Understanding generational groups at the workplace: The key to inclusive leadership development

Dr. Irene Nikandrou, Assistant Professor,

[nikandr@aueb.gr](mailto:nikandr@aueb.gr)

Dr. Leda Panayotopoulou, Assistant Professor,

[ledapan@aueb.gr](mailto:ledapan@aueb.gr)

Athens University of Economics and Business

76 Patission st.

104 34 Athens, GR

Tel: 210-8203 444

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Nowadays the business and the socio-economic environment become more and more complex and unpredictable in terms of changes. Moreover, with continuing diversity in the workforce, organizations need to have a greater capacity for collective problem solving and be able to respond to a wide range of employee needs, in order to thrive on uncertainty. It is thus, critical for the organization to prepare leaders with the capacity to handle complex situations. Leadership can be viewed as a source of competitive advantage and leadership development is receiving increased attention.

Inclusive leadership is a new concept recognizing that the active role of followers in attaining group and organizational goals is essential for achieving desired outcomes. According to Hollander, “inclusive leadership is about relationships that can accomplish things for mutual benefit” (2008, p. 3). Inclusion is understood as allowing to share, incorporating, doing things with people and in general eliminating exclusion. Leadership can be seen as a social process that engages everyone in the community (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). An organizational environment fostering inclusion allows people with different mindsets to work effectively together and perform to their highest potential to achieve organizational goals. In such an environment different voices are respected and heard, diverse viewpoints and approaches are valued and everyone is encouraged and recognized for the effort and the contribution in the process and the organizational results. To create such an environment we need to understand the characteristics of our workforce.

Leadership development from this perspective consists of using social, relational systems to build commitments among members (Wenger, 1998). Taking a social capital lens in leadership development the emphasis is on building networked, interpersonal relationships among individuals (Bouty, 2000).

Over the course of the last years, the composition of the workforce has dramatically changed. Today's workforce is more diverse in age than ever before with three generational groups co-existing in the workplace. Thus, there is a large number of Baby Boomers who refuse to retire, while the new Generation Y, who now enters the workforce, is eager to advance up the professional ranks. Generation Xers are caught in the middle. Each generation has its unique characteristics (Hewlett et al, 2009). Research has clearly shown that generational membership is a key variable in the determination of behavior (Zemke et al, 2000). Similarities and differences between generations in terms of expectations and attitudes about work, careers and life are important in understanding how employees’ relationships are formed.

The aim of this study is to examine the characteristics of three generational groups – Baby Boomers, Xers and Yers – in the Greek context and identify the differences and similarities among them and in the way they perceive their careers. More specifically, we want to investigate the degree that protean and boundaryless career attitudes are espoused by generational groups in Greece and their learning goal orientation. We use this knowledge to propose a leadership development system. Our sample consists of 610 participants (34% Baby Boomers, 32% Xers and 34% Yers). Based on our results several leadership development practices such as coaching, mentoring, networking, job assignments and action learning are discussed.

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