

Business leaders, sensing a different approach to work in the latest generation to enter the workplace, are often concerned that they will be unable to engage with this generation. **Rudi Plettinx** thinks they have nothing to worry about.

# Leading LIGHTS

**Every time I** meet a chief executive these days, I seem to get asked the same questions. They go something like this: ‘How do I prepare to deal with the next generation in the workplace – they’re so different, aren’t they? Will I have to change my leadership style to reach out to these people?’

With smart, can-do talent at a premium, this question is highly significant. Leaders know that recruitment and retention are vital to future success, but I still see a great deal of uncertainty as to what the next generation will bring to the workplace of tomorrow.

Not only do these views seem to be universal, they come from some of the business leaders I most respect. Taken as a group, many of our corporate leaders seem worried that we are facing unprecedented change when it comes to engaging with future employees.

You would think that our business leaders imagine that there are hordes of rampaging alien creatures heading their way disguised as university graduates – that the next intake of engineers, marketers, R&D personnel and the rest will somehow be hugely different from the preceding one. We have been told so often that

the next generation has new expectations, new views on life-work balance and different ideas about what counts as a career that we all seem to be living in fear and trepidation about the future.

Well, in the past few months I’ve spent a lot of time with the so-called next generation. And you know what I see? In country after country, in business school after business school, I see a bright, exciting future for Europe. My optimism isn’t based on wishful thinking or a stubborn refusal to face reality. It is

grounded in the plain fact that the next generation – those who will lead our organisations in the coming decades – may be different from their parents (what generation hasn’t been?), but they still seem to exhibit a great deal of drive, enthusiasm

and common sense. Will they make good leaders? My view is that they most certainly will.

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#### Myths and reality

This view is backed up by findings from a Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) research project called Emerging Leaders.

First launched in North America a few years ago, and then replicated in Europe, the study was designed to look at the myths

and reality of generational differences. On both sides of the Atlantic, CCL researchers discovered that generational differences were largely myths, and there was general agreement among all the respondents – irrespective of their age – about what was important to them in their working life and careers.

For example, CCL found that different generations have similar values, but express them differently. People of all generations want leaders who are credible and trustworthy, while no one likes change, not even the extremely mobile and trend-savvy younger generation. It also found that it is as easy to retain a young person as it is an older one – if you do the right things.

The European phase of the research revealed even more about talent management challenges, perhaps because it was launched just as the ‘war on talent’ was heating up again and becoming a very contentious topic within the EU. CCL’s Emerging Leaders findings suggest that the top career challenges occur in areas where learning and development are required:

- Leadership skills
- Managing change
- Problem-solving and decision-making
- Team building
- Skills training in a chosen field of expertise

but that has always been the way.

And, of course, with younger people there is the ‘tech’ thing. This is a generation brought up with new technology, adopting it naturally as part of the world they grew up in. This ease with technology shouldn’t be seen as a problem, but rather a huge advantage that new talent can bring to our businesses. Interestingly, CCL’s Emerging Leaders research revealed that the older generations were more likely to ask to be taught new skills via IT than younger generations.

When I talk to managers about this, their reaction is often: ‘That’s all very well, but how do I reach them? How do I connect with this next generation of talent?’ Personally, I don’t think that this will be too hard, as long as we remember that it is people, not technology that counts.



**RUDI PLETTINX**

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## Researchers discovered that generational differences were largely myths, and there was general agreement among all the respondents about what was important to them in their working life and careers.

Europeans even listed ‘development and learning’ and ‘more challenge’ as top career priorities, ahead of ‘increased salary’.

Organisational politics emerged as a problem across all generations, with ‘trust and credibility’ consistently chosen in the top five leadership attributes desired by respondents. This of course is an area where generational myths can reinforce mistrust.

### Huge advantage

I would be the first to admit that there are cultural differences in generations that must be acknowledged and addressed in order to integrate, motivate and leverage the skills and energy of new arrivals to the talent pool. There are some differences in the way they dress, what they eat, the music they listen to,

The key findings of the Emerging Leaders research, particularly the European phase, reflected and reinforced findings from an earlier CCL study called *The Changing Nature of Leadership*, which bolstered my gut feeling that we can connect with young, emerging talent through collective leadership, a process that fully meets the needs and expectations of the new generation.

This view of leadership as a process focuses on the relationship between people, their interdependency and their ability to act on a shared vision. If we can get the next generation involved in this way, I don’t think we will have any difficulties in integrating them into our organisations and turning them into strong, visionary leaders. As CCL’s *Handbook of Leadership Development Evaluation* explains: ‘Collective

### Shifting priorities

In just a few years, the significance and importance of individual leadership skills has shifted quite dramatically. Do these results herald a new leadership age where participation, relationship building and reward based on the success of others become a significant part of the organisational equation? Participants were asked to rate what they thought were the key skills and talents of leaders, with one being the highest score. The results are based on the responses of over 2,000 managers across a wide range of industries and regions.

Individual leadership skill categories	2002	Future
Leading employees	1	1
Building and mending relationships	5	2
Change management	7	3
Participative management	6	4
Resourcefulness	2	5
Decisiveness	4	6
Doing whatever it takes	7	7
Straightforwardness and composure	3	8



The next generation of business leaders will display collaborative skills as well as vision and decisiveness.

leadership seeks to support specific individuals and provide them with skills, experiences and resources that will make them and their organisations more effective.'

#### Key skills

My view is that participative management and building and mending relationships are going to be the key skills of the future business leader, replacing yesterday's much-admired talents of resourcefulness, decisiveness and doing whatever it takes.

Significantly, the Changing Nature of Leadership research has thrown up some interesting views on how Europe and the US differ as we seek out a new leadership style. According to the

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research, while the concept of leadership seems to be changing for both Europeans and Americans, the changes are different, with Europeans making a more significant jump from individual to more collective leadership and at a faster pace.

Much of this change has stemmed from the need for our business leaders – in organisations both large and small – to embrace the cross-border world of an expanding EU and the wider global marketplace, and the realisation that collaboration, negotiation and flexibility are key assets for tomorrow's leaders (see box overleaf). According to many leaders and, probably more significantly, would-be leaders, it is the so-called soft

skills of building relationships and participative management that seem to be in the ascendancy.

And while some old-fashioned I've-seen-it-all-before cynics might scoff and predict that one good business downturn will get us all quickly back focusing on 'making the numbers', my own experience makes me think we have come too far for that.

#### Meeting expectations

A new generation of leaders – across Europe at least – is making up some new rules. Not only that, but they are beginning to realise that being an effective leader in the 21st century requires meeting the expectations of the workforce

(insourced and outsourced). To do that consistently requires an emphasis on those more collaborative skills – including persuasion – that will create respect and involvement within the businesses of tomorrow and ensure a supply of the best talent.

The next generation in the workplace will only be a problem to manage and lead if we make it that way by staying in our own little comfort zones instead of eagerly embracing the new. However, if we take the time to understand and appreciate their expectations and their ways of doing business, we can build even stronger organisations in the future. The senior managers among us can probably learn a lot at the same time.

So don't be concerned that this next generation will blight your business. Properly nurtured, they can only enhance it. Effective leadership, collective leadership, built on a sense of sharing the future, is the catalyst that will make it work. ■