

“The distrust and sense of competition between generations can make constructive communication and effective work partnerships difficult across age barriers, deepening the negative impact of ageism on the organization.”

Tapping the Wisdom of the Ages

Ageism and the Need for Multigenerational Organizations

By Corey L. Jamison

Many leading organizations have made the leap from focusing simply on “diversity by numbers” to striving to become more inclusive workplaces where all people can contribute their best work in service of the goals and mission of the organization. Identifying and eliminating barriers faced by women, people of color and people from outside the United States has been a primary mission of numerous organizations, who long ago embraced the “it is just the right thing to do!” agenda and complemented it with a robust and clear organizational imperative—“inclusion and leveraging diversity are good; in fact, they are essential to the success of our business!”

Some of these organizations are tackling the harder issues of invisible differences, micro-inequities and the role of white men as allies in their efforts. More still are challenging themselves to take a business position on politically and socially charged issues, such as sexual orientation and religion. Yet, one area of difference remains largely ignored by even the most progressive of companies. The set of accompanying biases, stereotypes and prejudices it carries are still considered acceptable, and most often go unchallenged in the day to day of organization life.

That difference is *ageism*, and until we take action as individual practitioners and members of organizational communities, we are colluding with a system of oppression that results in organizations fighting for leadership talent, being unprepared for the future, and being poorly

positioned to compete in an increasingly global marketplace.

We have all heard the statistics: nearly 40% of the current workforce is estimated to retire in five to fifteen years. The numbers alone paint a grim picture, yet they do not fully describe the shift in lifestyle choice many members of Generation X are making and Generation Y will make—shunning the rat race of their predecessors for a more intentional simplicity. Many GenXers are using quality of life, time with family, and social and personal values as the criteria they use to evaluate possible career paths and promotional opportunities.

Everyone is talking about the “Brain Drain”—the Baby Boomer exodus that has already begun to sap organizations of their historical intellectual capital. What is the connection between this and ageism? What can we do, and what can organizations do to offset this drain and leverage the possibilities that will enable all generations to contribute and for individuals to reach their personal goals?

We need a mindset shift FROM thinking of age as a relatively innocuous dimension of diversity—one where we accept limiting and stereotypical notions as fact—TO seeing the value inherent in an organization that is truly *multigenerational*—that utilizes the best thinking and wisdom of the ages and leverages opportunities that can only come from cross-generational innovation and creativity. This kind of shift is described in *Table 1*.

This mindset shift means changing

the conversations we have about age—by aggressively challenging some of the stereotypes we carry about age, such as:

- » Younger people are simply too inexperienced or “green” to contribute in a meaningful way.
- » Younger people do not have the work ethic of the older generation.
- » Only older people can be relied on for a balanced perspective.
- » Older people maintain a “don’t-rock-the-boat” mentality that is risk-averse and conventional.
- » Younger people are not loyal or committed. They are still finding themselves and will move from job to job.
- » Middle-aged people are reliable, but dull and steady and lack innovation. They are looking down the road toward retirement, counting the years and months until they leave.
- » Younger people take to technology quickly, but they lack the breadth of knowledge needed to tackle challenging business problems.
- » Most older people cannot learn the new technologies, and, in fact, are downright technophobic.
- » Senior leaders can only trust people who have been with them a long time and only those that have been through the trenches with them.
- » “Earning your stripes” is the only way to become a good leader.

Ageism: More Than a Generation Gap

The distrust and sense of competition between generations can make constructive communication and effective work partnerships difficult across age barriers, deepening the negative impact of ageism on the organization. According to research conducted by The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group Inc. (1997-2006), age-related stereotypes and related barriers are prevalent within numerous organizations and have grown over the years, particularly more recently now that four generations are crowding the workplace.

For most of us, the biases of ageism are so ingrained that they seem the normal, correct way to view the world.

TABLE 1

FROM	TO
Focusing on the needs and wants of Generation X, Y or Millennials	Understanding how to engage all people in a multigenerational dialogue to leverage the experience and perspective of each generation
Generations needing to wait their turns: “The Boomers are leaving, that makes it MY turn!”	Leveraging the potential of multiple generations working together: “It’s everyone’s turn”
Older people have all the wisdom ... younger people have more creativity	Building cross-generational partnerships that create opportunities for all generations to add value
Older generations mentoring younger generations as the BIG idea	Multi-way mentoring: Every generation has ideas to contribute
OK to stereotype by age grouping or generation	Eliminating ageism

This is the way it is with all “isms” until we acknowledge them overtly and begin to dissect them. This takes honesty and a forthrightness not often promoted in organizations, but it is a necessary step toward completing the radical transformation organizations of all types need to undertake in order to be successful in the 21st century.

Each of us needs to make an individual commitment to speak out against age bias, and ageism when we see it. It will be challenging because it is so accepted. Comments like “I’m having a senior moment” are common jokes, but if we replaced the word “senior” with the name of another group—say, a certain race or nationality—would it still be accepted? Use this exchange as a litmus test, and then speak up!

The Era of “Wait Your Turn” Must End

Although there is some debate on the exact year that the “Echo Boom” generation begins, respected demographers Strauss and Howe (2000) call the High School Class of 2000 the leading edge of the next generation to enter the workforce. It will be at least 20 years before they begin filling mid-level management positions in the traditional progression in many companies. In the meantime, companies cannot remain competitive with even average turnover rates because, judging by the numbers generated by several surveys, the picture is not optimistic. Overall, new hires are leaving organizations even

more quickly than the older generations are retiring. According to Kaleel Jamison research (1997-2006), turnover for people with tenures of less than two years is up to seven times higher than for any other group. This is producing a serious leak in the leadership pipeline.

In the traditional organization, greater power accrues to those who are farther along at every stage of the age-experience spectrum. In most organizations, seniority and tenure is heavily weighted in consideration for promotions. In some organizations, it is the only consideration. People must “wait their turn” for their fair share of the rewards.

In yesterday’s world, the “wait-your-turn” system made sense. But for the new economy of breakthrough change, innovation by the minute, and instant creative problem solving, this rigid caste system is obsolete.

This inflexible system is similar to the old military organization chart that often put leaders too far from the battlefield. Similarly, organization decision makers now may be too far removed from the sources of the most valuable information about market conditions. With so many specialized skill sets required to address so many emerging and complex situations—often involving ad hoc collaborations across technological disciplines, as well as boundaries of culture, nationality, and language—there is an increasing need for more innovative organization structures. A wait-your-turn system places stress on the whole organization. It is contrary to

what organizations need—a system of advancement not only by merit and status, but by potential based on what someone did today or yesterday, where they are going in the future, and how they collaborate with and partner with others. To achieve these outcomes, a multigenerational initiative becomes essential.

There are two major ways that a wait-your-turn system hurts organizations:

(1) Collaboration between different age-cohorts suffers

People tend to gather and self-organize into generational age groups. Interactions between different groups are often filled with misunderstandings, power/dominance issues, and bias-filled assumptions. (“They’re trying to stifle our creativity.” “They don’t understand today’s reality.” “They don’t understand what is really important and what got us here.” “They don’t listen to us.”)

(2) Too much talent is walking out the door

Younger people will only wait so long for their chance at leadership, decision making, involvement, full rewards and feeling fully valued. Those who feel they are being held back are more likely to take attractive positions at other organizations. While others—and these include many of the most talented—simply walk away and start their own businesses.

So much of the age bias in the wait-your-turn model is couched in language of fairness. “It is only fair that people who came first should be given first consideration.” “It is only fair that those who have labored longest should get the greatest rewards.” “It is only fair that those with the most experience should be the ones to make the important decisions and chart the path forward.” This sounds so **reasonable** because we have been conditioned to it all our lives, but it is based on two false premises:

(a) Seniority Equals Superiority. This is the easier of the two false premises to refute. Logically, we all know that talent does not necessarily grow with age. People have different talents, and they have different amounts of talent. Similarly, experience may be a great

teacher, but some people learn more quickly than others.

(b) Power, Dominance, and Leadership

Must Flow Downward. This is a belief that is more difficult to overcome. The military-model, top-down hierarchy is so pervasive in organizations that it can be hard to envision any different model. The default organizational chart is strongly age-determined. In

experiences of teenagers, college students, young mothers, twenty-something sports fans, inner-city youths, hourly wage earners, first-generation children of immigrant parents, people caring for elderly parents, and people from other countries? Are they qualified to endorse strategies and to address those specific needs, opportunities, and problems that emerge from those groups?

As currently constituted, most boards are fairly similar: many wealthy white men in their 60s or older, with maybe one or two women and/or people of color of the same age cohort.

Is this necessarily the best makeup for a board of directors trying to anticipate the needs, desires, tastes and experiences of teenagers, college students, young mothers, twenty-something sports fans, inner-city youths, hourly wage earners, first-generation children of immigrant parents, people caring for elderly parents, and people from other countries?

most organizations the senior leaders are from the oldest group of active members. Middle management consists of the middle-aged group. The entry-level people are the youngest.

Establishing a New System Won’t Be Easy

The wait-your-turn philosophy is built on the premise that one generation first takes its turn to try to answer the challenges of its day, and then the next generation takes its turn to answer any leftover challenges, as well as the new ones that emerge on its watch. But the challenges facing today’s organizations are too complex for members of a single generation to solve alone. They need collaboration from all age groups.

Imagine the board of directors of one of today’s largest companies reviewing new strategic directions for the company. As currently constituted, most boards are fairly similar: many wealthy white men in their 60s or older, with maybe one or two women and/or people of color of the same age cohort. Is this necessarily the best makeup for a board of directors trying to anticipate the needs, desires, tastes, and

The reality is this: in the next 25 years, technology will change and evolve at least four to seven times more rapidly than it did over the last 25 years (Gingrich, 2006). It would certainly make more sense to have the board of directors populated with as broad a spectrum of people as possible—and not just from different cultural and ethnic groups, but across the entire range of age groups as well. But this has not been happening. People in power—usually those 50- and 60-somethings in the boardroom—do not seem to want to give it up. It is hard for them to envision that a teenager or a twenty-something person might be able to provide valuable information, opinions, or—the hardest of all to conceive—direction. And the age of the senior leaders might be a little younger, but the same question about the inclusion of younger people applies to many senior leadership teams.

**The Benefit:
Tapping the Wisdom of the Ages**

There are a few working models of systems in which different age groups interact

constructively and successfully. For instance, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in February (White, 2007) that Schwan's, a 61-year old family-owned frozen food business in rural Minnesota outside Minneapolis, has developed its first-ever senior leadership program that exclusively takes mid-level talent in their 20s to their 40s, sweetens their current compensation package, and puts them through a gauntlet of assignments over a two-year period to develop them as senior leaders. Along the way, these candidates partner with older, more experienced consultants and coaches from outside the firm and with internal mentors, who are there to answer questions and dispense advice. Started in 2002, the Senior Executive program has been recently augmented by a similar initiative that takes a handful of younger, less experienced people, often from the firm's production and warehouse divisions, and puts them through virtually the same paces.

A model for today's reality might be based on a collaborative business-village in which members of all generations hold the baton of power together, instead of a model where the younger generations wait for those before them to pass the baton when they are ready to leave their leadership roles. This is a place where everyone feels a responsibility to help integrate the youngest people into the life of the community; where all members contribute their energy, ideas, and experience; where all contributions are welcome and understood to be of differing value; and where people of advanced age continue to contribute their talents, efforts, and wisdom as long as they are able. The difference here is that dominance and power are not concentrated in the hands of a single group or persons based on their age. In this business-village model, wisdom, knowledge, and ideas have dominance, not people. And the best wisdom comes from the wisdom of *all* the ages contributing.

Even outside this business-village model, however, to gain the wisdom of *all* the ages, people must constantly confront a set of challenging questions:

- » How do I tap the wisdom of the younger people?
- » What are the younger people seeing from their perspective that I cannot see from mine?
- » How do I tap the wisdom of older people?
- » How do we create an interaction that is two-way, where we learn from each other?
- » How can I enhance my ability to ask for advice from people who are significantly older and younger than I am?
- » Is there any age-related point of view missing from my work life?
- » Which combination of us (based on age) is in the best position to consider decisions?

For organizations, eliminating ageism is quickly becoming a crucial issue. When combating *ageism*, the reward will be the opportunity to survive and thrive; the means will be the tapping of the Wisdom of the Ages.

The author wishes to express a sincere thank you to Frederick A. Miller, CEO of The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc., for his contributions to these concepts and this article.

References

- Gingrich, N. (2006, July 12). *The scale of the challenge: April 1861 - today*. Retrieved March 8, 2007 from Gingrich Communications, <http://www.newt.org/backpage.asp?art=3123>.
- Howe, N. & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc. (1997-2006). Comparative data review of proprietary survey instrument results. Troy, NY.
- White, E. (2007, February 5). Manager Shortage Spurs Small Firms To Grow Their Own. *The Wall Street Journal*, pp. B1.

Corey L. Jamison has been associated with The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc. since 1991 and currently serves as President. She has over fifteen years' experience partnering with organizations to develop the necessary leadership and infrastructure for leading corporations, municipalities and not-for-profit organizations through culture change. In addition, she has led one of the largest corporate culture initiatives in the United States in recent years. Corey has been interviewed by National Public Radio (NPR), Good Morning America, and *The New York Times*, and has published articles on topics ranging from the impact of downsizing on work culture to measuring the success of leveraging diversity and building inclusion efforts. Contact Corey at The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group at kjcg411@kjcg.com.