# Role of Leadership in Handling Conflicts Arising due to Age Diversity in the Workplace

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**Abstract**

A multi-generational workforce is a growing norm in workplace today. As different generations work together, their work styles and expectations clash. Age Diversity and difference in communication styles results in conflicts. The value-in-diversity theory should be understood and effectively to the organizations advantage. Authentic and Transformational leadership styles should be adopted to ensure all generations are treated fairly and given equal learning opportunities and chance for career development. The paper discusses about Gen X and Y, their communication styles and the role of leadership in handling conflicts in the work place. Further recommendations for managing different generations are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Age diversity; Transformational Leadership styles; Gen X; Gen Y; Communication; Conflicts

## Background

KM communications is an established IT company in India. The company is facing issues in managing multi-generational employees. The older employees are not able to connect and understand the viewpoints of the younger lot.

Chatterjee, Head of Marketing in the company is the leader of a new team made to discuss present strategies and come out with new ideas for the company. Lingam is a young employee who has been doing well in the company. Although being the most obvious choice to succeed Chatterjee he is not included in the team. Lingam approaches Chatterjee to understand the reason for not being included in the team. After a heated conversation, Chatterjee says "only an idiot of a leader will put people fundamentally opposed to him in the team".

Unhappy and now furious with Chatterjee's response he approaches Padmanabhan (Pad). Pad is the Head of HR within the company and the person who finalized the team. According to Pad it is important to have mutually respecting individuals in team to ensure productive discussions and not spiteful exchange of words. As Chatterjee was the team leader and could not be

removed Lingam was excluded from the team. Chatterjee was unhappy with Lingam's style of working. Lingam would often disagree with Chatterjee and had openly told him that his leadership style was autocratic. Lingam says that he disagrees because the upper management's approach is not correct. Pad knows that Lingam is good and decided to discuss the same with Chatterjee. Chatterjee tells Pad that Lingam disagrees with everything that was being said simply because he was old, and although the company needed talented people like Lingam they also needed people with the right attitude. He says he needs supportive team members and not members who constantly make leaders doubt their approach.

Pad is also part of the younger lot and is now in a fix. He is unsure how to approach the problem in hand. His discussion with both Chatterjee and Lingam is not fruitful. He is trying to manage aspirations of two

generations but the process is hampering the company's future.

**Literature Review**

*Generation- Age Diversity*

Diversity is the difference in characteristics of people due to age, culture, gender or sexual orientation (Qin, Muenjohn, & Chhetri, 2014). It involves respecting, understanding and appreciating characteristics of other individuals (Qin et al., 2014). Generation has been identified as a group of people born in same years, having similar life events (Kupperschmidt, 2000). These events affect the way they react towards authority, values and beliefs as well as their aspirations (Wey Smola & Sutton, 2002). Diversity Management is a process where all employees are given fair chance and opportunities to grow irrespective of their age, gender or cultural background (Begeç, 2013). It may involve changing the organizational culture and communicating the same effectively so that all employees are treated fairly.

Four generations-traditional, Baby Boomers, Gen X and Millenials (Gen Y, Nexters)- work together in organization these days. Many employees retire later than before delaying the employee regeneration cycle (Bennett, Pitt, & Price, 2012). Different generations have distinguishing working styles, influences, merits and demerits. These differences result in intergenerational conflicts that affect the overall performance (McGuire, Todnem By, & Hutchings, 2007). Research has confirmed that age diversity affects communication between generations (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989) and influences discrimination (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2011). Management should find ways to efficiently manage different generations to avoid low productivity, conflicts, job dissatisfaction and terminations.

*Generation X*

Born from 1965 to 1979, Generation X experienced technological advancements and social changes but no job security. They mostly had working parents. Thus, Gen X employees are independent and committed to their own careers and not to the organization placing more value on skills advancement and productivity (Stevens, 2010). Their independence streak makes them come across as disloyal and posses an indifferent attitude towards corporate politics (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2013). Although considered selfish, Gen X works hard and is the first generation to have achieved a work life balance (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). They have a tendency to criticize, lack self-assurance and accentuate outcomes over procedures (Bennett et al., 2012). Because Gen X has experienced lay-offs and economic recession, they consider maintaining relations with upper management as *degree of bootlicking* (Kyles, 2005). Receiving career opportunities and liberty is a necessity for them to remain contended in the workplace (Stevens, 2010). They prefer leadership by competence and have a reluctance to commit to relationships. Gen X has a serious backlash for teamwork. Although their quest for family draws them towards teams, they prefer to choose their own team members (Zemke et al., 2013).

*Generation Y*

Generation Y is most comfortable and updated with Internet and technology advancements (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). They value career advancements and work-life balance (Stevens, 2010). Gen Y is optimistic, confident, realistic and good at multi-tasking (Bennett et al., 2012). They can easily work anywhere. Although they need supervision due to lack of experience, they do not appreciate hierarchy in the workplace (Bennett et al., 2012). Millennials have concern for the world and like acknowledgement for their contributions (Stevens, 2010). Generation Y expect to be aware of their company's mission, vision, values as well as problems if any. Their strongest asset is resilience and an inclusive view towards relationships at work (Zemke et al., 2013). Here's what other other Generations feel about Gen Y (Zemke et al., 2013)

The Traditional: "they are smart kids with good manners"

The Baby Boomers: "They are cute. They can set the VCR. Can you do my web page for me". The Gen X: "Here we go again…. Another self-absorbed generation of spoilt brats".

Thus, the perception is different for other generations. This has a solid impact on the way different generations

deal with each other.

## Communication Styles

Communication in simple terms when exchange of information takes place between sender and receiver and the receiver understands the message (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). Communication styles are influenced by backgrounds, beliefs and culture. Gen X grew up independently thus, have individualistic culture that makes their communication style low-context. Gen Y has a very collective approach towards things. They like working in teams. Thus, their communication style is high context (Pesch, Bouncken, & Kraus, 2015; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009). Further, 80% communication is non- verbal (Adair & Semnani-Azad, 2011). Deviating communication styles can result in disagreements.

The *similarity attraction theory* states that like-minded people are attracted towards each other as they share viewpoints and communication style. Interpersonal trust increases and conflicts are reduced in the process (Abu Bakar & McCann, 2014). *Social identity theory* suggests that individuals struggle to preserve their self-esteem (Abu Bakar & McCann, 2014). Therefore, diversity issues can increase resulting in less social interaction and reduced team satisfaction. However, diversity should not be considered as a factor that harms team coordination. Ambiguous situations can be handled well by *sensemaking* (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014).

## Value in Diversity Theory

According to the *value-in-diversity theory* diversity in teams can improve quality of decisions taken. Diverse team members have distinguished skills, knowledge and abilities that can aid in developing innovative and novel ideas. Multi-generational team members use different communication styles. Team members devise schemes like using sensemaking processes and productive discussions to overcome communication misunderstandings (Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010).

## Relationship Conflicts and Interpersonal Aggression

Jehn et al. defined *Relationship conflicts* as

"disagreements and incompatibilities among group members about personal issues that are not task-related, such as social events, gossip and world news" (Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997, p. 288). Interpersonal conflicts discourage individuals to communicate with each other (Hung & Lin, 2013). Age diversity coupled with relationship conflicts diminishes the advantages of having a diverse team (Pesch et al., 2015). Interpersonal aggression is a behavior that can weaken employees' mental and physical righteousness. When less severe such behaviors can result in neglecting peers, target them with disturbing comments, no access to learning opportunities and even being fielded threats written or verbal (Neuman & Baron, 1998; Neuman & Baron, 2005).

## Generation Y Leadership Preference

All generations have different expectations from their leaders. Therefore, leaders have to adopt styles according to the generation they are dealing with. Gen Y prefers a fair, proficient and straightforward leadership style (Salahuddin, 2011). They prefer leaders that provide instant feedback and expect a polite relationship with their superiors (Salahuddin, 2011). A leadership style that meets Gen Y's expectations is authentic and transformational leadership style.

## Authentic Leadership

Avolio, Luthans, Walumbwa and May define authentic leaders as "those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others values/morals perspectives, knowledge and strengths; aware of the context in which the operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient and of high moral character" (2004, p. 4). According to Whitehead authentic leader has been defined as "one who: (1) is self-aware, humble, always seeking improvement, aware of those being led and looks out for the welfare of others; (2) fosters high degrees of trust by building an ethical and moral framework; and (3) is committed to organizational success within the construct of social values." (2009, p. 850). Avolio and Gardner describe Authentic Leadership as the base of all types of positive Leadership (2005). Authentic leaders have an ethical perspective, are self-aware and will strive for an open

and trusting relationship with followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans, 2002). Authentic Leadership is proven to be a facilitator for full time inclusion of employees and manage diversity (Cottrill, Denise Lopez, & C. Hoffman, 2014).

*Transformational Leadership*

Researchers have acknowledged the influence of transformational leadership on authentic leadership (Luthans, 2002). Transformational leaders have the ability to influence followers, are self-aware and help followers to become good leaders (Osborn & Marion, 2009). Diverse groups tend to have high innovation when transformational leadership is high (Wang, Rode, Shi, Luo, & Chen, 2013). Therefore, transformational Leadership reduces negative perceptions of team diversity. Further, transformational leadership also influences overall organizational creativity especially in developing countries (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009).

**Analysis**

To begin with it is clear the KM communications does not have policies in place that give a fair chance to all employees. Lingam is a smart employee who has the experience and has proved his mettle in the past. Pad knew that he would prove to be an asset in the team. He was excluded from the team, to avoid conflicts, which is definitely not the way the situation should have been handled. Being the HR head it was his responsibility to address the issues between Chatterjee and Lingam. Though he had discussion with both of them, it was after all decisions were taken.

*Multi-generational aspiration*s should have been taken into consideration. The company needs to adopt and understand the value-in-diversity theory, as diverse work force will have new ideas that can be incorporated in the company's advancement strategies. Having an inclusive team would help the company to come up with better strategies as conflicting view points can be discussed and solutions can be sought for the same. Homogenous teams may exclude discussing some key issues as essential issues may be neglected. Moreover, both generations difficulty in handling people issues should be taken into consideration.

As mentioned above different generations have different style of working and different expectations from superiors and subordinates. Chatterjee belongs to Gen X and is self-reliant and skeptical. When Lingam questions or opposes his ideas during meetings, Chatterjee feels that his intelligence is being questioned. Here he is striving to protect his social identity. To ensure things work on his pace and liking, Chatterjee prefers to have only those people in his team that agree with him and support him. Constant opposition from Lingam affects Chatterjee's self-esteem. Although it is not clear from the case study whether the decision of excluding Lingam from the team was influenced by Chatterjee it is clear that Chatterjee definitely did not want Lingam in the team.

For Gen Xers leadership is just a job because they consider themselves competent enough to be chosen for such roles. Their straightforward nature hampers their people skills. They tend to be so honest as leaders that it can affect the younger employee's morale (Zemke et al., 2013).

On the other hand, Lingam is a Nexter who is self-confident and optimistic. He believes that he has the knowledge and experience to join the newly made team. He wants acknowledgement for his contribution to the company and the lack of it makes him feel that he should look for better opportunities in other companies that appreciate his talent. Chatterjee's leadership style seems autocratic to Lingam because he prefers a fair and proficient leader that gives regular and healthy feedback. If Chatterjee had issues with Lingam, it would have been more ideal to let him know on the go. Excluding him from the team denies him learning opportunities. Both Chatterjee and the top management need to adopt transformational or authentic leadership style as it strongly helps to manage a diverse work force.

There are relationship conflicts between Chatterjee and Lingam. Chatterjee's opposition towards Lingam seems personal rather than professional. Chatterjee does not appreciate lingam's backlash towards senior management's style of working. Also, since the senior management has approved the team it is clear that the top management as well have serious reservations about working with Gen Y. Moreover, Chatterjee's tone while speaking with Lingam demonstrates interpersonal

aggression, a result of constant altercations during meetings. This aggression results in opposition towards Lingam.

Further, different communication styles affect the level of understanding between Chatterjee and Lingam. Chatterjee's preference for low-context communication results in improper reviews given to Lingam. Also, Chatterjee isn't an effective mentor. An effective mentor would guide subordinates efficiently. Moreover, Lingam's communication and interpersonal skills are not appropriate. Lack of experience may make him impatient. But he is young and can surely change his ways, as the same cannot be expected from Chatterjee.

## Recommendations

At KM communications the following interventions should be adopted.

### For Chatterjee

Chatterjee needs to understand that Gen Y has different expectation and requirements. He needs to adopt authentic or transformational leadership style. It would be help him to be more accommodative towards contrasting views during meetings. Multi-generational workforce is a reality and that has to be understood by Chatterjee. India specifically has a young workforce and an autocratic leadership style will not work in the organization. Gen Y has ethical ideals (VanMeter, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2013) and ignoring them from the team would seem highly unfair to them. Authentic leadership style would give a fair perspective to Chatterjee. Also, direct feedback should be given to Lingam during performance reviews so that he knows where he needs improvement.

### For Padmanabhan

Firstly, Pad should approach the top management and inform them about the generational issue in the company. Secondly, Mentoring and interpersonal training programs should be conducted for Lingam. Boomers should mentor Gen Y as they tend to get along well. While Gen Y looks up to Boomers for advice, Boomers enjoy working with the Nexters (Watson, 2009). Thirdly, direct feedback should be given to

Lingam during appraisals. Finally, Coaching should also be provided to Chatterjee on how to manage Gen Y.

### For the Management

Firstly, a more incorporating internal communication system is required. Employees should be given a chance to freely voice their opinions but in accordance with the code of conduct. Due to lack of effective diversity management strategies the company may loose some key employees probably to themcompetitors, which will hamper its position in the industry. Effective internal communication mechanisms should be established. For example, conflicting parties can be bought together and given a chance to speak one by one till all misunderstandings are cleared. Secondly, top management needs to be more sensitive when dealing with different generations. Diversity management should be included in the core values of the organization. They need to be aware that issues may arise when Gen X and Y are working side by side because their approach and style of working are different.

Thirdly, workplace rewards and appreciation programs could be enhanced and if not in place, introduced. Employees will not only become more competitive but also appreciate the contribution of other employees. Both Gen X and Y need appreciation. Gen X needs appreciation because they haven't received in the past and Gen Y because they have constantly received appreciation. Finally, the top management should also adopt transformational leadership to manage the changing workforce.

## Conclusion

Multi-generational workplace has to be managed effectively. As mentioned they have different working styles and expectations and that has to be take into consideration. The management has to work effectively with HR at KM communications to handle the situation. Chatterjee needs to be more accommodative and Pad needs to find ways for conflict management. Excluding a well-deserving candidate from learning opportunities cannot be a solution.

A limitation of this paper is that traits, behaviors and communication styles of both Gen X and Y are

generalized. Not everyone belonging to a particular generation may have the similar characteristics. However, research supports these characteristics. Although, there is a gap in understanding different generations it is not impossible. Effective coaching and Mentoring to develop interpersonal skills will not only help employees to work together but also develop employees' overall personality.

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