

Supporting Young Leaders in the Workplace: How to Bridge the Gap



As the class of 2024 starts their finals, I reflected on a conversation I had with an older leader, who expressed frustration with managing his predominantly young workforce. His concerns echoed common stereotypes: Young people are perceived as entitled, impatient for quick results, unsure how to interact with leaders, glued to their phones, and prone to leaving jobs early.

In our work with organisations and leaders, we constantly emphasise the importance of diversity - including intergenerational diversity - in the workplace. Young employees bring new skills, innovative ideas, energy and new approaches, especially in today's high-tech and AI-driven world, where leveraging technology and social media is crucial. But the key challenge remains: How do we create environments in which young leaders can thrive and we can tap into their unique perspectives and experience?

In my experience working with young people - interns, graduates, and newly recruited employees - I've found that often above all else, they seek meaningful work; work that enables them to contribute to a broader cause, helps them achieve work-life balance and is aligned with their values. Yes, job perks are important, but that's not all they value. They look for a safe learning environment, boundaries, opportunities for growth, diverse challenges, mentors, and the space to try and fail.

To get the best out of younger employees, it is important for organisations to create supportive environments where they can learn workplace norms. This can be done through creating spaces for engagement across generations and mentorship or buddy systems that teach practical skills and provide constructive feedback. One young employee once told me how embarrassed they felt because they didn't

know how to use the office printer, highlighting the gap in basic workplace knowledge that older leaders sometimes overlook.

Organisations today demand critical thinkers, problem solvers, and proactive individuals who can “find a way” despite challenges. Older leaders might think that younger employees are not up for this challenge, assuming that younger generations have “had it easy”, growing up in an era of instant gratification and technology. However, many young people have had to navigate significant challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, highly competitive environments, and the rapid evolution of work. These experiences have made them resilient, flexible, and quick to adapt.

Another leader I spoke with mentioned that young people seem “too soft” and that he struggles to provide feedback or hold them accountable. Unlike previous generations, who may have tolerated poor working conditions and authoritarian leadership to maintain their jobs and keep the peace, younger employees expect regular feedback and prefer it framed within a context of learning and development. When given thoughtfully, feedback can be incredibly motivating.

For their part, young employees should focus on what is in their control. They can be more proactive in their development and learning, seek support from others, try new tasks, learn how to improve at them and embrace feedback as part of the learning process.

If you’re tempted to say, “back in my day, we did things differently,” here are a few ways you can better connect with, support, and empower young leaders:

Adopt a learning mindset and do not assume: When welcoming young employees, approach it as a learning experience for both sides. Younger generations are diverse so don’t take a one-size-fits-all approach. Be curious and ask them lots of questions. Share that learning is a two-way street, where no one has all the answers and that together you can find the best solutions.

Seek input: Share your ideas with young people and ask them for their input/feedback. They often know the latest trends and how best to position initiatives in today’s context. I’ve been consistently surprised by how young people build on ideas, take them to new heights, or improve them in unexpected ways.

Encourage intergenerational connections: Whether through shared projects, social gatherings or formal mentorship, create opportunities for younger and older employees to engage. Many older employees are eager to pass on their skills and knowledge and leave a legacy, while younger employees have much to offer in terms of digital skills, such as AI.

Provide mentorship & support: Establish formal systems to help young employees learn workplace norms, build relationships, acquire leadership skills, and understand the organisation’s culture. This will make it easier for them to assimilate and feel secure.

Offer regular feedback: Annual or semi-annual performance reviews aren’t enough. Frequent feedback helps young employees understand their strengths and areas for growth, keeping them motivated and engaged.

Create space for experimentation: Give young employees the chance to work on low-risk projects where they can be creative and try new approaches. Let them know that they have your support regardless of the outcome. This creates a safe space to take risks, which fosters innovation and confidence.

With youth unemployment at high levels, it is crucial for government, businesses, and leaders to find creative ways to onboard and engage young people. This will help them feel valued and capable of contributing fully to the organisation and to society.