

Career Tip: Get A Mentor

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If you have had the opportunity to discuss with the liberators (the pre-independence generation) and the born frees (post-independence generation) about their work you will observe that there is a huge divide between these two employee groups in terms of motivation, values and perception with regards to work. You may have also noted that there is a lot of finger pointing, the liberators accuse the born frees of being “carefree” and “sloppy” and the born frees in turn accuse the liberators of being “behind” and “condescending.” This age difference in perception is by no means unique to our workforce – it’s a global challenge. Yet our ability to create truly competitive and productive employees (and workforces) relies on the degree to which we will harness and leverage diversity, experience and perspective across both employee groups. Allow me to explain.

The issue here is really not of one generation being “lazy” or not having been educated well. Neither is it about an older generation that is “backward” and “arrogant.” It is about two generations with very distinct backgrounds and who have gone through very different enculturation processes into the workplace. For example, many of the liberators grew up in rural settings and only came to the urban areas in search of employment with the objective to make a living and return home with pension.

We are moving away from the time when the sole motivation to work was to accrue assets, pension and retire. The hyperinflation period was a wake-up call to both liberators and born frees – born frees especially. With savings and pensions eroded, it taught us harshly that the sole purpose of work should not be getting pension and retiring. I believe we will begin to see (and have begun to see) a generation coming up that will be arguing that “there must be more to work?” The born free generation that has already joined the workforce will view work as a key part of life rather than as a separate activity. For this reason, born frees will place a strong emphasis on doing work that is personally fulfilling. Their thinking will be that “now that work is part of my life, I need to make friends here; I need to learn new skills and connect my day to day job to my larger purpose.” This sense of purpose will be the deal maker or deal breaker in engaging born frees.

Born frees that work for organisations with (formal and informal) mentoring programs will have an advantage. I would personally recommend [formal mentoring programs](#) because they are clearer in terms of objectives and expected outcomes. A particularly important objective of mentorship is knowledge transfer. Born frees need to tap into the practical experience that has been accrued by the liberators over their years of working. Many of our companies are very unique and are still beset by many operational challenges. It will require the assistance of a veteran employee who has an understanding of the business to guide the born free – in many cases even though the born free may possess even higher academic qualifications than the liberator.

Born frees can also tap into the liberators to learn and adapt to the company’s culture. This is often taken for granted but I have observed that cultural misalignment can be a huge source of frustration for

employees in both groups.

Another benefit of mentorship is that mentors can become the advocate of the born free. By going through a mentorship program – whether informal or formal – the born free can be groomed for future supervisory and leadership roles. To succeed in any workplace you need someone who believes in you and is confident enough to give you a chance or recommend that you be given a chance to test your capabilities.

I must however caution that viewing mentorship as a one direction exercise is incorrect. Mentorship is an interchanging activity. Whilst there are many things born frees can learn from the liberators, they are also other things that the liberators can learn from born frees. For example I have noted that not as many liberators can effectively use information technology resources available to them. It will take the assistance of the more techno savvy born frees to assist in this area. The key to making a mentoring relationship successful is making it mutually beneficial.

Should you be employed in an organisation with no formal mentorship program, make an effort to develop a mentoring relationship with a more experienced staff member (preferably supervisor level upwards) who has the expertise and experience you seek to development. Ideally informal mentoring relationships grow organically based on trust and collaboration. Once you have built a rapport you can then make it formal by telling the person you would want to learn and benefit from their experience.

You cannot be successful in the work environment by going at it solo. Leverage on the more experienced staff to become more productive and invaluable in the workplace.

Collin Bhiza is a Human Resources Consultant.

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