

MULTILEADERS – THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF LEADING MULTIGENERATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL ORGANISATIONS

by **Patrick Dunne**, experienced chairman and author of the award-winning book *Boards, a Practical Perspective*

An uplifting peer-to-peer event – staged by Board Director, the FT’s exclusive community for board members – looked at today’s challenging environment for business leaders.

The encouragement and inspiration that the leaders shared was proof of the range of issues they encounter as the heads of complex and diverse organisations.

One chief executive said: “Being able to lead multigenerational and multicultural organisations has never been more important or stimulating.”

Another leader said the challenges of the job motivated him daily. “It’s absolutely joyful to be working with people of all ages from across the world and learning something new,” he said.

The group comprised CEOs, C-suite and board leaders from various sectors and countries. They included industry veterans and people in their first leadership posts. The organisations they lead range in size from 20 staff to more than 37,000 workers.

As with previous Board Director sessions, we aimed to take a topic of current and strategic interest to business leaders, avoid a “whinefest” and instead explore pragmatic ways to turn challenges into opportunities.

We agreed that while we have to acknowledge differences we should be aware of the dangers of stereotyping and categorising.

We decided it was important to be clear about what we mean by different generations and cultures, as well as why this matters.

It was agreed that the simplest definition of a generation is “a group of people born at about the same time”. That phrase may seem vague but generations are usually defined in bands of 15 to 20 years.

The definition of culture is more straightforward: it is the combined influences on mindset and behaviour, on expectations, communication, social attitudes, skills and capabilities – and the way in which we lead more generally.

Generation	Born	Age now
Baby boomers	1946-64	58-76
Generation X	1965-80	42-57
Millennials (Generation Y)	1981-96	26-41
Generation Z	1997-2012	10-25
Generation Alpha	2011-25	0-11

A good example of generational stereotyping being busted is included in research by Channel 4, entitled *Beyond Z – The Real Truth about British Youth*. This said:

“There is far less conflict between generations than is often claimed. To a degree, the intergenerational conflict that we read so much about is a myth. Three out of five 13 to 24-year-olds see their parents as role models, a quarter point to a grandparent and the same proportion identify a teacher.

“Big societal issues such as gender equality, climate change and human rights are seen as shared values – in other words, the collective responsibility of society, not the failings of older generations.”

In defining a culture, we settled on “the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society”. We also agreed that a culture could be defined by place today, origin, race, belief, social groupings, common experience, organisation or professional focus or other characteristics.

Whether cultural or generational, people agreed it was worth trying to understand our differences. One leader said: “If we don’t understand the differences, how can we find the right way to navigate them?” Another participant gave a tip for further reading: *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business*, by Erin Meyer.

The key points in terms of the joys and challenges of leading multigenerational and multicultural organisations were these:

Joys

- Increased innovation and creativity
- Better market understanding and connectivity
- Anticipating market need
- Fresh thinking rather than generational disruption
- More robust cultures (but not always!)

Challenges

- Where, when and how to work
- Communication styles and preferences
- Getting interactions right: the use of words is important
- Transferring knowledge
- Ensuring we have the right learning models for each culture and generation
- Not having a common set of values and motivations can be tough to manage.

We also looked at the high level of worker turnover that many organisations currently experience and concluded that some of it is caused by the challenges related to our topic.

One tip on reducing churn was “to spend as much time thinking about why people stay as why they leave”. Another was simply to “reduce futility” – to drive out unproductive, boring work or bureaucracy.

We also discussed the use of so-called horizon or next gen boards as a way to gain fresh insights. If you haven’t heard of these, they are set up in tandem with the actual board and bring together a company’s rising talent. Members are given the task of looking afresh at strategy. They should seek to challenge and/or engage the cultures and generations outside the leadership or actual board.

It felt like we all learnt something from our multigenerational and multicultural conversation.

This article summarises the most important themes and trends that emerged from our recent FT Board Director peer-to-peer workshop. These workshops are reserved for our VIP members only and are conducted on a strictly Chatham House basis, facilitated by Patrick Dunne.