DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE AND THE IMPACT OF WORK VALUES ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MULTI-GENERATIONAL TEAMS

By

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ABSTRACT

Companies and organizations that want to become or remain successful in the 21st century face a constant challenge of dealing with the great diversity existing in the world. That diversity presents itself in many dimensions such as gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, culture, thinking, among many others. The diversity found in the workforce of most companies and organizations, including different generational cohorts of workers (Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y or Millennials) represent a great challenge to them, and a better understanding of that can lead to better outcomes. Facing diversity instead of avoiding it, is the beacon for a path towards success. This paper will discuss the impact of different generations in the workforce and how understanding and embracing different work values can lead to build effective and efficient multi-generational teams.

Keywords: Workplace Diversity, Generational Cohorts, Work Values, Team Building.

INTRODUCTION

Building effective multi-generational work teams is a crucial task for organizational leaders that look for efficiency and embrace the diversity existing in the workplace. Understanding the similarities and differences of the generation's work values is the first step towards organizational success. The lack of that knowledge could inhibit the productive function of work teams, which would be detrimental to an organization. A qualitative, descriptive case study methodology was conducted to help understand the work values of three generations—Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y or Millennial. An interpretation of the collected data resulted in a synthesis of generational work values that determined how they differ and how much that impacts success in multi-generational teams. The findings of the study identified three core themes - dedication, responsibility, and teamwork - to understand the similarities and differences among the three generations. In addition, the study produced outcomes that can help managers or leaders to develop effective work teams by considering the strengths and weaknesses of each generation. It also found ways to alleviate any potential disconnect between organizational leaders and employees during the development of multi-generational work teams.

1. The Research Study

A qualitative, descriptive case study was conducted including a population of 23 employees of one homebuilding organization located on the outskirts of Houston, Texas to illustrate the similarities and differences in the work values of the participants. The impact of those differences and similarities has helped understand the work values of three generations, the Baby Boomer, the Generation X, and the Generation Y/Millennials, and the impact on multi-generational work teams. The knowledge gained from the study could be used to promote the development of effective multi-generational work teams.

There have been several studies from different angles relating to generational differences that range from workplace behavior that pertain to job mobility, the compliance with work rules and policies as well as the willingness to work overtime; why multigenerational workplaces are important; designing a workplace for different generations; and, the actual differences versus the perceived differences of each generation (Brecton,

Walker, and Jones-Farmer, 2014; Lester, Standifer, Schultz, and Windsor, 2012, Swan, 2012; and Tomislav, 2014).

According to Amayah and Gedro (2014), although there are many stereotypes about generational characteristics, the research that formally consolidates the topic across an array of studies is limited, so the idea was to conduct a study that would inform through a comprehensive set of considerations for policies, practices, and training and development. However, in this case, providing a synthesis and generalization of generational work value similarities and differences was necessary for a qualitative, descriptive case study to help with the interpretation of the verbal statements to answer the questions:

- How are the work values of the Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y/Millennial employee similar or different?;

- Why do generational differences in work values affect multi-generational work teams? How do generational work value similarities or differences influence employees that belong to a particular generation within the work team?;

- Why do managers or leaders need to understand the impact generational work value similarities or differences of a particular generation, may have on the work environment when developing work teams?

The study entailed a discussion of the findings based on the pilot study participants (3), and the 20 case study participants to reflect on whether generational similarities or differences impact the work team or a manager's or leader's ability to develop effective work teams.

The findings of the study are representative of several factors that contribute to the understanding of generational work values. The scope of the study was pertinent because a descriptive, case study methodology guided the exploration of the work values of the Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y/Millennial participants.

2. Generational Work Values and the Three Themes

The research was divided into two parts: a pilot phase, with three participants, and the case study phase, including 20 new participants. The pilot study was conducted to test the feasibility of the interview questions posed to participants, which included one Baby Boomer, one Generation X, and one Generation Y/Millennial. While themes emerged, the interpretations of those themes were not considered during the analysis of the descriptive study. As part of the feasibility study, an alteration of the construction of the interview questions was needed to provide clarity for the study. The pilot study that was conducted offered a means to triangulate the data.

In the case study phase, the responses from the twenty participants identified three themes, two of which were major themes that emerged from the coded transcripts, to provide an understanding of generational work values. The themes that emerged were dedication, responsibility, and teamwork. Incorporating the nuances of the coded themes showed, how multi-generational work teams can become more responsive to the organization based on the diversity of the participants.

2.1 Theme One: Dedication

The dedication of the employees in each generation to the work team showed a commitment to all facets of the project. This was validated when the coding showed that dedication emerged as a theme, with the majority of the participants implying that a job needs to be done. Some participants felt a lack of dedication could substantially impact teamwork. The participants reported that, if there was a lack of dedication, work processes would slow down and the teamwork effectiveness would eventually disappear.

An analysis of the data collected from each generational cohort showed that, participants from multiple generations believed, either the job gets done no matter what or, there is a high level of dedication for the job that needs to get done. Yeaton (2008) reported that, the Generation Y/Millennial employee has good morality and is civic-minded, which gives this group a strong sense of dedication to the team and the organization. In comparison, the technological savvy of the Generation X employee, and the demand for a balance between life and work, gives employees from that specific cohort, less motivation for dedication to the job when compared to

the other two generations included in this study (Johnson, Rogers, 2006). For the Baby Boomer employees, dedication means a commitment and determination to complete a project of any length (Richardson, 2008).

The study concluded that the dedication level differed from one generation to another and it is directly related to how employees approach a task. For instance, Baby Boomer employees are strictly focused on getting the task done. Generation X employees understand that tasks need to get completed, but also include an analysis process to figure out how to accomplish the task. The Generation Y/Millennial employees visualized what needs to be done, and then proceed to find shortcuts to accomplish the task without thinking through the various possibilities.

2.2 Theme Two: Responsibility

Responsibility showed conscientiousness by the participant about the project. A mixture of beliefs from each generation pertaining to the impact of work values on the work team was part of what was gleaned from this theme. The responsibility of an employee towards the work environment was demonstrated by a willingness to contribute to the organization. Responsibility was linked to the commitment, cooperation, and dedication an employee had towards the work team and the mission of the organization. The data related to this core theme corroborated the results of Dumbrava, Gavreleta, and Lupulescu (2009), finding that the rules are based on values and principles, including the responsibility that helped make the organization function and move toward a common goal.

The participants interviewed believed, responsibility and dedication are important work values when developing multi-generational work teams and that the level of responsibility each generation contributed to the work environment was very important. More importantly, the participants thought that, a difference of responsibility levels existed from one generation to another, which could result in conflicts that impact negatively the team work and, therefore, the organization. Dumbrava et al. (2009) also implied, when there is a lack of responsibility,

the organization loses the "... invisible control ...," and the behavior becomes unacceptable (p. 87).

Responsibility was an important component of every generation's work values, but the definition of responsibility might be different for each generational cohort. For an instance, Baby Boomer employees thought, the Generation Y/Millennial employees know more than the other generations and think less about the team due to an unfavorable work ethic. On the other hand, the Generation Y/Millennial employees perceived the opposite. Generation Y/Millennial employee felt the need to respond quickly, had a lot of good ideas, and could bring a fresh, new perspective to the team. The gap between the work value perceptions of these two groups clearly indicated the responses pertaining to responsibility differ. The perceptions shared by Generation X participants showed that, Baby Boomers would be a good source of information. The Generation X participants believed their responsibility is to get the job done and are focused on job priorities. Robinson (2009) believed, responsibility was part of the nature that makes up a person's value system through three interconnected modes: (a) imputability, that guides the actions of a person, (b) accountability, by making a person answer to someone, and (c) the liability that a person answer for something or someone (p. 11). The underlying thought process, if truly a basis for human value systems, could be the identifying key that motivates each generation in the work environment.

2.3 Theme Three: Teamwork

Along with dedication and responsibility, teamwork becomes more effective due to the commitment of every member of the work team. However, when teamwork is not present, the attributing factor could very well be a lack of dedication and responsibility. Managers and leaders compensated for the lack of dedication and responsibility by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each employee to ensure cohesion in the work team, and, as a result, develop a work team that has a high level of dedication and responsibility to ensure a productive work team.

The study corroborated the findings of Bourgeois (2006) who identified in general that, employees want to be valued. The employees want to be recognized for the work values that are brought into the work place. Managers and leaders should acknowledge the work values of multiple generations by integrating the work values of different generations into the work team, thus making each employee belonging to different generations feel as though each are assets to the organization. The role each generation plays within the work environment is crucial to maintain multi-generational teams, and an understanding of the similarities and differences in generational work values is crucial to the success of any work team in any organization.

To understand the similarities and differences among generational work values as recognition of the basis for the work values, lead to the ideologies of each generation. The knowledge, Baby Boomers have due to life experiences, impacts each generation and the stability of the organization (Patota et al., 2007). The fact remains that, each generation has specific ideologies within the generational makeup. Another thought pertaining to the basis of work values was that, the ideologies culminated from the life experiences become more noticeable when taken into consideration and understood by other generations.

Cennamo and Gardner (2008) suggested that, the Baby Boomer employee relied on the traditional work values of hard work and dedication, whereas the Generation Y/Millennial employees placed a high importance on work-life balance. The knowledge that one generation can give and the other can receive is equally important to both generations. The key to all strategic decisions and successful interactions among work teams relied on dedication and teamwork. Although the Generation Y/Millennial employee is known to think more creatively, the freedom to maintain creativity does not come without the need to prove that capability (Schwarz, 2008).

The interview responses emphasized the value placed on teamwork for the work team environment to be successful. For instance, the Baby Boomer generation believed teamwork was an important consideration when deciding to develop multi-generational work teams. The generations that participated in the study felt inadequate, when there was a need to understand what motivates the Baby Boomers because the Baby Boomers are beginning to retire. The Generation X and Generation Y/Millennial generations recognized that, not being prepared enough to continue the momentum, the Baby Boomer employees have created, could be detrimental. The younger generations realized, there was much to contribute to the way, the Baby Boomer employees have constructed the work place. For instance, many of the employees belonging to the younger generations felt the need to move away from manual processes and into an electronic age that would streamline those processes and provide more efficiency.

When building work teams, the work values of different generations must be integrated. Each generation was optimistic, ambitious, and had a belief that teamwork was the key to overcome diversity (Patterson, 2005). One generation may have strengths that complement the weaknesses of another generation. There was a broad diversity in generational thought processes. Payment (2008) agreed that, Generation X employees do not like people to get involved and can make progress by working alone. According to Swan (2012), a multigenerational workforce brings a diverse set of skills complementing the attributes that help strengthen the effectiveness and capability of the organization.

The consensus among employees from the three generations was that, the integration of different work values offers a positive atmosphere of diversity when introduced into the work team. Big ideas, more diverse brainstorming, balance, and added value are some of the perceptions that were uncovered from a cross-section of generational participants. Mostly all employees agreed that, the Generation Y/Millennial employee had the most ideological demeanor than employees belonging to the other two generations. Baby Boomers and Generation X participants felt that, the idealistic views of the Generation Y/Millennial participants contributed freshness and an ability to revive the old, mundane ideals

of the older generations. At particular stages in an individual's life experience, sharing knowledge may be easier because of a genuine interest in the development of future generations (Brun de Pontet, Wrosch, and Gagne, 2007). Future generations become more receptive toward accepting of the advice from older generations as the life stages progress.

Bringing ideas into a work team can be good or bad because of the diversity of the generations that participate on the work team. Leveraging the strengths against the weaknesses, and the realization that members of different generations have unique qualities such as creativity, will positively contribute to the work team (Di Meglio et al., 2005; Vanden Bergh, and Stuhlfaut, 2006; Weston, 2001). Generation X employees have the work value diversity of the Baby Boomer employee and the freshness of the Generation Y/Millennial employee, which may allow each generation to understand the other generations to make work teams more effective.

3. Research Findings

New processes may be frustrating for Generation X employees because of the ideology gained by being raised by Baby Boomer parents and by feeling the satisfaction of understanding the technological methods created by the youngest Baby Boomers (Blythe et al., 2008). Generation Y/Millennial participants had a different set of experiences. Generation Y/Millennial employees grew up technologically advanced and tends to become impatient with manual processes (Lower, 2008). However, due to the generational life experiences, personal values also differ, causing a lack of loyalty opening the door to instigate a decision to terminate employment (Brecton, Walker, and Jones-Farmer, 2014). The stereotypes that surround the Baby Boomer, Generation X and Generation Y/Millennial employees suggest, there are differences relating to the workforce and, as a result, the assumption is that, the Baby Boomers will have fewer job mobility behaviors than the Generation X and GenerationY/Millennial employee (Brecton, Walker, and Jones-Farmer, 2014). Therefore, especially if the decision to terminate employment becomes a non-issue to the Generation Y/Millennial employee, the experience

level of this generation would allow creativity to be introduced into the work environment, and would become the team design that the other generations envision. The influence and experience of members of all generations contribute to each person's own set of beliefs and values, or what is expected of others (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007).

The experiences of multiple generations become an asset for the work teams within an organization, rather than an unknown mixture of talents. Several methods can be used to provide focus on the abilities of each generation. The methods used should enhance the work environment, provide a road map for competence building by setting goals, and encourage communication to help develop efficient work teams (Boguslauskas and Kvedaraviciene, 2009). Identifying ways an organization could use different approaches to develop multi-generational work teams would be beneficial for the organization. The following approaches would help the managers or leaders and employees gain an understanding of generational work habits:

- Personality assessments geared to identify generational nuances allow organizational leaders to gain a deeper understanding of the work values of each generation;

- Team building exercises to help members of each generation realize the strengths and weakness of each participant; and

- Take ownership of projects on a rotating basis to strengthen leadership abilities among all the generational cohorts.

Those approaches would alleviate any potential stress or disconnect between generations due to misunderstandings about how each the generation works in a team setting. The groups interviewed provided the necessary information to develop an understanding of generational work value similarities and differences that may aid in the development of multi-generational work teams (Neuman, 2003).

To recognize patterns in the work values, the analyses included in this research study used personal, social,

organizational and cultural components to underscore how similarities or differences in generational work values apply to the organization (White, 2005). In fact, Li and Nimon (2008) believed, the recognition of generational work value similarities or differences play a particular role in the development of new procedures to help improve organizational performance. By ignoring any similarities or differences in work values among the employees of different generations, a one-size-fits-all procedural approach could result, which does not satisfy the criteria needed for creating the diversity found in multi-generational work teams (Li and Nimon, 2008). Work culture can play a role that is an actual difference from one generation to another and that is the view of formal authority, the association with leadership, and the appropriate way to conduct work tasks (Lester, Standifer, Schultz, and Windsor, 2012). Moreover, Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) posit an engagement with the job was distinguishable from an involvement and commitment to the job, emphasizing that each member of a work team must feel valued and understood, regardless of the generational category. The work preferences include distinctive job characteristics and any potential match or mismatch in generational preferences and the expected job performance could have a positive or negative outcome across generational cohorts, emphasizing the importance of understanding generational differences (Tomislav, 2014).

The findings of this research study are clear revelations for the leaders or managers of the organizations, because without an understanding of the diversity of work values, organizations could be at risk of dysfunction within a work team environment (Renn, 2008). Nixon (2008) believed, there are advantages for employers to assist employees when attempting to resolve tensions between different generations, and this can be accomplished in an open atmosphere that does not diminish respect. In addition, the importance of developing strategies for resolving conflict should bring into focus the realization that each generation can be perceived differently, so the process should be as transparent as possible to avoid further conflict (Nixon, 2008; Cooper, 2005; Grover, 2005).

According to Behrens (2009), most individuals within the workplaces, do not identify with generational similarities or differences due to the traditional work models and existing training programs.

The factors, and consideration of the themes that emerged, could help an organization understand the importance of multi-generational work value traits and aid in the development of more cohesive multi-generational work teams (Gleeson, 2007). Kearney et al. (2009) stated that, since the organizations rely on team function within the work environment, gaining the knowledge of the "... different dimensions of diversity ...," and the levels of personality, makes it easier to develop a good team structure (p. 581). Austin, Kelecevic, Goble, and Mekechuk (2009) echoed the sentiment of the finding that, the process of developing teams begins through communication that clarifies the similarities or differences in the level of work experience and the perceptions of work values of each generation.

Conclusion

This research study indicated that, the possibility of developing successful multi-generational work teams does exist. There were more similarities than differences in the way each generation viewed the work values of other generations. Each generation had a desire to accomplish the tasks presented in the work environment, whether in a team setting or not. The development of multi-generational work teams continue to be a work in progress for many organizations as similarities or differences in the work values among generations become more familiar, and less complex, and as "... members interact over time, and evolve and adapt as situational demands unfold ..." (Kozlowski and Ilgen, 2006, p. 78). As employees' perceptions evolve, the understanding of these similarities and differences can help organizations recognize what needs to be in place to begin developing multi-generational work teams (Guastello, 2007).

The study used a method to help provide an understanding of generational diversity through the categories that emerged from the data that was

collected from each participant. An understanding of the diversity ensured that, the patterns were not a view of the participants' two-dimensional reality (Scott and Howell, 2008). The two-dimensional reality pertains to a constant comparison of patterns, which describe the participants' reality. If the participant looks beyond those two-dimensional realities, and delves into more complex multi-dimensional constructivist ecology, the patterns would show the participant's character in a group setting (Scott and Howell, 2008).

Analysis of data also showed that, each generation was not aware of the thoughts, feelings, and work values of the other generations. The coded themes that emerged, validated the fact that each generation had personal perceptions, but none of the participants had explored the possibility of similarities or differences in work values among generations, or how the similarities or differences in work values could have an influence on the work team. If communication among generations was enhanced, members of each generation may come to understand that, there are many similarities in the perception of work values among generations. This insight would have a definite impact on how managers or leaders can begin to understand how multi-generational work teams would interact.

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