Don't reinforce generational stereotypes - overcome them

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Age-related stereotypes can have a negative impact on employee health, wellbeing and productivity, according to conflict-management expert Catherine Davidson, who says that teaching employees to question stereotypes can improve their ability to engage, collaborate and innovate at work.

Davidson, a consultant and facilitator with Neuroawareness Consulting Services, says that accepting stereotypes can actually cause them to become a reality.

"Stereotype embodiment theory says that age stereotypes become embodied once the surrounding culture accepts them," she says.

"So once we have beliefs about Generation Y, and we begin to accept them... they become self-definitions for those in that age group, and for us."

Davidson and Neuroawareness CEO Francois Bogacz recently embarked on a large-scale literary review into generation-based stereotypes and their implications for the workplace.

She says the review was prompted by their work in dispute resolution, which revealed that "a whole lot of the conflict... was based on people's assumptions and responses to behaviour based on generation".

A manager, for example, would dismiss an employee's behaviour by saying, "What do you expect? She's just such a typical 'Y'", which would only make matters worse.

"If we stick to a stereotype we [judge] behaviours as static; we don't give [people] the opportunity to develop and grow," Davidson says.

"[This] leads to a breakdown in how people end up communicating in the workplace."

Focus on generational similarities, not differences

Davidson and Bogacz's investigation into behaviours such as decision-making and emotional regulation identified "remarkable" similarities across generations, challenging many accepted stereotypes.

For example, research conducted by Jennifer Deal, of the Centre for Creative Leadership in the US, demonstrates that contrary to popular belief, "Millennials":

- are more willing than Gen Xers to defer to authority;
- have the same organisational loyalty as boomers or Gen Xers;
- have the same intrinsic motivation; and
- are not interested only in material rewards.

Davidson says it's worth acknowledging age-based generational differences that *do* have a scientific basis - such as differences in memory and the speed at which the brain processes information - but unfounded stereotypes, which can create unnecessary differences, should be debunked.

The review led Davidson and Bogacz to develop 10 "neuro-principles" to help organisations foster "age-neutral thinking" and overcome intergenerational differences.

One of these relates to the fact that stereotypical thinking is a pattern, Davidson says.

Patterns are default ways of thinking that people revert to because they require less effort than new ways of thinking, she explains.

"It's all about self-awareness; we need to be alerting ourselves to our default mechanism and call it into question.

"If we change our belief system, and we use some skills to help us - 'pause, take a breath, take a look at what's happening...' - then we give ourselves a chance to impose a new pattern, so that new pattern becomes non-effortful and far more productive."

"We just need to be aware that we are all pattern-makers and pattern-followers and the reason we do it is because it's easy.

"What we need to be most mindful about is [that] we might have found ourselves in our workplace deferring to a whole lot of unhelpful patterns and unhelpful ways of thinking."

Another neuro-principle relates to multitasking. According to the stereotype, Gen Y employees are "huge multitaskers", which is often hailed as a good thing, Davidson says.

But research shows that across all age groups, doing two or more things at once hurts performance in the primary task.

"Our principle is that multitasking is exhausting and inefficient.

"In the workplace, people often confuse speed of processing and multitasking. Being quick does not mean being able to multitask efficiently."

What all brains need is to be able to focus attention appropriately, Davidson says, and "multitasking is the opposite of that".

Speed of processing is a far more valuable trait, and one that can be improved regardless of age through attention selection exercises, she says.

Davidson says that strategies designed to develop age-neutral thinking can help employees to understand themselves and each other better, thereby fostering a more harmonious, productive and diverse workplace.

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