

Building Intergenerational Synergy
- Large Work System
Experiments and Lessons

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“Face-to-face conversation may seem like something very ordinary, but it is in fact the most powerful tool for positive change that we possess.”

.... Dr. Daisaku Ikeda

Abstract

The paper describes the learnings of a planned intervention in a large organisation struggling to make a multi-generational workforce engaged and productive. The intervention aimed to bridge the perceptual and functional gaps between 3 generations, namely, the Baby Boomers – senior management, with 30 years of experience, the Gen X – middle management, relatively young, with around 15 years of experience and the Gen Y –young entrants with 2 to 3 years of experience, in a large work system.

Differential Challenges for a Large Workforce-Work System

The diverse, demographically spread organisation, found in their recently conducted Employment engagement survey that found that employee engagement in the organisation had dipped and that of the large chunk of young executives was the lowest. This caused alarm in the top management as the average age of the organisation had now become 35 years, approx. with 32,000 employees with less than 8 years' experience and 14,000 employees had more than 8 years' experience.

The environment was rampant with conflicts and this dip in engagement and productivity was due to generational differences. This endeavour began with trying to understand this new generation- what makes them contribute their best to the organisation? An online survey was specifically designed to find out the work preferences, how they build relationships and their satisfaction with the compensation. As the findings pointed towards a need to create trust, and understanding between the generations, a guided process of structured intervention in a phased manner was conducted over 4 years.

The interventions started with a Top-Down approach. The Programmes for the seniors was titled “Nurturing Young Successors” to raise capable successors and the Programmes for the younger workforce was titled “Young Achievers”.

Findings & Outcome

The interventions had a positive effect on team working and personal growth initiatives of the youngsters. This paper explains the process adopted to create synergy between the generations.

Introduction

The performance of the company was going down. Investigation into the reasons showed that one of the primary reasons was, that the year's employment engagement survey showed that the young executives were relatively less engaged. This was not a good sign as out of 13,000 executives, over 7,000 were young executives with less than 8 years' experience. The percentage of young executives was 54% of the total workforce and was likely to increase with mass retirements in 2019, draining the organisation of experienced executives in the next 5 years. Currently of course the workplace had three generations working together.

1. The Baby Boomers
2. The Gen X
3. Millennial's (also known as The Gen Y)

In view of this alarming situation, focused group discussion with the young executives were held throughout the organization. They revealed that the workplace, characterized by these 3 distinct generations working together, each with their own unique characteristics, were instead of creating synergy between the dynamism of the youth and the wisdom of the experienced generation to help the organisation to gallop in a competitive market, busy sticking to their own point of views and highlighting each other's weaknesses rather than compensating for one another which lead to loss of productivity, trust and engagement with the organisation. Further the younger generation complained that the bosses neither nurtured them nor listened to their suggestions.

These findings worried the Top Management. They felt urgent measures needed to be taken to engage these young executives, so as to sustain the organisation in the long run.

To motivate the Gen Y, it became imperative to understand the work habits of this new generation. The quest started with an online survey specifically designed to find out the work preferences, how they build relationships and their satisfaction with the compensation.

Research Design and Methodology

It was decided to understand the above through conducting a survey with a questionnaire designed in house. Current studies suggested that employees' contribution gets influenced by the following factors which can be broadly classified into the three dimensions of 'Work-Relationship-Compensation':

- **Job content:** autonomy, challenging opportunities for learning
- **Compensation/ Monetary Benefits:** attractive salary vis-à-vis qualifications and responsibility, adequate compensation for the work and intra-organization parity
- **Work Life Balance:** appreciative of personal needs, able to spend time with family
- **Top-Management Employee Relations:** approachability of top management, their values and ethical conduct, equality in treatment, respecting the views of subordinates, providing an environment of working together
- **Scope for Advancement and Career Growth:** well-designed policy, adequate opportunities for career growth and advancement, clearly laid down career growth paths; implementation of the promotion policy in a fair and transparent manner, helping employees achieve career growth
- **Team Orientation / Team Work:** importance, cooperation in inter and intra department teams

On the basis of this understanding an in-house online questionnaire was designed comprising 15 questions covering the 3 dimensions of “Work-Relationship-Compensation. It had 12 Objective Type and 3 Subjective Type Questions.

Out of the total group of 2236 young (Gen Y) executives / engineers who were surveyed, responses were received from 1079 (approx. 50%) from across all the Units/Regions within 2 days.

Questionnaire Response Highlights

Summary of Analysis and Findings of Youth Survey (Gen Y): The Findings could be summarized as below:

a. Work:

- Among GEN Y there is no significant difference between those who work because they want to make a difference and because it is necessary
- They want work to be assigned by being given broad goals with feedback, and sometimes by being trained along with seniors
- They like to work in an environment which is neither formal nor informal.
- Work can be made more engaging by not giving repetitive and lengthy assignments. They prefer challenging and creative assignments

b. Relationships:

- They like to get work done through face to face interaction i.e. they like a personal touch
- However, they need more Appreciation for work
- They would like to be evaluated on the following:
 - ✓ For doing the work as assigned to them
 - ✓ For doing innovative work, taking the initiative
 - ✓ For their attitude to work
 - ✓ For their leadership qualities and
 - ✓ For being good team players
- They believe in stating their point of view, including disagreements
- They would express their views (though constructively)

c. Compensation

- Gen Y has expressed satisfaction with Pay Scale and Medical facilities. 52% expressed dissatisfaction with Canteen, Township (48%), and laptop/entertainment allowance (40%)
- The form of reward they value most is getting more interesting/challenging assignments (36%), and being sent for high end training courses rather than monetary compensation (which only 10% have asked for)

The Process following the Survey:

The compiled issues of the focus group discussions and the survey in each unit were discussed with the unit Management, so that they could respond to the expectations of the GEN-Y workforce suitably. Though they listened to these points, while these were being presented, they also had some anguishes in working with the gen-y executives. Cognizance to which needed to be paid otherwise it would lead to defensiveness and a need to strike back making matters worse.

The unit management was assured that their point of view would also be communicated to the younger generation **BUT** the change had to begin from the Top. The expectations of Gen-Y and their differences from their Controlling officers and vice versa could be summarized in Table 1.

Issues of Older Generation Working with Younger Generation	Issues of Younger Generation Working with Older Generation
Knowledge Gap	No role clarity
Lack of knowledge on Procedures and policies	Unclear articulation of goals
Unwilling to stay for extended hours	Poor planning and organizing
Not maintaining office decorum	Lack of guidance on the Job
Low adaptability to demanding environment	Do not get informal on-going feedback
Belongingness is low	Not open to new ideas
Constantly on cell phone	Do not appreciate openly

Table 1: Expectations of Gen-Y workforce from their Controlling officers and vice versa

Need for Building Intergenerational Synergy

Assumptions

All the findings pointed out that there is a need to create trust and build Intergenerational Synergy. So, the following assumptions led to test the hypothesis of planned change intervention:

A1: It was strongly felt that each employee down the line has innate desire to contribute provided he or she gets the opportunity.

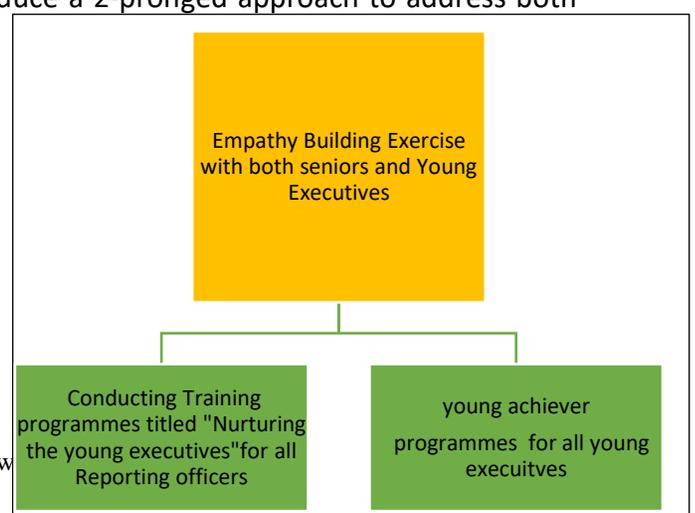
A2: The Organization has to find ways and means to create a way to help develop intergenerational synergy.

A3: Continuous dialogue and sustained feedback mechanism alone would address the missing gaps of the quest in the organization. However, a direct face to face interaction would have led to conflict.

To prevent further conflict, it was decided to introduce a 2-pronged approach to address both the groups, illustrated in the diagram.

Exercise in Developing Skills of Empathy with Youth

To enable Gen-Y workforce to have a more empathetic and trusting relationship with their seniors, and go beyond just complaining, after



the focus group discussions, inputs were given on taking responsibility, film clippings were shown how successful people Never get defeated and always rise up to the occasion and the younger executives were asked to explore and draw up action plans that could be initiated at their level to resolve the problem by thinking “what they would do if they were the seniors?”.Inspired and motivated, they drew up several action plans. This exercise changed their perception of the situation and they went back feeling more responsible, empowered that they had choices which were in their control.

“Nurturing Young Successors” Programme

For the **senior level executives**, it was clear that a change in their style of leading and Nurturing was required. A training programme titled was designed:“Nurturing Young Successors”to sensitize the reporting officers towards their role in developing their subordinates and to empower them to understand and adopt a style that facilitates their development.

Given that the organization had over 5000 executives in this cadre, who needed to be sensitized in a short time in **over 300** workshops held in various units/regions within a **short span** of 2 years, it was decided that these 2-day “Nurturing Young Successors”Workshops would be conducted for all senior managers across the organization by internal trainers. Also they would be best able to contextualize the learning modules to the needs of the organisation, and it would save cost to the company.

The organization started the endeavor by conducting “Train The Trainer” workshops (10 days each) to develop in-house trainers or change agents. 78 trainers had to be trained in 3 workshops.

In order, to design the Training of Trainers Programme, we did a preliminary assessment of the nominees chosen by the units to be trained as in-house change agents. This rapid assessment exercise led us to understand the challenges of our task. These future trainers were all engineers with hardly any exposure to undergo training beyond their shop floor learning, which are very structured with clearly defined inputs.

These non –trainer engineers had to be taught how to conduct the semi- structured workshops- familiarized with the pedagogy of training quite contrary to their prescriptive styles, taught the new concepts and exposed to basics of process skills.

Further we found that Their confidence in themselves for doing faculty work was low. This meant that the Training of Trainers programme had to be designed very carefully and at many levels.

We proceeded in making the design of the “Training for Trainers” programme with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The quality of internal change facilitators and their sense of confidence would eventually lead to better learning transfer process down the line.

Hypothesis 2: In such a short time imparting process skills would be far more complex than bringing about content and pedagogical familiarity for in house facilitators’ development.

Hypothesis 3: A clear structure of guidelines and tools may not be needed well in advance, a trial and error mode of learning climate for developing internal facilitators should be experimented with.

Framing of this hypothesis helped us to overcome the challenges of training people with no facilitation background. Subsequent to the workshops a standardized trainer's manual was prepared to assist the trainers in conducting workshops across the organization. To encourage healthy competition among the trainers, "Best Trainer" awards were instituted to recognize remarkable contributions.

The trainers did intense preparation before the conducting the workshops. With this and polishing their skills with each workshop, the trainers gained confidence, eventually facilitating the rest of the employees, covering 7,000 employees over a period of about 2 years. Every quarter the team of external process consultants and in house corporate learning anchors used to sit together to review the ongoing intervention strategy. They planned their visits in selective areas for their trained trainers.

The "Nurturing Young Successors" Workshops were widely appreciated by the participants all across units and regions. Many of the Reporting officers, who were already involved in the process of developing their subordinates also expressed that they were now sensitized to the specific issues they needed to take care of while dealing with the younger generation.

Reportedly this intervention had two other benefits,

- It helped senior executives in their personal lives, to understand the aspirations and expectations of their wards at their homes,
- It taught the engineers a new skill, that of training and facilitation which they thought they could not do, this increased their public dealing skills and gave an overall sense of empowerment for having successfully done something they thought "Impossible!".

"Young Achievers" Workshops

After completing this exercise, the organisation embarked on the next part of the intervention i.e. to align the young executives through workshops titled "**Young Achievers**". It was envisaged to train young executives, below the age of 35 to improve their employee engagement and role realignment to the larger organizational goals.

A 3 day semi-structured programme was designed with the help of a couple of young executives so that they may suggest methodologies and interventions which would click with the young generation.

After conducting 4 pilot programs the following objectives of the programme were finalized:

To enable the young executives to mobilize their energy to win by:

- Leading self effectively
- Becoming an effective Team Player
- Developing a proper understanding of the Vision, Mission and Objectives of the organisation

The target was to cover the entire population of approx. 7,000 executives within 2 years.

Once again, internal trainers needed to be trained for rolling out these workshops.

The challenges and the hypothesis earlier made in “Training the Trainers” were same, with an additional challenge that since the trainers were not from the millennial group and they would have had to deal with some resistance, therefore they had to be sensitized to an additional point and perhaps the most important that they were not bosses conducting the workshops.

This hypothesis helped us to design the “Training of Trainers” programme better and inputs were included on the skill of asking open ended questions, rather than giving prescriptions which the seniors in the organisation are so adept at.

A training manual was prepared and they were asked to stick to it asking only exploratory questions so that they do not generate a defensive climate in the class room.

Once trained these trainers went back to their units and very joyfully conducted these workshops!

The whole programme, based on learning through games was very well appreciated by the young group, they said that the most significant change that they felt was during the interaction organized with the seniors of the Unit.

In this session a group of senior executives were invited many of who were these youngster’s bosses. The whole group was divided into two: Group 1- The seniors group and Group 2- The juniors group. The groups were asked to discuss, in their respective groups ‘What they think their seniors think of them’ and the seniors on “What they think their juniors think of them”. When mutual perceptions were shared, and clarified with each other in the next round -the juniors discover that they imagined that their seniors thought much worse of them than they actually did, and many of the points they thought they were critical of, actually the seniors admired them for that. Thus through mutual dialogue both groups were able to clarify many points of misunderstanding between themselves, and share their expectations of each other.

This dialogue brought them to a shared understanding and fostered deeper trusting relationships.

All the programs received an overwhelming response. In fact the unique feature of this programme was that the unit coordinators were excited to conduct it, the trainers were enthusiastic to facilitate the workshops and the participants said “This is the BEST training I have attended in my life so far!”

Post Training Evaluation

After 1 year of training all the participants of the program, a need was felt to understand what incremental changes it has brought about in the behaviour of the executives, and whether these changes were felt palpably by their seniors.

In order to fathom the effectiveness of the workshops on its participants, an Impact assessment survey was carried out through an online system, and responses from participants and their controlling officers were captured. The selection of the questionnaire was done so as to exactly figure our improvement against key deliverables, before and after Young Achievers workshop to ascertain its effectiveness.

The Study and the Results

Two independent questionnaires were used:

Questionnaire one

To study the effect of behavioral changes in team-working, Patrick Lencioni's questionnaire "The Five dysfunctions of a Team" was used. It measures five factors which lead to effective or ineffective team working, across the following dimensions:

- a) Absence of trust - unwilling to be *vulnerable* within the group
- b) Fear of conflict - seeking *artificial harmony* over constructive passionate debate
- c) Lack of commitment - feigning buy-in for group decisions creates ambiguity throughout the organisation
- d) Avoidance of accountability - ducking responsibility to call peers on counterproductive behaviour which sets *low standards*
- e) Inattention to results – putting personal success, *status and ego* ahead of team success

The survey data revealed that there is a remarkable improvement in the following areas after the workshops:

- Trust within team members
- Reduction in fear of conflict
- Commitment level
- Level of Accountability
- Result orientation

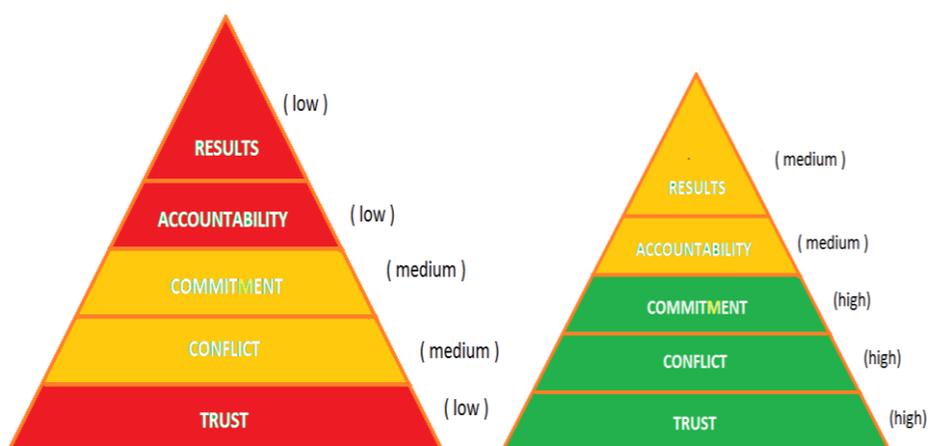
A snapshot of the results is given below.

Team summary (Young Achievers participants): scale: [0-3]

■ High (2.25 and above) ■ Medium (1.95 to 2.24) ■ Low (less than 1.95)

Before Workshop

After Workshop

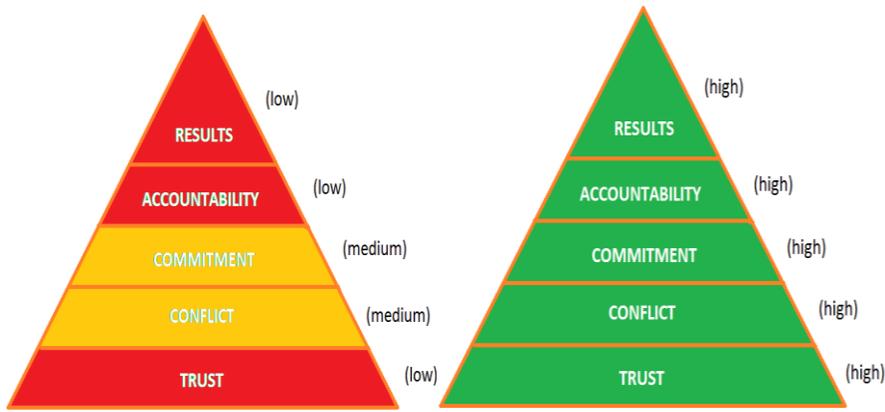


Assessment scores indicate that after Young Achievers workshop, there are significant improvements in Commitment, Conflict and Trust and incremental changes in Result and Accountability.

Team Summary (Controlling Officer/Seniors): SCALE: [0-3]

Before Young Achievers workshop

After Young Achievers workshop



Questionnaire Two

The second questionnaire was on the “Personal Growth Initiatives “of the participants. It measures 4 factors:

- a. Readiness for Change
- b. Better Planning
- c. Effective Resource Utilization
- d. Improvement in their Intentional Behaviour

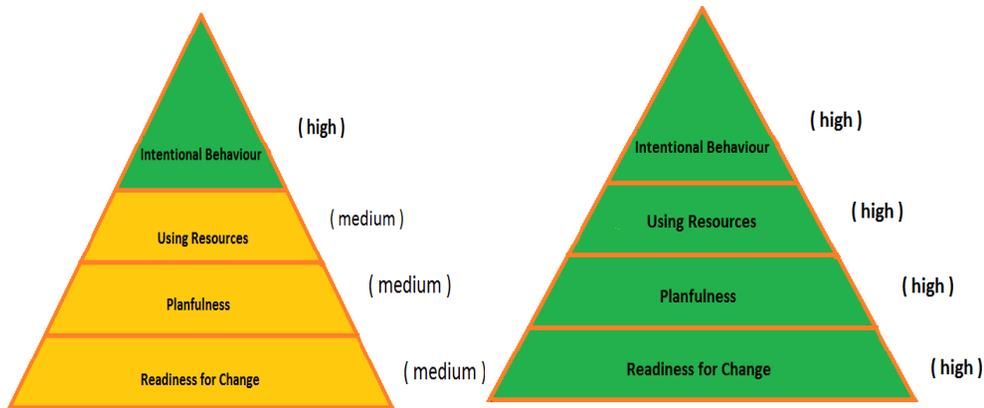
On Personal growth initiative front there is a marked departure on readiness for change, better planning, effective resource utilization and improvement in their intentional behavior in positive way. A snap shot of the results is given below.

Personal Growth Initiative Summary (Scale: 0-5)

High (3.7 and above) Medium (3.25 to 3.74) low (less than 3.25)

Before Workshop

After workshop



Assessment scores indicate that after Young Achievers workshop, there are significant improvement in Readiness for Change, Planning, Using Resources and Intentional Behaviour.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The experience of internal change agent development to build a bridge of intergenerational learning gaps at multiple levels in large system in a big company has been an arduous journey.

The experience was not only intense, it had a draining effect on both emotional and mental energy of the expert team. The experience also created many uneasy moments within the key facilitators' team while dealing with the differences of working styles, and the basic approach of the design itself. This challenge led us to create a standardized learning kit with video memory kit to reinforce/refresh their own learning experience and to regain momentum to carry on the process.

Persisting with our efforts at each level eventually led to a meaningful impact of the project which had a positive multiplier effect. Bosses have become very appreciative of their newly converted staff working as facilitators at the ground level on their own. The process has now begun down the line at worker's level to create better intergenerational synergy.

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