Generation X

This generation, shadowing the Baby Boomers (1961-1979) was born and raised in a socially and economically dynamic and turbulent environment (Notter, 2002). This cohort grew up in two career household setting, raised and spent considerable time in informal and make shift day care centres and has seen the advent of high divorce rates, social and political upheaval and corporate scale down and downsizing (Howe and Strauss, 2002) unfolding before their eyes. Because this generation lived and worked in a more arduous circumstance in comparison to

their Baby Boomer counterparts, Generation X cohort are believed to have developed a “latch key” outlook (Deloitte Consulting, 2007) and are pessimistic with their approach towards life and is generally apprehensive and inherently mistrustful in their relationship with institutions like the church, government, school and the workplace (Lawsson, 2009). Seeing this institutions collapse and be entangled in indignities and scandals as they grow up, Generation Xers learned to fend off for themselves rather than completely depend on these institutions for their well being.

In terms of technology, Generation X is the first group to use computers in schools (Deloitte Consulting, 2007) which then enabled them to understand the importance of integrating and utilising technological instruments in order to make their work easier. Likewise referred to as the “MTV Generation”, Generation X is also said to be the first consumers and essentially grew up and was reared by amusement commodities like music videos, computer and video games and similar gadgetries (Lawsson, 2009).

In a workplace scenario, in comparison to the baby boomers, Generation Xers are highly individualistic and places prime importance to personal contentment and satisfaction over hard work (Tulgan, 1997 as cited in Lyon, Duxbury and Higgins, 2005). Taking into account their reserved and reluctant attitude toward established institutions, this generation is said to be more dedicated to their profession rather than to their employers (Warner and Sandberg, 2010). Being highly individualistic and self-reliant, Generation Xers are known to be entrepreneurial and competent of thinking out of the box and offer innovative solutions to old problems (Tolbize, 2008). They value a working condition that acknowledges their need for autonomy and will permit them to establish their own structure, boundaries and methods in carrying out their tasks rather than to be closely supervised and told what to do (Peters, 2001 and Sharp, 2009).

Generation Y / Millenials

Generation Y is a label attributed to the cohort born during the period of 1980-1995 and are specifically known for their confidence, independence and being goal oriented (Meier, et al., 2010). If their predecessor, the Generation X is the first

cohort to use technology, Generation Y was born and has lived their lives surrounded by it. This generation can then be considered as the most technologically adept, literate and digitally connected among all generational cohort (Solnet and Hood, 2011). Being born and fully immersed in technology, multitasking is a standard for this generation (Yan, 2006). Technology similarly brought in an “everything in an instant” and “real time” mindset where this group expects that everything will be accessible with a few clicks of the mouse, thus, contributing to their impatience, restlessness and short attention span (Lau and Phua, 2010).

Some key global events that has unfolded during the course of this generation includes the first gulf war, 9/11 terrorist attacks, Iraq War and natural catastrophes like the Indian Ocean tsunami, SARS and Avian and Swine Flu scare. It can be inferred that these occurrences might have a stronger impinging to this cohort’s worldview considering the speed and mass of information they had access to and being bombarded with as the aforementioned global events are unfolding.

A survey conducted by Deloitte (2009) of 860 Generation Y employees working at Fortune 500 Companies representing 20 industry segments showed the following distinguishing characteristics of this cohort. The same attributes were pointed out by Solnet and Hood (2011).

1. Confident amidst high degree of uncertainty and anxiety in the economy
2. Hungry for more decision making responsibility and career advancement but not enthusiastic about putting in time and “paying their dues” and slowly climbing the corporate ladder.
3. Trusting and eager to collaborate with their superiors.
4. Opportunity driven rather than salary and job security orientated

What sets this generation apart from other cohort and also fundamentally influenced their worldview is that they are reared and came of age during a period of rapid technological advancement in a socially, politically and economically turbulent environment.

Intergenerational Conflict

Each generation possess a unique and multifarious belief, attitude towards work, working style and organisational commitment as influenced by political, economic, sociocultural and technological events that unfolded in their own time periods. It is inevitable that they carry with them their respective generational upbringing that impacts the manner they carry through their work, view and perceive the world and deal with people around them. In some instances, these perceptions turn into generalisations and stereotypes that oftentimes leads to conflict. Given the high level of interaction as a key characteristic of an education workplace, intergenerational conflict becomes inevitable. An “us vs. them” mentality (Yang and Guy, 2006, as cited in Gursoy, Maier and Chi, 2008) in a diverse working environment then, is a main contributor to workplace conflict.

Example that Dittman (2005) used in order to illustrate intergenerational conflict as brought about by perceptual differences are:

1. Baby boomers may believe generation Xers are impatient and willing to throw out the tried-and-true strategies
2. Generation Xers may view baby boomers as adamant to change.
3. Traditionalists may view baby boomers as self-absorbed
4. Baby boomers may view traditionalists as overbearing, domineering and stiff.
5. Generation Xers may consider millennials too spoiled and self-absorbed
6. Millennials may view generation Xers as too distrustful and pessimistic.

It is a common knowledge that conflict, when left unsettled becomes counterproductive. Unresolved conflict leads to a highly unfavorable organisational climate which in turn affects level of job satisfaction, motivation and organisational citizenship behaviour. The challenge then for educational leaders in this scenario is to find a way that will enable a generationally diversified workplace to act and behave as a cohesive unit that will contribute to the attainment of organisational goals.

Implication to Educational Leadership: Diversity Management Paradigms

Workplace diversity is an undeniable phenomenon. It will be of no use for an organization to ignore, take for granted and disregard its existence. What needs to be done is to find a way wherein diversity will be recognized with the end view of maximizing its capacity to realise benefits for the organization. This can only be done through instituting an overarching paradigm that will guide the whole organization on how diversity will be approached and treated across all levels in the organization. Thomas and Ely, through their article entitled *Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity*, highlighted three possible approaches organizations can employ in dealing with diversity in the workplace:

The Discrimination and Fairness Paradigm

As a dominant way of looking at diversity (Thomas & Ely, 1996), this approach mainly focuses on an organisation's degree of compliance to a regulatory agency's established diversity related policies such as equitable treatment and equal access to opportunities and promotion. Subscribing to this paradigm entails an organization to be gender and color blind and employ an idealised assimilation construct by having an "everyone is the same" mentality (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

Relating this paradigm to generational diversity, it can be said that this model is useful in building the foundation of an organization in terms of its readiness in dealing with diversity. This approach ensures that the legal responsibilities of the organization in terms of dealing with diversity are addressed and its responsiveness towards it can be evidenced through measurable, observable and documented data. Utilisation of this paradigm will greatly contribute to increasing actual demographic diversity (Thomas and Ely, 1996) due to the fact that subscription to this model will enable the organization to create a tangible favorable organizational atmosphere that gives an impression of acceptance of diversity which will in turn enable the organization to attract employees coming across diverse background.

One noteworthy shortcoming of this paradigm is, incongruously, its tendency to disregard and turn a blind eye towards diversity brought about by following and propagating the "everyone is the same" philosophy. Equitable treatment and fair allocation of opportunities is facilitated not through the acknowledgment of the reality of diversity but rather by means of ignoring and denying its existence. Resultant to this, failure to acknowledge the presence of diversity in the workplace means denying the organization the opportunity to benefit from a wealth of ideas and innovation that is obtainable from a multi faceted organization.

The discrimination and fairness paradigm then can only be facilitatory to organisations that are on the start up phase of their diversity management initiatives.

Access and Legitimacy Paradigm

"Diversity isn't just fair; it makes business sense" (Thomas & Ely, 1996) may have been the main tenet of the access and legitimacy paradigm. While the discrimination and fairness paradigm focuses on compliance and strives towards assimilation through discounting the existence of diversity, the access and legitimacy paradigm celebrates it. This is a marketing driven model where the direction and conduct of diversity management programme is largely influenced and is linked to the organisation's market diversification strategies. Example of this situation can be encouraging diversity through recruitment of Asian employees with the end view of attracting, acquiring and growing business from the same demographic cluster.

While the access and legitimacy paradigm may give an impression that it is a more sophisticated diversity management approach compared to the discrimination and access paradigm due to the fact that this model actually acknowledged the existence of and celebrated diversity, the genuine intention of those who subscribed to this paradigm can still be put into inquiry. While it is a common and logical notion that a diversity management initiative's chief outcome is its contribution to facilitating a more favorable organisational climate which in turn leads to financial rewards, should fiscal rewards then exclusively or principally drive and influence

how diversity is being managed in the workplace?

If diversity blindness is said to be the main limitation of the previous paradigm, this model have analogous issues. Rather than being blind however, those who employ this framework chose to utilise the “organisation's visual sense” but instead of perceiving a diverse organisation made up of individuals of varied age, color, gender and ethnicity, organisational members are looked at in terms of the clients they can bring and the cashflow that they can initiate for the company.

Placing this paradigm in the context of generational diversity, one would think: if inter-generational diversity must be acknowledged and celebrated based on a generational cohort's capability to access and open up key markets and thus, bring monetary rewards to the organisation, how then can core diversity management principles of fairness and equity be ensured? Employees then are in danger of being exploited, victimized and treated as cash cows where their value is proportional, linked and only as good as the lucrativeness of the customer segment whose demographic characteristic, they likewise represent. Consequently, this diversity management approach has the inclination to marginalise those coming from generations that are not considered as a key market segment for the organisation. Subscription to the access and legitimacy approach may give rise to organisational inconsistencies in terms of dealing with diversity as this paradigm is linked directly to and influenced by the waves and trends of market and business forces which, also can be characterised as dynamic and ever-changing.

Learning and Effectiveness Paradigm

“Integration” can be said as the word that typifies this diversity management paradigm as this approach develops an orientation where organisations are enabled “*to incorporate employees' perspective into the main work of the organisation by rethinking primary tasks and redefining markets, products, strategies, missions, business practices, and even cultures*” (Thomas and Ely 1996). The learning and effectiveness paradigm represents a higher degree of maturity on how organisations deals with diversity for it goes above and beyond looking and understanding

diversity in terms of legal and ethical compliance to standards or how it is solely influenced by the dynamics of market changes.

The learning and effectiveness paradigm may provide a superior fit in terms of managing generational diversity due to the fact that it recognises that each cohort has the ability to contribute and add valuable returns to business performance by facilitating a synergistic and collaborative relationship across generational lines. Through this, the maximum potential benefits of a diverse organisation are harnessed and diversity mindedness is inculcated not just on the surface level but rather infused on how the organisation and its employees carry out their day to day tasks. By doing so, it can be said that employment of this model will result to a more relevant and far reaching positive outcomes for the organisation due to the fact that the level of work diversity will be congruent and will evolve in parallel with employee diversity.

Recommendation and Conclusion

There is a great need for an educational leader to understand and gain competency on how to deal with and leverage generational diversity. While most existing literature focuses on the study and discernment of and bridging the generational divide between a learner and a teacher, I believe that it is equally important to gain an understanding of generational interrelationships between academic staff.

This is where the role of the leader as agent of cultural change comes into play. Systems and processes must be established that will foster an environment where diversity will be understood, celebrated and embraced.

A mindset of inclusion must be reinforced and marginalisation of a generational cohort must be avoided and discouraged. The diverse skills, abilities and expertise each generation brings must be given due recognition and harnessed with the end view of empowering each generational segments to add value to the organisation. It is essential that leadership inculcate the mindset of generational interdependency and enable the organisation to come into a realisation that it is not solely similarities but divergences that bring about structural synergism enabling the organisation

to reach a new level of performance and productivity.

Conflict between generational cohorts cannot be fully avoided. However, it will be imperative for a leader to institute a generationally responsive conflict resolution methodology in order to ensure that conflict is managed carefully and maximum positive outcomes can be obtained from the resolution process.

As a summation, managing generational diversity needs to be holistic, all-encompassing, activity for managing differences and similarities that employee brings keeping into mind the productive well being of all including the organisation and its stakeholders.

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