

Overcoming Fear and Doubt -- Three important Lessons: The unique value of age and wisdom in the workforce

By Paul V. Butler

It was 8:15 a.m. when I parked next to the massive building of the Fortune 50 headquarters, where I was to present a two-day seminar. I followed the long walkway to the entrance, clipped on my security badge, and took a seat in the lobby to wait for Joe, who had hired me to work on a marketing strategy project. The lobby, abuzz with activity, reminded me of an airline terminal on a holiday weekend.

While waiting, I watched a large bus pull into the circular driveway in front of the building. As the people began to disembark, I was struck by their relative age. The majority seemed younger than my youngest daughter, mid-to-late twenties, I guessed. Joe's client was known for developing great marketing talent. Lately, I'd been struggling with the question if I had anything to offer this up-and-coming generation.

Joe arrived to take me to the seminar room. "I'm so excited you're here, Paul. This is going to be a great workshop with you leading it."

People began streaming in as I set up and I recognized several of the bus passengers. As Joe and I were covering last minute details, I said, "I can't believe how young these participants are." Many probably had MBAs from the best schools, were tech savvy, and were knowledgeable about the principles of business. I didn't hide my sarcasm when I added, lowering my voice, "I'll bet they're surprised to see someone my age leading this session. They're probably thinking, 'What can I learn from this old guy?'"

Joe smiled. "They will love you."

This did not comfort me. Familiar doubts about my relevance in today's business world crept into my mind, but I didn't have time to dwell on them. Joe introduced me, I took a deep breath and thought, *Here we go!*

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I am a baby boomer, generally defined as those born between 1946 and 1964. We represent 25% of workers, number about 41 million, and many of us are approaching retirement. Although busy as ever, I am continuously focusing on my ability to relate to the younger generation of workers. In the past, I wouldn't have given a second thought to the age of the people I do business with, but for the first time in my career I question how relevant I still am.

Despite my initial doubts, the workshop went extremely well. Participants were immediately engaged and embraced the information and activities I presented. I taught them a unique way to think strategically and solve problems. I led an exercise where they had to prioritize a long list of problems and watched them winnow down the list and identify three issues, two of which required urgent attention. Just as important, they improved their decision-making skills and enhanced their collaborative leadership capability.

At the end of the session, I asked them to describe their experience over the two-day seminar. The responses were overwhelming positive including words such as Invigorating, Energetic, Pioneering, Thought-provoking and engaging.

I breathed a sigh of relief. My experience, track record, and stories were valued.

As I was packing up, Joe approached me. "These young people are smart; they have great analytical minds – yet they needed your help."

"How were you so sure? I was definitely doubting myself" I admitted.

Joe laughed. "Are you kidding me? You bring wisdom, something this generation doesn't have. You've seen so much and help us to think and act differently. That's why we hired you. That's what we're investing in."

On the ride home, I realized the lesson Joe taught me that day: the value of wisdom in the corporate world. Wisdom comes with experience, and these young professionals, fresh out of

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school and finding their way, are only beginning their journey. Wisdom, from years spent solving problems—and making mistakes—is one of the unique values I bring into any organization.

My Three Take-aways:

Relevance

In order to **be** relevant, you must **stay** relevant. This means continuously learning and developing your craft. Doctors who practice medicine never stop learning about the advancement in new treatments, no matter how long they practice. If you were having major surgery, would you rather have a doctor with a little grey hair who has operated successfully on hundreds of patients or a young surgeon right out of medical school?

Call on your experience

Stories are the best way to communicate. After decades in the business world, I have stories to share, especially about the challenges I've helped leaders across the world address. Whether it is assisting a non-profit solve a financial crisis or a helping a young leader find the best way to motivate a team of more experienced colleagues, these stories land well for people of all ages.

Know your value

I asked a group of trusted clients why they brought me into their organizations. The response that made me feel most relevant was, “Your expertise and experience working with leaders is unique. You can see through the problems and issues quickly and bring along others to self-discover that, too. You are highly professional and teach them to fish for themselves.”

I'm not resting on my laurels, though. I work hard to stay relevant every day.

About Paul

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After a successful career in sales/marketing and HR with Pfizer and Procter & Gamble (Gillette) where he led large organizations, he founded GlobalEdg; a firm dedicated to providing value to organizations. He has helped thousands of employees in more than 50 different organizations since his firm was founded in 2006. There are over 3,000 alumni in his internationally known STAR (Strategic Thinking – Action – Results) program.

Paul is the co-author of Think to Win, Unleashing the Power of Strategic Thinking as well as many articles on strategic leadership. In addition to his blogs, he can also be heard interviewing some of the world's most successful leaders on the Association of Talent Development Leadership Diary Podcast series.