



The Generation Paradox

Executive Summary

There is disconnection in today's organisations that is paralysing leaders and disengaging their teams. Business leaders may be missing the opportunity to create the right environment to maximise value and huge potential from engaging their multigenerational workforce.

If leaders were to embrace a creative mindset, they can create a significant competitive advantage by accessing 'New Knowledge'. Tapping into this untapped potential by making new connections between individuals at different stages of their life, with differing levels of experience, knowledge and expertise can create an age of new learning, growth & value for individuals as well as the business itself.

The challenge is that in today's society, we have swapped seeing people as individuals and adopted marketing and media terminology to think that we 'know' who people are and what they want, based on broad-brush stereotyping. This creates significant negative impact & unconscious bias at all levels of an organisation, resulting in frustration, miscommunication, distrust and fear.

Over the last 18 months we have dedicated time to observing and working with leaders of today and tomorrow, witnessing the interactions at all levels of the business and speaking at length with 'groups' of individuals to understand the impact of this 'stereotyping'.

The research predominantly focuses on 'millennials' as one of the most misunderstood groups (16 million individuals) and identifies the negative impact it has on organisations of not seeing them as individuals with new perspectives. It also touches on the engagement of today's leaders and the reciprocal learning that can exist at the top and bottom of the hierarchy. It concludes with the identification of 3 principles which can harness the untapped creativity, energy and new knowledge: **individualisation, connectivity and reality**.

Isn't it time we stopped labelling people, only connecting through rigid layers of hierarchy and connect as a group of engaged & highly capable people with different perspectives - what opportunity for growth might exist in your business if you tap into your untapped potential - connect without judgement.

Hello2morrow works with organisations (leaders as well as learning & development teams) seeing your business as a network of untapped opportunity. We create new connections to inspire & engage your business leaders of today & tomorrow. Our belief is to use existing processes and structures to ensure that this becomes an environment for new knowledge to flourish and a way of engaging, not a tick box activity that fades out.

Where does the untapped potential for new knowledge growth lie in your organisation?

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The Generation Paradox

For the first time in history, we are part of a five-generation workplace and today's leaders have a huge responsibility to engage, motivate and retain an increasingly age-diverse population within their organisations. Just as retirement plans are delayed for many over 60s, those same leaders will also find themselves working alongside colleagues born in the 21st century. This presents unique challenges in connecting to and truly understanding people whose life and work experiences are often at opposite ends of the generation spectrum.

There continues to be 'miss-labelling' of entire generations in our society today, such as the so-called 'Millennials' and this is having a huge negative impact within organisations, however at Hello2morrow we believe there is huge opportunity to create reciprocal learning opportunities exchanging expertise for new knowledge.

Over the last 20 years, I have experienced not only the positive impact on organisations which have embraced these challenges, but also the demoralisation and divide when they haven't. For this reason, we undertook our own research to substantiate what I had found during my career. We interviewed and worked alongside the different generations to observe and understand where and what the challenges are, as well as recognise how to meet them.

THE DISCONNECTION;

- Within a multi-generational workplace, traditional hierarchies are stifling creativity, connection and innovation –middle management is often responsible for perpetuating the younger generation's feeling of disengagement.
- This younger generation has been given the label 'Millennial'. Marketing philosophies have influenced our judgement and subsequent treatment of this group, despite only 54% of them actually self-identifying with the label .
- Fear is causing a significant disconnect between the working generations - 85% of Millennials are too scared to share advice with senior leaders, through fear of judgement.

THE OPPORTUNITY;

- There is an **unmissable business opportunity** in this era which is witnessing a multi-generational workforce, new innovations and technological expansion, all of which challenge the way people connect within their businesses.
- The best leaders will embrace individualisation, new connections and the untapped pool of 'New Knowledge'
- Leaders can benefit the most by listening to this new knowledge, rather than ascribing to the traditional 'tell hierarchies' which have existed until now
- By adopting these new ways of working, leaders can unlock growth for **all** individuals and the organisations in which they work

We work with leaders of today and tomorrow to identify and create new connections to engage, inspire and develop all 5 working generations.

The disconnection starts in the middle

Middle management play a pivotal role for the younger generation

For the first time in history, we are part of a five-generation workplace and today's leaders have a huge responsibility to engage, motivate and retain an increasingly age-diverse population within their organisations. As retirement plans are delayed for many over 60s, today's leaders will continue to find themselves working alongside colleagues born in the 21st century.

This paradox creates unique challenges in connecting and truly understanding people whose life and work experiences are often at opposite ends of the age spectrum. Action needs to be taken to prevent disengagement and frustration from crippling organisations.

The life stages that we go through, as individuals, have not changed fundamentally in recent times. Whilst the order or duration may have shifted a little over the years, the core events are still the same. However, it is HOW we are living these stages in the 21st Century that can create disconnection between generations.

The disconnection comes to a head in the middle layers of a traditional hierarchical structure. These people - the middle management - hold the critical role of managing, leading, engaging and inspiring more junior individuals at the early stages of their careers. What's more, there's also pressure to get work done, deliver to operational targets and communicate information, ideas and action to the senior executives. Of all the positions within an organisation, middle management is the most pivotal.

This middle managerial level frequently coincides with a significant progression in life stage, where mind-sets can shift from being solely career driven to focusing on other life events and maintaining a career. This is often referred to as the 'contemplation life stage'. This pressure often translates into stress, middle layers are often fearful of the younger generations. Equally, younger and more junior colleagues feel stifled and fearful of raising their voice and sharing new ideas.

“they know more than me; those ideas will involve a huge change; that can't be done; I haven't got time; I am not sure I understand what was suggested...”

“I am not being listened to, can they not see the opportunity, I'm not going to bother to say anything...”

This progression through the career hierarchy and life stages fosters the beginning of where gaps start to form and where connectivity and communication start to break down. The way we treat all people, even subconsciously, impacts on many different levels. For example, the engagement, retention, communication and connectivity within organisations can be affected and fear starts to creep in. However, this is short lived and as the life stages continue to develop, more senior leaders move beyond this stage and into the 'benevolent stage'¹. At this point, the space to learn opens up; some leaders become more self-aware and able to reflect on what they do and don't know, as well as be more inspired to learn

If we are to create inspiring leaders, we must raise awareness and improve understanding of where the knowledge lies within an organisation. If this is properly understood it can have a huge positive effect on performance, culture and engagement of ALL individuals and the organisation overall.

¹ Dr Armstrong's 12 stages of the human lifecycle

“The younger generation of people - the 'smart-phone' generation who are innovative, intelligent and aspiring, but who also face pressures and obstacles from older generations.”

“I think when you have invested in hiring the right people, you need to empower them to take ownership of tasks and attack them their way - micro-management doesn't give people room to grow or allow them to discover how their own skills can translate”

Millennial

Energy, creativity and ideas are becoming flattened due to the mutual fear of failure and rejection and the question is therefore **how** can you recognise and open up new communications so that this fear does not paralyse the organisation?

Today's senior leaders need to play a role in making sure that this middle management layer does not stifle the creativity and engagement within the organisation for all 5 generations. But this is not about trying to make significant changes. It is about understanding and raising awareness of the 3 critical areas which will deliver the most positive impacts within any organisation.

Individualisation

Connectivity

Reality

Individualisation: understanding & respecting the different life stages that people are at - not judging them by their age but appreciating and valuing what the individual perspectives can bring to your organisation.

Connectivity: opening up distinct and new channels for communication between the top and the bottom whilst being mindful of engaging the middle.

Reality: acknowledging it is different working in today's world. Our leaders need to not assume that they 'know', they must tap into the new knowledge to improve their 'assumption accuracy' to reverse the paradox.

“As a leader, how can we create the space and permission for communication and creativity to flourish within our organisation?”

Stop Labelling People:

Individualisation wins over unconscious bias

Capturing data about the attitudes and behaviour of different generations is definitely not a new phenomenon. In fact, this way of understanding society can be traced back thousands of years, all the way to the Ancient Greeks. However, it wasn't until the introduction of data analytics in the late 1980s that people measurement became valuable not only to governments, but also to large commercial organisations. By understanding the behaviour of different 'segments' of people, grouped together by similar characteristics, you could predict their needs for direct marketing purposes. This was the birth of geo-demographic segmentation and of labelling of people.

Over thirty years on, this segmentation process has evolved much further as the volume of data available has exponentially increased. Whilst it was originally designed for targeted marketing purposes, it has penetrated far beyond the marketing department and spilled over into our everyday language. We are using it to define and engage with people in all sorts

of situations: direct conversation, leadership and development opportunities, political strategies, talent engagement and management, formal organisational scenarios and beyond.

People are being defined and labelled by sets of general criteria and are no longer seen as individuals. What impact are these preconceptions having on our leadership style, conversations, communication and forward movement within organisations?

We have interviewed and researched over a hundred 'millennials'. I experienced first-hand the impact on an organisation of the breakdown and corrosive nature of this type of labelling. Therefore, I undertook this research to understand the 'generation gap' and give these individuals the opportunity to articulate who they are, how they live and, most importantly, what value they can bring to organisations today.

So who are millennials?....

"I believe it embodies a generation that has been brought up in a world where access to any kind of information is taken for granted, a generation that is trained to have a shorter attention span in every area of life, and a generation that communicates, seeks validation and exerts social values differently based on 'new' methods of social communication (social media, networks)."

Millennial

There are between 11 - 16 million individuals in the UK that fit the 'millennial' label, depending on what criteria you use (another challenge with general labels!). These individuals are all at different stages of their lives with different ambitions, values, goals and challenges. Yet today we all choose to call them 'millennials', accompanied by sweeping generalisations that can be extremely derogatory.

"Always on their phones", "lazy", "attention span of a goldfish", "snowflake", "entitled", "self-obsessed" – we've heard all these negative labels attached to a whole generation of young people.

There appears to be a growing consensus that we "know" how millennials think and behave and want to be treated, despite the fact that there is no clear definition of a millennial. What is indisputable however is that:

- i) There are some 16 million people in the UK between the ages of 18 and 30
- ii) The business leaders of the near future are in this bracket
- iii) They were born into and live in a digital world that today's leaders often struggle to understand and navigate.
- iv) There is a shared opportunity to learn new knowledge

When the younger generation were asked if they identified with the term millennial - only **54%** of those studied agreed

Amongst them, many were unsurprisingly positive about what the label 'millennial' embodies. In contrast, those who do not identify with the 'millennial' label experience a high level of frustration – and this is where the real damage starts to occur.

- *"A generation that sees life in an interconnected way"*
- *"Younger generation, more informed, more driven, more ambitious and expecting more from life than previous generations."*
- *"Young, innovative, unwilling to settle, open-minded, inclusive and creative thinkers"*
- *"Homogeneity and lack of understanding about what it means to be someone who was raised being able to engage with information digitally"*
- *"I believe it's a commonly used 'catch all' grouping used when trying to portray largely negative stereotypes of younger people."*
- *"A demographic bucket. No relation to how people of our age really think and do"*

This gap between different perceptions, perpetuated by marketing and media, is driving larger than life myths about an entire generation and this is carried around with us under the surface, fuelling unconscious bias. Leaders are assuming, rather than knowing.

"Not to judge a person by their age. I often feel I'm looked down on for being young at work and older people are presumed to have better ideas/more experience due to their age. I have had a lot of comments about being 'fresh out of uni' meaning I know nothing about the world of work. I think they should be more accepting of difference and more open to criticism/suggestions from lower grades."

Millennial

This younger generation are becoming disenfranchised with work and organisations, and feel uninspired by today's leaders; not because they are 'millennials' but because they are not understood nor spoken to as individuals who have the energy, insight and commitment to organisations to make a difference.

Leaders need to role model open culture and communication channels to embrace these individuals' potential. In order to reverse the paradox of labelling these individuals with negative stereotypes. There is a huge opportunity available to leaders and organisations if we can increase the opportunities in which senior leaders are able to interact with this generation for mutual growth and understanding.

Start listening to 'New Knowledge':

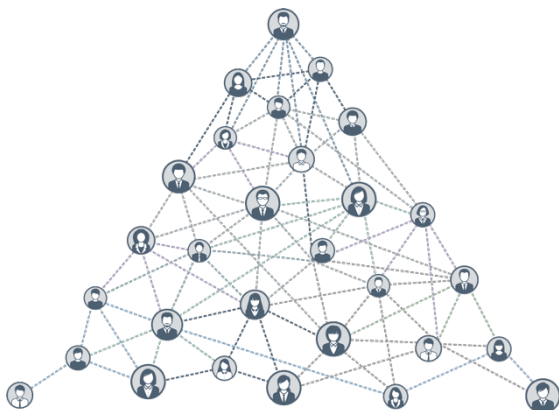
Listening Networks vs. Tell Hierarchies

We know there is a rapidly increasing disconnect between how 'millennials' see themselves and how they are perceived by other generations, including today's leaders. Many ambitious, insightful young workers are positioned in a hierarchical structure, of which they are at the lowest levels. These individuals identified themselves in the research as bringing energy, creativity, enthusiasm and, most importantly, open mindedness to organisations and yet are sadly **being ignored** by the reporting line above them and remain undiscovered and/or unknown by the senior leaders of the organisation.

The impact? They are no longer inspired, have no loyalty and become **disengaged** from the organisation. Subsequently, the circle is complete and they themselves begin reinforcing the pre-conceived negative stereotypes.

"I can't bring myself to care enough to give it (ideas upwards). I feel undervalued so my ideas would be too."

In order to break this chain of corrosive relationships and close the 'gap', organisations need to understand that they are part of a system that enforces that disconnect. The question that leaders should be asking themselves today is "does our organisational structure and culture encourage or inhibit connectivity and innovation at all levels?"



We see numerous leadership articles that talk about it being 'lonely at the top' and that the pressure feels immense - you only need look at a structure chart to see why! Another adage, but one that stands truer today than ever, is: 'Ideas do not always have to come from the top'. How much more balanced and stable might an organisation be if it was based on a network of communication with the right people talking to each other?

"Stop creating divides by bringing in hierarchies and boundaries. Teams and structure is valuable but exclusion then becomes an issue that never gets looked at."

Millennial

Where does the new knowledge sit in your organisation?

Before you answer, we want to share a favourite quote:

"Smart people learn from everything and everyone, average people from their experiences, stupid people already have all the answers."

Socrates

Organisations need to see that this type of creative connection can be a vital tool in attracting and retaining their people and customers. What's more, they must appreciate the opportunity

within their people as a **pool of collective intelligence** and not for the roles they play within a rigid and restrictive hierarchy.

“Knowing that they will stereotype you because you will be doing one type of work and don't recognise other skills.”

Millennial

If people have the ability to bypass the strict hierarchical linear relationship and connect as individuals, leaders can access and embrace the energy and open-mindedness that junior people bring as they start their career.

“No opportunity to do it. It's hard to speak to people at the top sometimes. Depends on the manager's style”

“Would they listen? I'm not sure there is an avenue to go down at work to give this kind of advice.”

Millennial

The reason that we need to seek the creativity of new knowledge and ideas from the more junior members of the organisation is that the older we get, the faster we unlearn creativity. As we progress upwards through the hierarchies of organisations, the more we conform to expected behaviours and lack the courage to produce anything new or innovative, through fear of being laughed at or rejected. Energy, enthusiasm and creativity therefore tend to sit at the lower levels of the organisational hierarchy - not surprising when we see that research shows:

‘98% of five-year-olds are creative but only 2% of 44-year-olds are creative.’²

When ‘millennials’ were asked, “what they look for in an ideal job role” amongst the top answers were **challenge**, **growth opportunities** and **social interaction**. This myth that they would rather connect virtually and are on their phones all the time is untrue – another misconception. When asked if they had ideas and wanted to offer their feedback to managers or other further up the hierarchy, **85%** answered positively; **however only 50% have the opportunity to do so**. What opportunities are our leaders missing out on by keeping the doors of communication closed?

“There are a lot of talented people in our company; that isn't a threat, it is an advantage. Work to raise the profile of everyone here not just the senior team”

Millennial

In this era of the 4th digital revolution, the people that we employ (and often ignore) at the lowest ends of our hierarchies are also the current and future customers, and may well have more experience than our leaders in understanding the way the world works today. This isn't about any one group having all the answers; this is about how do we get into the mind-sets of younger generations and embrace the unrestricted energy, creativity and thinking that they bring whilst sharing the relevant experience needed in today's business world. How can we lead, develop and retain people if we do not understand each others value?

“Youth doesn't always mean lack of experience. We are fresh out of university, digital natives, and eager to learn without having the cynicism of someone who has been in the work game for a long time.”

² Who sinking your boat: Bob Kelleher <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4nwoZ02AJM>

These are people who have been born into a world where technology is used by everyone – not as a hobby or an interest, but as a way of life. With the advancements of technology and AI, these people understand it, live it and breathe it in a way that the older generation can't, purely because of the length of the journey they have taken through technology.

Only 58% of respondents said they get the opportunity to learn from senior colleagues. The individuals I spoke to were hungry to learn from the experiences of the senior leaders in order to gain skills such as people management, leadership and team management.

Conversely, when asked what advice they would like to give to the senior members of the organisation around engagement and commitment, many inspiring themes stood out, including:

- Stop judging people by their age
- Let people learn ("non-stop nagging kills creativity")
- **Share your vision with us and we can help**
- Understand how much I understand
- Empowerment and challenge

This goes some way towards demonstrating their enthusiasm, compassion and desire to have an impact on organisations, as **78% of those researched wanted to share advice**. However it is also recognised that 85% also gave a clear reason for not doing it openly, including the following:

- Lack of opportunity or encouragement
- Feeling senior management wouldn't listen (shoot down inexperienced ideas)
- Fear of being fired, being judged, overstepping the mark or of their youth being held against them
- Lack of forward thinking on their part

So how open is your door? By not being open to this feedback or creating the real opportunities to have conversations, what is the lost opportunity for our leaders, especially regarding talent retention and business growth? Can we afford to keep ignoring these ideas?

With organisations now representing up to five generations of society, there is significant opportunity for leaders to embrace this **energy and untapped potential**. However, the key is to create the environment, culture and access for more relationships to be built at an informal 1:1 level between these individuals. We can start to bust the myths that are driving the divide by creating access to the right communication channels first –**leaders need to create open listening networks, not closed 'tell management' hierarchies**.

The world of work is different now:

Traditional Assumptions vs. Reality.

As previously discussed, the structure and communication lines of an organisation perpetuate the perceptions and unconscious bias that exist between millennials and our leaders. However, at a personal level, there are more fundamental issues at play.

Currently, senior leaders have limited evidence from interactions with 'millennials' (due to structure restrictions) and therefore are acting based on myths pushed by the media and other unreliable sources – in other words, from unconscious bias. This unconscious bias is not one-sided; we should not underestimate that 'millennials' are also creating the same fictional internal narrative about the leaders of their organisations. These fake narratives create paralysis and fear within organisations.

Our leaders fear listening through lack of knowledge and the millennials fear the reprisals from speaking up. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a deadlock!

Throughout my research, I kept coming across certain themes, enabling me to break down this fear further into three abstractions that help us understand its origin: **Evidence, Speed and Balance.**

Example: When interviewing two individuals at either ends of the career spectrum within a hierarchical organisation, it soon became evident that the more three abstractions listed above.

His expectations of commitment to the firm and, consequently to this, his own 30+ year career, was measured by the time physically seen in the office:

senior individual had a strong internal narrative based on the

"No juniors are here past 7 o'clock in the evening and no one is here at the weekend! "His reflection was "When I was that age (23 years old) I had to show my commitment to succeed and progress here – it's what I had to do!"

There is one glaring issue with this statement – and it isn't specifically to do with the need to be present in the office late into the night. The older generation judge their more junior counterparts based on the memory of what it was like to be that particular age themselves, using signposts such as the life-stages they had reached by a certain point. This is where the problem starts. Comparing experiences of an 'age' is not a valid comparison and it can perpetuate the unconscious bias frustration. If, however, you change the comparison to being 23 years old **AND** living in 2018, in comparison to being 23 years old and living in 1987, we are on sturdier ground. The comparison becomes depersonalised, as it is based on the years, rather than on the individuals.

1987 vs. 2018

Thinking about this 'year' comparison..... advances in technology have significantly enhanced everything from the way we can access our work from a physical location to the time of day in which you access it and the ability to respond from wherever you are. In 1987, you had to be in the office to work; there were no computers or laptops at home, no emails to your mobile phone and no Wi-Fi on public transport.

In 1987, the way you demonstrated commitment to the organisation and your career was by being physically present in the office, working, as you couldn't feasibly work anywhere else. Today, where is the equivalent evidence that you are committed to your work or responding to everything you should be, even if you are not there to be seen?

Technological advances have also significantly increased the speed of actions and communication. Communication used to be very slow, with handwritten documentation sent via faxes or letters and the lengthy process of awaiting responses and needing to be present to get things signed. This, again, resulted in a mass of physical evidence; there

were letters and faxes, and box files of physical information and proof. Without this 'proof' or 'evidence' then how can success be measured?

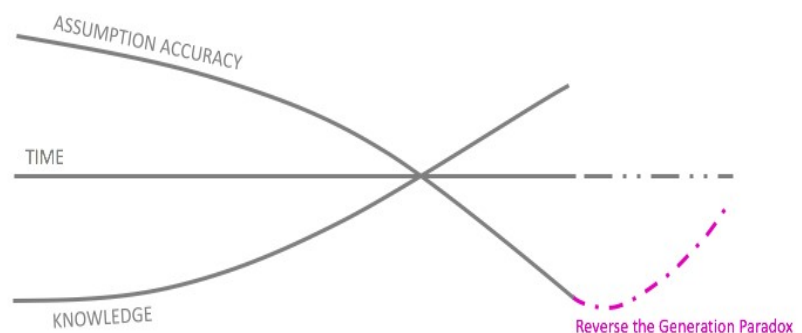
Finally, there was also a very different work-life balance in 1987; in fact, this phrase didn't even exist. If you were career-minded, then a significant proportion of your life was dedicated to your job in the office. This was partly because people were committed to their careers but also because the availability of choice for social activity was limited and expensive, including gyms, eating out, cinema and travel.

In 2018 the volume of interactions, communication and work that gets undertaken in the equivalent time, compared to 1987, is incomparably high. This 'evidence'-based, limited-choice way of life was very different to what our current young generations have access to today, so any sort of comparison based on when leaders 'were that age' can have limited value in understanding the differences. Instead, leaders need to stay curious and ask what it's like to be 23 years old today.

As we get more senior and increase our own knowledge, our ability to make correct assumptions about what it's like for these individuals decreases. The graph below displays the term "curse of knowledge" originated in the Journal of Political Economy by economists Colin Camerer, George Loewenstein, and Martin Weber (maybe source, year?).

Contradictory to what some leaders think, this term refers to the idea that 'I have experience and have done what you have done to get here and therefore I know'. However, the assumptions that are being made as a result of this knowledge are becoming increasingly inaccurate.

"Remember what it was like to be at the bottom and give young people the opportunity to speak and share their ideas - you'll be surprised what you learn. Respect also that times might have changed and they will have lots of new ideas you haven't thought of but could be very relevant"



The leaders today often have a blind spot when it comes to 'knowing' what it is like to be young in today's world. If time is dedicated to **asking and experiencing**, rather than **assuming and telling**, then organisations and individuals will experience a real shift resulting in deeper relationships and therefore improved engagement and retention. This understanding of reality has the power to remove the 'fear & assumption' both at the top and the bottom of the organisation. To be a truly effective leader, you should first not only ask what it's like to be young in today's world but then really listen to the response.

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