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RETHINKING AUTONOMY AT WORK



OVERMANAGING TALENT
JULIAN LIGHTON



The future of leadership lies not in choosing between generations, but in building bridges where experience and fresh perspectives come together to make institutions stronger.

LEADERSHIP

♦ RAJEEV KUMAR MEHAJAN, PHD, NOBLEGENICS TRUST

Bridging generations

“**R**ajeev Sir, this generation questions everything.” The remark came from a seasoned

senior executive immediately after one of my leadership interactions at Microsoft on 13 August 2024. There was no irritation in his voice, only genuine bewilderment.

Barely three weeks earlier, while participants (scientists, technocrats and administrators) were dispersing at NRSC, ISRO, Hyderabad on 24 July 2024, a young professional walked up with a smile. Referring to a point I had made about ownership among everyone, especially those joining ranks with seniors, he said almost apologetically,

“Sir, we are willing to work hard. We only wish our seniors trusted us a little more.” Standing between these two conversations, I realised that I was not listening to conflicting opinions. I was listening to two generations describing the workplace through entirely different lenses.

That moment stayed with me.

Over the last four decades, I have had the privilege of working in remarkably diverse institutional ecosystems—the armed forces, scientific organisations, government departments, research funding agencies, universities, international bodies and, more recently, through mentoring thousands of young professionals from equally diverse backgrounds.

The organisational structures differed. The missions differed. The cultures differed. Yet one leadership challenge surfaced with surprising consistency. How do institutions ensure that one generation does not merely replace another, but strengthens it?

Ironically, at a time when organisations are investing unprecedented attention in technology, artificial intelligence, digital transformation and future skills, a quieter question often remains unexplored. Are we investing equally in strengthening the relationship between generations that must work together to realise those ambitions?

It would be unfair to evaluate today's young professionals using benchmarks that shaped earlier generations. My generation entered workplaces where information was scarce, opportunities were limited, hierarchy was clearly defined and patience was considered an essential professional virtue

Looking beyond labels

Generation Z has perhaps been analysed more than any generation before it. Depending upon whom one listens to, they are either celebrated as technologically brilliant, adaptable and entrepreneurial, or criticised as impatient, demanding and unwilling to accept hierarchy.

Neither description, in my experience, captures the whole picture. One characteristic that has increasingly stood out during my interactions with young professionals and mentees is their strong preference for alignment between thought, expression and action.

While every generation has its strengths and limitations, young professionals are less inclined to maintain a distinction between 'what they believe', 'what they say' and 'what they do'.

Perhaps what impresses me even more is their instinctive preference for authenticity. They are usually less influenced by titles than by credibility. Less persuaded by authority than by competence. Less impressed by position than by purpose. Many leaders interpret this behaviour as a reluctance to respect hierarchy. I increasingly see it as a different way of defining respect.

Every generation is a product of its time

It would be unfair to evaluate today's young professionals using benchmarks that shaped earlier generations. My generation entered workplaces where information was scarce, opportunities were limited, hierarchy was clearly defined and patience was considered

an essential professional virtue. Today's professionals have grown up in a world of instant information, global exposure, rapid technological change and connectivity. The environments that shaped us are fundamentally different. Why then should we expect identical behaviours? If organisations genuinely seek to harness the strengths of emerging generation, the first requirement is not adaptation. It is understanding.

The other half of the conversation

Having said that, it is evident that the responsibility cannot rest exclusively with senior leaders. Younger professionals too must recognise that experience represents far more than the passage of time. It embodies judgement refined through uncertainty. Many lessons that appear obvious today were learnt over decades of experimentation, disappointment and perseverance. Technology accelerates learning. Experience deepens understanding. The two are not competing assets. They are complementary strengths.

Perhaps the real leadership challenge before organisations is not deciding which generation is right. The objective, after all, is not generational agreement. It is organisational effectiveness.

From managing generations to connecting them

The question, therefore, is no longer whether organisations should adapt to emerging generation. The more relevant question is whether organisations are prepared to become places where successive generations continuously learn from one another.

For decades, leadership development largely focused on preparing individuals for greater responsibility. Succession planning became an important management process. High-potential employees were identified, leadership designed and future organisational roles mapped with

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considerable care. Yet one critical dimension often remained outside formal planning.

Very little attention was paid to preparing generations to work effectively with one another. That omission may become expensive. Tomorrow's leaders will require two capabilities that business schools seldom teach—building bridges between generations and developing institutional literacy.

The 3A Leadership Bridge

Experience has led me to believe that organisations need what I call it 'The 3A Leadership Bridge' - a bridge that enables experience and emerging talent to move

towards one another rather than drift apart. In my view, this bridge rests on three powerful pillars:

- Acceptance:** Recognise that every generation is shaped by a different world. The goal is not to create replicas of ourselves but to understand and leverage the unique strengths each generation brings. Leadership begins where comparison ends.
- Appreciation:** Acceptance must lead to appreciation. Experience offers judgement and institutional memory; whereas youth brings speed, curiosity and fresh perspectives. Organisations flourish when these strengths complement rather than pull in different directions or compete with each other.
- Alignment:** The ultimate objective is not generational harmony but organisational

purpose. When people across generations align around a shared mission, differences in style become secondary and diversity becomes a strategic advantage.

Interestingly, the essence of this Bridge is reflected beautifully in the recent web series *Made in India – A Titan Story*. Through the portrayal of J.R.D. Tata by Naseeruddin Shah, one sees leadership that neither imposes authority nor abandons standards. The interactions between J.R.D., Xerxes Desai and subsequent generations offer a subtle but powerful illustration of acceptance, appreciation and alignment across generations.

Institutional literacy: An emerging leadership competency

We speak increasingly about digital literacy, financial literacy and AI literacy. Perhaps organisations now need another equally important capability: Institutional literacy. It is the ability to understand why different generations think, communicate and respond differently within the same organisation. It goes beyond recognising behavioural differences.

Institutional literacy replaces judgement with understanding and curiosity with trust. It encourages both generations to ask not merely how the other behaves, but why.

In my interactions with younger professionals, it is rare to encounter a generation unwilling to learn—more often, a generation unwilling to pretend. They rarely reject guidance. They reject being judged before being understood. Likewise, I seldom find senior leaders resisting change.

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One nation, many institutional cultures

One observation has consistently emerged from my interactions: intergenerational transitions play out differently in different institutional cultures. In fact, cultures may differ, but the need for mutual respect between generations remains universal.

Many private sector organisations have adopted flatter hierarchies, collaborative workplaces and informal communication, where respect is earned more through professional credibility than protocol. In contrast, government organisations, public sector enterprises, universities, research institutions and sections of the armed forces continue to draw strength from traditions where hierarchy reinforces accountability, continuity and institutional discipline.

Neither model is inherently superior. Each has evolved in response to its unique purpose. The challenge arises when one generation interprets the other's behaviour without understanding the culture that shaped it - mistaking protocol for rigidity or informality for indiscipline.

Leadership, therefore, demands contextual intelligence: the ability to appreciate diverse institutional cultures and help them evolve without losing their essential character.

The responsibility of leadership

The leaders who leave the deepest institutional legacy may not necessarily be those who introduce the most disruptive technologies or deliver the highest quarterly results. They are more likely to be those who build cultures where young professionals feel confident to question respectfully, and experienced colleagues feel valued to share their wisdom generously.

Such organisations do not depend on charismatic individuals. They nurture leadership as a culture rather than an individual capability. Perhaps that is the true measure of institutional

maturity - when people feel safer to question convention without undermining the institution.

In the Indian Air Force, where I received my early professional grooming, rank ensured clarity of command; it never prevented a young officer from contributing an idea. Contrary to the popular perception, respect for hierarchy and openness to ideas in services coexisted naturally.

From succession planning to succession preparation

Succession planning has long been recognised as a leadership priority. Yet today's demographic realities call for something more—succession preparation. Preparing senior leaders to mentor yet unlearn and relearn. Preparing younger professionals to learn. Preparing organisations to value innovation and institutional memory in equal measure.

A final reflection

Every generation believes it is shaping the future. The more important question is whether it is preparing the next generation to shape the one beyond.

I remain deeply optimistic, not because one generation is better than another, but because each brings something indispensable. Youth contributes possibilities; experience offers perspective.

Institutions flourish when both recognise their interdependence. Neither can realise its full potential without the other.

Leadership question of our time is no longer, "How do I manage the next generation?" It is, "How do I create an environment where generations make one another better?"

Every generation inherits an institution. Its greatest responsibility is not merely to improve it, but to make it stronger, wiser and more welcoming for the generation that follows. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Rajeev Kumar Mehajan is founder, NobleGenics Trust, and a WMO-UN Expert. He serves as President of India's Nominee to IIT Kharagpur.