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Navigating and Celebrating the Gen Zs

Let us try and assess the psyche of the Gen Z with the experience I have had in various organisations

Avivid recollection of an early encounter with a Gen Z comes from ten years back when we were designing an AI enabled learning system for youth and got a twenty-two-year-old Nandini to do the research on what young people really want (an update on a book I had written a few years earlier with the same name). Making a presentation to us on the outcome of her research, Nandini ended her recommendations with a line “And impossible is nothing”. When a Gen X member of our leadership team asked her, “Surely you mean that nothing is impossible?”, Nandini held her ground and said, “No, I mean impossible is nothing, and I think everybody in my generation believes in that, and will always find a way to accomplish what we want.”

This little encounter gave me an insight into what is common belief today, that generations change every five years, not fifteen years, and for the young graduate who joins an organisation, the fifty-year old Gen X CEO seems to be a dinosaur, her forty-year-old line manager beyond comprehension and even her thirty-year-old team leader unable to understand why her needs for work-life balance are so different from those of her seniors in the organisation. And, what saddens the young new entrant is the quick judgement that her organisation jumps to, that her

unwillingness to subscribe to a “work is worship” culture is seen as a lack of purpose and commitment to the organisation.

Let us try and assess the psyche of the Gen Z with the experience I have had in various organisations – Zensar Technologies, GTT, 5F World and Lighthouse Communities, being just four of them. First and foremost, most Gen Zs come from single or two child families and have not been denied any physical comforts during their childhood and youth, and expect that there will be no absence of joy as they begin their careers. Second, they want to work for an organisation which has a sense of purpose, and communicates that in its vision and mission to all the associates without keeping that as an exclusive preserve of top management. And, most important, they want to be recognised for their unique identity and the skills they bring to the organisation and their individual aspirations taken seriously. They resent being batched as one group of recruits, all destined for similar treatment in the workplace.

At Zensar, the organisation I ran for fifteen years till 2016, we took special care to ensure that each Gen Z who wanted to make a difference had ample opportunities. The associate relations function enabled access to an empowered HR representative, who could engage and resolve most issues and the opportunity to be part of the vision



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community every year, encouraged the youngest aspirant to work with the senior most vice presidents to co-create strategic and operations suggestions for the organisation, which became a great intellectual leveler. In fact, vision communities at Zensar became the subject of a well-written and frequently taught case study at Harvard Business School, which is also discussed in many academic and corporate programmes in India and abroad. Most members of the “Power of Three”, as Zensar called the young engineers who typically entered at Grade-3 in the organisation, participated actively and felt they were appreciated for their unique ideas. Their retention levels reached the ninety plus percentage level, at a time when 18 to 20 per cent attrition was the norm in the industry.

What is most important for organisations and even family elders, present and future, is to practice conscious leadership with Gen Zs. Preaching from the pulpit that it is only hard work and long hours that built successful countries and organisations, is likely to fall on deaf ears and evoke squeals of disapproval on social media. Youth will find their own voice and will themselves take responsibility if they are allowed to participate on their own terms. Gen Zs want to work smart, party hard and be convinced of the reason to do any work before they plunge into tasks, and a conscious leadership working with inspired youth can truly bring out magic. ■

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