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## Leading the Whatever Generation – the 'Bright Young Things'

article by Keith Coats

*Keith looks at how to get the most out of a band of new young talent sometimes call Generation Y or the Millennial kids*

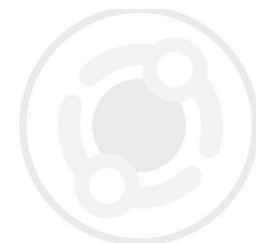


### Article at a glance

Leadership in today's world is not easy. I suspect it has never 'been easy' but with the contemporary levels of complexity, connectedness and ubiquitous change these are indeed unique times in which to live and lead. The twin challenges that leaders face, that of leading diversity and understanding the inherent generational paradoxes. This demands from leaders new mindsets that form the catalyst for new behaviours...

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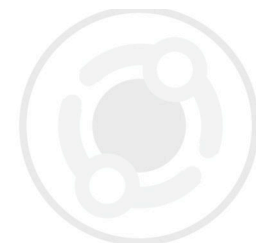
## Boomers get ready to learn about leadership!

*When what leaders have done has met with success, 'why change?' is their obvious response. The harsh reality is that past success has never counted for less than in today's world.*

For most contemporary leaders who have lived through the 'Age of Aquarius,' they now face the reality that this is the 'Age of Learning'! We all know how tough learning can be, but tougher still is when unlearning is required prior to absorbing new insights. Alvin Toffler put it succinctly in Future Shock when he wrote, 'The illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn'. It is clear that it will be those who do this best who will be the ones to inherit the future. Often standing in the way of this process is success. It has been my experience that past success is perhaps the biggest roadblock in the pathway to new learning. When what leaders have done has met with success, 'why change?' is their obvious response. The harsh reality is that past success has never counted for less than in today's world. The very things that contributed to building wealth may in the future be the things that inhibit wealth creation. An example of this is that in the past the biggest ingredients for Nation wealth creation revolved around having natural resources, land and labour. Today, resources alone cannot contribute to wealth, vast land can be problematic - as Russia has found out, and unskilled labour is of little use.

However, let's get back to the relevance of all this for today's leader.

The need for leaders to learn, unlearn and relearn has never become more apparent than when we talk about what it takes to lead the next generation - to lead Talent. The battle for the competitive edge in the future has been dubbed 'winning the talent wars'. Clearly the ability to attract and retain talent will be essential for any company wanting to compete for the future. The problem is that having attracted talent - those 'Bright



Young Things' represents only half the challenge - and perhaps the easier part of the challenge at that! Far harder is the ability to retain them - to lead them. Leadership styles that have worked in the past fail dismally in the face of this new challenge. And leaders everywhere are floundering in the wake of this unfamiliar Tsunami.

Here are six insights to help leaders as they lead the next generation.

*Leading Talent requires working off the assumption that you are dealing with the techno-literate and instead of this being a threat, it can be turned into a wonderful asset.*

**Firstly, understand that 'How are you?' has been replaced by 'Where are you?'** Let's face it, the standard mobile / cell phone greeting has become 'where are you?' which is indicative of the mobility of today's world. The next generation are submersed in technology. Technology is to them as water is to a fish. It is all they know. Leaders need to ensure that this inherent skill is put to use in the work environment. Technology is also the gateway to fun and entertainment for the next generation. I recall interviewing a group of Bright Young Things in an international auditing firm. They recalled how they used to stay after work on a Friday to play computer games on the networked system in the office. Pizza would be ordered and the gaming would last late into the night. This practice was eventually shut-down by management for reasons that made sense to only management. With that, they lamented, much of what had been a 'fun work environment' became, well, just a 'work environment'. And that for the next generation, simply doesn't work! Leading Talent requires working off the assumption that you are dealing with the techno-literate and instead of this being a threat, it can be turned into a wonderful asset. This understanding has lead to what is referred to as 'reverse mentoring' where younger employees get to teach some of the Old Dogs a few new tricks when it comes to the use of technology.

**Secondly, this generation has shifted the emphasis**



*'Today's young people - they show no respect for authority!'*

*Bright Young Things don't share your 'live to work' ethic. In fact they, 'work to live'*

**from the 'are' to the 'who' in the statement, 'who are you?'** It's related to respect. Older generations base their respect on the title of an individual. An impressive title translates into instant 100% respect. That at least is the starting point and it is what we would call, 'positional respect'. Those 'Bright Young Things' you lead? Well, they have what we would term a 'relational' approach to respect. In other words their reasoning goes, 'I can't respect you until I know you - until I know what you did to earn that title'. So they start from a zero base when it comes to respect. Clearly we have a 'generational paradox' playing itself out in this area. Two values, two 'rights' that clash head-on. The only way to negotiate this impasse (or any paradoxical situation for that matter) is to create a framework of understanding. Respect is a relevant flashpoint within many companies today and how often have you heard this lament or one similar to it: 'Today's young people - they show no respect for authority!' There are many leaders today who feel as though they are due respect based on the title or position that is printed on their business card. They need to realise that it doesn't work that way with those younger employees. That's just the way it is and so if you want respect, then take this reality to heart and do something toward building a meaningful relationship. Start with throwing that mug 'I'm the Boss' in the trash or burning that favourite T-shirt of yours that proudly shouts, 'Because I said so that's why'. Told you it wouldn't be easy!

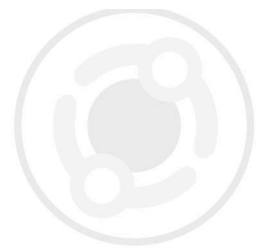
**Thirdly, understand that these Bright Young Things don't share your 'live to work' ethic. In fact they, 'work to live'.** This too causes its fair share of tension in and around the work place. The 'live to work' approach has been responsible for some impressive empire building over the years. Those visionary companies that we are told have been built to last are for the most part the product of the 'live to work' ethic. However, the personal and family cost to such efforts has been considerable and is well documented. The next generation refuse to be victims of the same trap. They have a life outside of work and are not afraid to let you know that they do. Work doesn't trump life - not in their



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world at least! This comes as a shock to many leaders who expect the same focused dedication they displayed in achieving the success they did. Again we need to frame this as a generational paradox and a very real one at that. Failure to understand this can mean going down several dead-ends in attempts to 'motivate' and secure the commitment of the Bright Young Things.

***Fourthly, don't expect the Bright Young Things to 'bring you a solution' in response to, 'if you bring me a problem, then...'*** Accept that this is your mantra, not theirs! In fact, they are very good at pointing out the problems, the shortfalls and then expecting you to do something about it. After all, isn't that *your job* (to find the solution)? This underscores a general reluctance of this next generation to accept responsibility. They appreciate the offer but are generally unwilling to step into positions that will demand of them more than they are willing to pay. For them it isn't about the position, title and package that are the traditional lures accompanying the corner office. The motivators for this generation are markedly different to their predecessors. For them life-work balance is critical and the biggest incentives on offer are those that can be titled the '3F's' - fun, freedom and flexibility. What these look like and how they are expressed is for each company to work out for themselves. But as the leader you need to be aware of the new goalposts and as the leader you are responsible for overseeing the development of a relevant game-plan. Recently I was with an Executive team who were somewhat bemused (and a touch angry) that the great team-building fun day that they organised for the generally younger staff had not been appreciated. All the effort and expense involved had been met with a lukewarm response that frustrated management who had conjured up the event. "Did anyone think to ask their opinion in planning the event?" I asked the Executives. Stunned silence.

Enough said!



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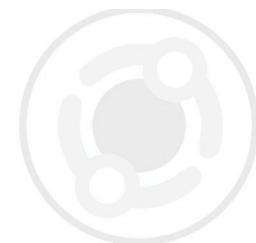


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***Fifthly, remember that in leading the next generation, one needs to measure 'outputs' and not 'inputs'.*** Their approach is to know *what* you want and by *when* you want it and then to leave them to do it...whenever. It is not about being in at 8am and clocking out at 5pm irrespective of just how productive you are in this time. If that is the expectation then 'why should I bust a gut' would be their reasoning? The Bright Young Things want to be told what is expected of them and then left alone to get on and do it and as such, are expecting to be judged (and rewarded) on their results. Being measured on inputs provides little incentive for them to work harder or be more productive. After all, if they do work harder and are more productive, more tasks will simply be poured into the spare time for the same returns. It is a tough logic to fault! This generation are not unwilling to work hard, it is just that they do it differently from the 'norm' - both in terms of their motivation and execution. You have been warned!

***Finally, change is the order of the day for the Bright Young Things. The old mantra of 'stability is good' is just that - old!*** This new generation will change for change sake, no reason required. Understanding this reality will lead to a redefining of what is meant by 'loyalty' in terms of career longevity. It will also shape the approach to the development and design of career pathways within large companies. Bright Young Things will stay around for two, four year assignments as opposed to commitment to one eight year assignment. There is a catch however. Bright Young Things can be intolerant of change that doesn't originate from them or have their stamp on it. They are accustomed to be consulted and included and so one dare not ignore this expectation. Doing things because "I told you so" or because, "it is right thing to do" is akin to waving a red rag in front of a grumpy bull. And you don't want to do that!

In a time where innovation and finding 'a better way' to



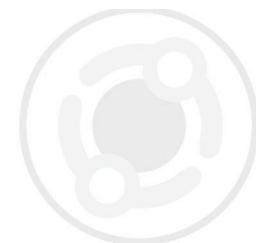
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do things are simply not optional extras any longer, having the reservoir of 'ready to change - need to change' on tap is not a bad thing. The problem inhibiting tapping into this ready to go resource is usually the attitude that says, 'I know' and one that pushes learning into the shadows. Leaders who aren't learners aren't leaders of the future. And so we come full circle to the place where we started - the need to learn. Yes, the Bright Young Things have plenty to learn - and the smart ones at least recognise this. But like the health warning on a cigarette pack, leaders need to heed the warning that, as we navigate the future, experience represents a devalued currency. Be careful if that is all you are trading on!

Of course these 'six things' only represent a 'good over' in a cricketing sense. There is other work to do and things to pay attention too if a match-winning strategy is to be executed. But six dot balls would be a good start in any game!

Over-up. Change the field setting and get ready to start again...



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