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A Generational Challenge for Leaders

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A business perspective shared by a number of companies is that what is good for the company is good for the community in which the company operates – and vice versa. Dynamic companies that are engaged in and supportive of their communities are great places to work and, more often than not, successful. Companies that encourage and enable their employees as individuals to be similarly engaged in and supportive of their communities are rewarding, satisfying workplaces. CDF has worked for years to recognize and encourage such good business practices, and we benefit from this collective effort.

However, as Charles Dickens wrote exactly 150 years ago in the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us....” That we are in the worst of times can be seen in the news every day – economic and social woes in our community, our state, our country, and the world. The unprecedented speed of change in our world displaces people and causes angst for many. Yet we are also in the best of times with advancements in medicine, science, and technology, and there remains significant wealth in the United States. Another similarity over the last 150 years is the aging generation shaking their heads over the younger generation(s), wondering about their work ethic and values. Yet it is the best of times with a new generation of energy and creativeness.

There are many different facets to these challenging, changing and dynamic times for our businesses and our communities. While this new generation brings more informality to the workplace, and focus on technology, there is sometimes a disconnect between age groups on commitment to the company and giving back to the community. Understanding these differences can help corporate leaders harness the power for good.

My “Gen X” daughter recently sent me an article addressing the different outlooks of the four generations currently found in our businesses and our communities. The article described some generalizations that are interesting and perhaps useful to some extent. The older “Traditionalist” Generation, usually recognized as people being born before 1946, values loyalty, hierarchy and recognition, and are resistant to change. The “Baby Boomers” generation are people born between 1946 and 1964, and value team spirit, dedication, and face time. “Gen X,” aka the “Slacker Generation” or the “Me Generation,” are people born between 1964 and 1982, and value work-life balance, autonomy, flexibility, and informality. “Gen Y,” aka “Millennials,” are people born between 1982 and the late 1990’s, and value feedback, recognition, fulfillment, advanced technology, and fun.

How do the different perspectives of different generations impact corporate leadership? A business can have a culture that is aware of the different generational perspectives, acknowledge these differences, and appreciate each person for how they might contribute in different ways. For

instance, some Baby Boomer staff at a company may desire to tutor under privileged children after hours, on their own time. Good leadership for the company and the community means the company contributes financially to the effort, arranges for the cost-free after-hours use of part of the facility, and thanks those staff people in public ways. The Me Generation may also want to participate, but may need the interpretation that the success of the effort is about them, that they make a difference, that they will feel good for helping others.

One challenge is to reward different perspectives in different ways for both the quality of work in the company and the quantity of time spent in developing community. A Baby Boomer that values team spirit can be encouraged with a team approach to a problem. A Millennial that values feedback and fulfillment can be on the same team. The key is to lead the team and articulate the task to address both perspectives, giving feedback and (hopefully) fulfillment in a team effort. This team effort can be applied to community projects also, whether it be hands-on or monetary donation. The key is to celebrate diversity.

If a leader acknowledges the differences in perspective and recognizes that the values of these generations conflict, he or she can be more effective in achieving corporate and community goals. The loyalty and hierarchy valued by a Traditionalist appear to be in direct contrast to the autonomy and flexibility valued by a Gen Xer. An innovative leader might create an opportunity for work-life balance in a hierarchical structure that presents such an approach as being loyal to the company and best for the individual. The key is understanding and communication. Failure to understand this generational difference will lead to a gap in effective leadership.

Overall, the best approach is a corporate culture of awareness, acknowledgment, and appreciation of efforts and results for both business and community activities for all generations. People in the business should be asked to make others aware, on a regular basis, of their activities and opportunities. Corporate support of individual participation should be noticeable, in terms of dollars, time, and emotional support. People should be recognized and thanked frequently, and sincerely. Even with different generational perspectives, people will generally respond positively.

One thing that says much about who we are is what we focus on – the best of times or the worst of times. A leader should believe that there is much opportunity to make our companies and our communities function better by recognizing, taking into account, and even celebrating our different generational perspectives. A good leader will guide a company and a community to address problems in meaningful ways while remaining positive and appreciative. Therein lies the trick, and hopefully we are developing leaders who are acknowledging and accepting that challenge.