

Human side of innovation:

Encouraging innovation in a multigenerational workforce

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Social media feeds offer an abundance of content about differences among generations—including in the workplace. Often, this content draws upon familiar tropes, pitting Baby Boomers and Gen X against younger colleagues who are Millennials or Gen Z.

As your organization strives for greater innovation, you may be wondering: How do generational differences affect a culture and people's willingness and ability to think and behave in new ways? What should leaders know and understand about each generation to encourage more creativity, more breaking through the status quo?

Surely what works for professionals who started working in the era of the interoffice memo will be different from what's effective among those who have little experience with a landline telephone. Surely there are relationship "hacks" that will make it faster and easier to fuel innovation—from early-career to highly tenured members of your team.

The truth is, "hacks" are better suited to streamlining chores than building cultures. There's no place for shortcuts when you're working to build strong relationships and a culture of innovation. Indeed, generational differences have little, if any, role in how leaders succeed in nurturing the human side of innovation.

Mining for inspiration

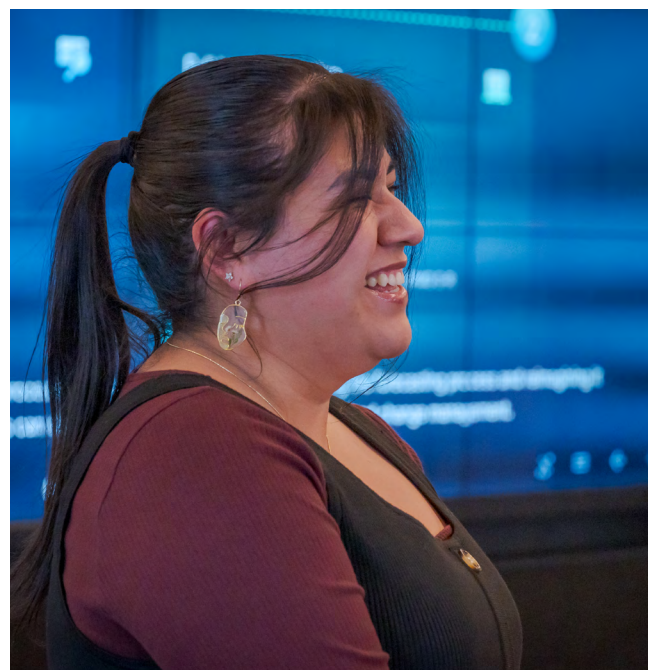
One of the most compelling examples of culture building and innovation nurturing occurred over a decade ago in Chile—when 33 men became trapped under hundreds of thousands of metric tons of rock. The situation was dire, and the odds of a favorable outcome were extremely slim. By now, most of us know that this story has a happy ending. Sixty-nine days after being trapped, all 33 men were brought to safety 69 days after being trapped.

The outcome still seems miraculous, but how the team in Chile made it happen is worth exploring further. A case study in Harvard Business Review highlights how this extraordinary series of events has parallels in much more prosaic settings.

It points to two of the real keys to the human side of innovation: leaders who are empathetic and inclusive and a culture in which employees experience psychological safety.

"Today, executives often find themselves in similar straits. When they do, many feel torn. Should they be directive, taking charge and commanding action? Or should they be empowering, enabling innovation and experimentation? As the successful example of André Sougarret, the chief of the mine rescue operation shows, the answer is yes—to both. The choice is a false dichotomy."

Harvard Business Review





Lead with empathy and inclusiveness

In the Chilean mining disaster, the breakthrough idea came from one of the youngest members of the team, a 24-year-old engineer. He proposed using an American company's cluster hammer technology, which would enable the team to cut through the hard rock more rapidly.

The same kinds of breakthrough ideas can emerge from unexpected people and teams when solving challenges in any organization.

By getting to know team members not as parts of a generational cohort but as individuals, leaders can begin to understand the unique perspectives and strengths each brings to a situation.

This investment of time and attention pays off in multiple ways, including strengthening the connection that workers feel they have to their manager and organization. It also illuminates opportunities to develop talent that can deliver value to the company.

All workers thrive with psychological safety

Fostering the human side of innovation requires people to feel safe enough to suggest new ideas and experiment with such ideas. They need to feel secure enough to speak up and sound "off the wall." They also need assurance that they can and should take risks—knowing that it is okay to fail (and then try again).

While it's easy to talk about creating psychological safety, it can be very difficult to execute—particularly in organizations with official and/or unofficial hierarchies. People need to know that when they speak up, their leader will actually listen to what they suggest. People also need to see examples where their leaders and peers have taken calculated risks and fallen short but not been demoted, fired, or otherwise penalized.

Human side of innovation: A daily practice

At KPMG, we've captured our commitment to these approaches in three of our core values:

Courage: We think and act boldly.

Together: We respect each other and draw strength from our differences.

For Better: We do what matters.

Generational stereotypes can be entertaining, but they aren't productive. Leaders should focus their time, energy, and attention on the hard work of encouraging people of any age to bring their best, bravest thinking.

This doesn't take shape through a formal initiative or executive proclamation. It happens through daily practice: how leaders show up and engage with their people and how the organization recognizes leaders for being empathetic and inclusive. Even when the stakes aren't as dire as they were for those 33 miners, breakthrough innovations can feel just as exhilarating.

Three key questions for every C-suite leader:

How are we balancing the need for control with opportunities to empower our people?

What practices have we implemented to help leaders at all levels to operate with empathy and inclusion?

How are we recognizing and rewarding people for nurturing an environment of psychological safety?

Tap into the power of human ingenuity

Humans are curious. We're creative. And when faced with even the most daunting challenges, we're willing to rise and meet the moment. Human ingenuity is what got us to the moon in the 1960s. It's what will help us realize the promise of quantum computing in the no-longer-distant future. And it's what can help your organization break new ground as you meet your mission, power growth, and make a bigger, better impact in business and society.

Start your journey. [Reach out today.](#)

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