

Navigating the Troubled Waters of Cross-Generational Discipleship

I was raised by an army officer. He thought like an officer—a good one, by the way—and he taught me much. I heard taglines from Officer's Candidate School at the breakfast table. That combined with my year of birth made a difference in the way I think about life and leadership. Year of birth? Yes, I am what is known as a Baby Boomer, that is, people born in the era around 1947-1962. In fact, I am the quintessential “early boomer,” born as I was in 1947.

Because I was born at the beginning of the boom, I tend to think more like my father's generation, the so-called Builders, than I do like those born at the end of my own generation. Take, for example, my inner understanding of authority. Chain of command is a phrase I grew up with. It sounds alien and angry to Gen-Xers and incomprehensible to everyone born since Woodstock.

To the Builders and early Boomers, chain of command not only sounds proper, but even comforting. It speaks to us of order and discipline, another harsh, unreasonable phrase to Millennials. To us, chain of command covers how things work, who reports to whom, where things fit and who bears final responsibility. It also deals with the legitimate authority positionally.

If I heard my father say it once, I heard it a thousand times. “You do not salute the man (or woman). You salute the rank.”

In other words, it was our understanding of position that one does not salute an officer because he is smart or likable; you salute because he is a superior officer. Period. To us, it made the world orderly. Those understandings were fixed for my

generation. They were considered cultural linchpins holding leadership and management and maybe society in place.

That is the reason it is so hard for many senior executives to understand the way some younger employees think. Younger employees are often put off by terminology like accountability, authority, flow charts and down lines. They may instead talk about horizontal management philosophies, up lines and team leadership. Younger employees want more understanding of the decision and more participation in the process rather than simply being told what to do. They love options. Their lives are filled with menus, and they adore them. Older executives love words like efficiency and productivity. Younger employees prefer empowerment.

This also does not mean one or the other is right. Thereby hangs the tail. It just means they are different. It means that in business, in leadership and in church, colleagues who think differently, often generationally different, must learn to sense those differences and work a little harder to communicate across the cultural/generational gap.

Younger employees should work hard to show respect. Scripture teaches to show honor where honor is due. Older colleagues should never high hand it based on position. Younger people are eager to learn from you. They absolutely do not assume you know anything just because your pay grade is higher than theirs. If I learned anything from my Dad, it is that a superior officer should never mention his rank, and a subordinate should never forget it (OCS again). If you have to constantly tell your employees you're the boss, you may be the boss, but you're no leader. By the same token, if you put your feet on the boss' desk to prove you're free and modern, you're not casual and contemporary, you're just an arrogant bore.

As we gain in knowledge and experience, we have an ever-greater responsibility to lovingly yet firmly encourage and teach our followers. We want them to be better than we are, to

have better technology, better skills and better lives than we do. We have to be patient fathers to them and learn how they think. Explain more, ask them more often for their input, listen to their answers and remember we were once young and every irritating thing that goes with that.

Virtually symbolic of this “generational gap” is the up line/down line issue. Older executives tend to view lines of communication exclusively as down lines. They mainly expect to use those lines to transmit downward. Younger employees tend to want to transmit upward. In other words, the younger employees are, the more they want to send information, opinions and input of every kind up the line.

What this means is that senior executives need to take seriously the input of subordinates. True leaders understand that communication is two-way. The more they can learn to receive information and encourage lower level employees to feel their input is taken seriously, the more the gap will close from their side. The more humility younger employees can demonstrate, the gap will close from their side. Younger folks need to take seriously the ever so remote possibility that someone with decades more experience may just know something they don't.

A variation on the OCS teaching I quoted earlier:

Senior leaders should never mention they know more than their younger employees. Younger employees should never forget it.

Older leaders need to receive, not just transmit. Humble yourself in the light of the brilliance of young tech-savvy tigers that can help you. Younger employees should work hard to find ways to honor older veterans. Listen more, learn more and remember, you will one day be hard-pressed to understand how employees born in 2014 can really work here. {eo}

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