# ENGAGING GEN Y

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## THINGS ARE DIFFERENT

Leaders are changing. They bring different aspirations, different perspectives and different approaches. Some are excited about the changes. Others bemoan the 'entitled' generation.

Recently I had a conversation with a Boomer vicar in his early 50s. Their church has run an intern scheme for a number of years. He said how much he loved having 18-21 year olds on the staff team. He always looked forward to the new intake and the energy and ideas they would bring. Until recently. He confessed that in the last two years he was struggling. He just didn't understand them any longer, their attitudes, approach and actions. He didn't seem to connect with them as well as in the past. Was it him or them?

Over the last three years we've conducted a research project to investigate some of the changes this vicar is experiencing, motivated by a desire to help leaders across the generations work well together. Here are a few of the insights we've gained from the research.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GEN Y

Gen Y are those born (roughly) between 1980 and 2000, and like all generations have been impacted by the world they were brought up in. As a consequence they are:

- **Technologically savvy**. They are 'digital natives'. Technology has always been part of their life. In the early years the web and email, in the latter years social networking (My Space, Facebook, Twitter), tablets, smart phones and gaming consoles. As a result they expect information to be public, life to be instant, and hierarchies to be ignored.
- **Socially networked**. They are the (permanently) connected generation. My wife and I went to the cinema last night and in a crowded theatre were amazed at how many younger couples came in together, sat down and immediately went online on their phones. As a result of this connection they blur the boundaries between work and the rest of life, find information quickly, and think 'network'.
- **Feedback hungry**. As a result of 'helicopter parenting' they are used to the input of others in their lives, and struggle in environments where there is little feedback.
- **Emotionally empathetic**. They connect at an emotional level. Feelings are important. Relationships matter. They look for authenticity and vulnerability.
- **Movement oriented**. They want to make a difference and are generally far more positive than the rather cynical Gen Xers who preceded them. They take an integrated approach to things, so for example 'integral mission' sits well with them.
- **Entertainment driven**. Fun is important to Gen Y. Their access to media, methods of education, and consumerist philosophy all fuel a desire to enjoy things, to have fun, to be entertained. They have little patience for things they don't like.
- **Entitlement attitude**. They have grown up being told they can do anything. They are used to having a voice. They aren't shy about asking for things they want, expect praise before they've earned it, aren't overly concerned with hierarchy, and move on quickly if something doesn't appeal to them.
- **Leadership savvy**. They have been brought up with

leadership as part of their vocabulary and experience. They've bought the book, been to the seminar, listened to umpteen podcasts, and have the proverbial T-shirt. But whilst familiar with the language of leadership, they can be naïve about the reality of leadership.

One of the results of their background is that Gen Y have certain expectations about leadership, and these often differ significantly to generations that have gone before them. So for example, they generally think of leadership as collaborative. They don't want to be told, they want to be involved. If we have a leadership style which is more 'telling' or directing they may not take well to it.

In 1 Timothy 4:12 Paul urges younger leader Timothy 'Don't let people look down on your youth' and in 5:1-2 'Don't speak harshly to an older man but as to a father… an older woman as a mother.' Paul encourages younger and older to have appropriate attitudes that will enable them to work well together in the body, respecting one another, learning from one another. Here are three ideas that might help to ensure that such diversity is a creative and enriching experience.

## 1. EXPLORE GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Every generation sees the world through its own particular lenses. Helping people take off their glasses and put on someone else's will bring clarity of understanding to what otherwise could be some contentious aspects of leading well with others. Many think of their own generation as 'better' and others by default as somehow 'worse' (normally couched in terms of 'I just don't understand them'). But it isn't a matter of better or worse, just different. So help people understand the differences. Give time to listening to one another in order to understand thinking and approaches. Encourage people to contribute to discussion and decisions from their own perspective, and then to articulate how someone of a different generation might approach that issue as a way of practising generational interpretation.

## 2. DEVELOP A CODE OF CONDUCT

One of the common tensions between the generations is the use of technology. Gen Y like to stay connected all the time – they are the networked generation. Using their smart phone to post on Facebook during a meeting is normal. Meanwhile Boomers are appalled at their rudeness and everyone is frustrated with someone because they are not behaving as they think they ought. One way to address this is to agree a code of conduct together. It is important this is done together so that everyone gets to understand each other's point of view, and owns the result. Talk through what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Be specific; don't allow it to stay at the level of generalities.

## 3. ENCOURAGE MENTORING

Many of Gen Y are looking for mentors, and particularly connect well with the older generations. Let's create cross generation mentoring opportunities so that all can grow and learn from one another.

Gen Y also love to show others how to do things. So one of the ways to lead well with them is to make the most of their highly connected and creative approach. Rather than being threatened by their use of technology, invite them to mentor those who are struggling with it. Boomers tend to be more open to this than Xers, simply because they are more willing to admit they don't know.

## BETTER TOGETHER

If we are to reach the majority who know little or nothing of Christ we'll need leaders from all generations to work well together. It may not always be easy, but if we manage it, the quality of leadership will be enriched and the possibility of fulfilling our part in God's mission increased. Let's give it a go!

For a fuller exploration of this subject click here for Engaging Gen Y: Leading Well Across the Generations (Grove books).



### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Who do you struggle to lead well with in your context? How much of this might be generational misunderstanding?
- Who are you looking to develop as a younger leader? What is your next step in that relationship?
- If you are Gen Y who could you ask to mentor you? If you are Gen X or older, who could reverse mentor you?