**C3Advantage Leader Insights by Cheryl Scanlan**

**Prove it to me!**

**There has always been generational turnover in the workforce and every generation brings different approaches with them. What is unique about the current environment is not the presence of change; it's the pace of it. In this world of to-the-minute updated information and rapidly transforming ways of doing business, keeping up with the times is hard enough. But adding to that tension is a workforce split between three generations, each with different world views, approaches, experience and opinions saying to the other - "Prove it to me."**

**Identifying sources of tension and discord can turn in to an exhausting rabbit chase. When you choose to step back, however, and look at the big picture, there are three macro influencers in the current workplace climate: politics, economics, and information.**

**1. Politics**

**We all know that the political climate at the moment is brutal at best. The media and the extremists who fuel it are feeding polarization that reaches beyond those with preferred political affiliations through social media. We are split down the middle on most, if not all, issues. We position ourselves in two camps, each standing their ground, saying "listen to me." Neither willing to put down their sword and walk toward the other in the name of understanding.**

**A recent experiment summarized in the Harvard Business Review explored this polarization:**

**"After the bruising and contentious 2016 U.S. presidential election, it's not surprising that Americans' evaluations of members of the opposite political party have reached an all-time low. According to data from the Pew Research Center, 45% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats think the other party is so dangerous that it is a threat to the health of the nation. This animus has spilled over into social networks: According to a HuffPost/YouGov poll, nearly half of Americans got into an argument with someone (a friend, family member, coworker, etc.) about the election last year."**

**-Christopher McConnell, Yotam Margalit, Neil Malhotra, and Matthew Levendusky,**

**Political Polarization is Changing How Americans Shop and Work**

**For "One nation under God," we certainly look like a nation divided. This culture of polarization has extended beyond the political stage, the media, and institutional systems, and has now infiltrated the workplace. Whether it is age or other demographic differences, we find ourselves with an "us versus them" perspective, shouting down the other side and not willing to humbly listen - let alone adapt. What used to be training ground for sensibility and kindness has turned into a rancor "prove it to me" defensive and defiant posture.**

**The only way to achieve change is through finding common ground. But common ground is more than just collaboration; it is commitment to unity. It's dying to myself and my agenda in action rather than just puffed up talk about ideals. It must be deliberate, it must be purposeful, and most of all, it must be selfless. The willingness to understand another's position first matters and perhaps we will find, we weren't in that far different camps after all.**

**2. Economics**

**The second macro influencer is economics. Think about the dramatic changes that have happened in the economy over the last few years, namely, the recession. The recession of 2007-2009 forever impacted the three generations that make up the current workforce: Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1984), and Millennials, or Generation Y (born 1985-early 2000's). While none of these generations were left unscathed, each were hit in unique ways which continues to influence their approach to work.**

**Boomers came out of the recession having lost extraordinary amounts of investments, paling their views of long-anticipated lush retirement and sentencing them to another decade in the rat race. A recent report by AARP on "**

**Boomers and the Recession: Struggling to Recover" reports:**

**"Although some may have sailed through those years relatively unscathed, the recession unsettled most boomers. A sizable percentage experienced some unemployment, often prolonged. In this study, 17 percent of the boomers (aged 50 to 64) were unemployed when first surveyed in 2010. Ten months later, 80 percent of the unemployed were still looking for work... [Now,] 6 in 10 boomers in the survey were either somewhat or very uncomfortable with their level of savings, and nearly half were either somewhat or very uncomfortable with their level of indebtedness."**

**Much to their frustration, boomers remaining in the workforce through the new millennium has forced them to re-learn new business practices and procedures more than any other generation. And because they are having to continue working longer than expected, they are often occupying top-level positions that up-and-coming middle-agers were hoping to have gained at this point.**

**Gen X**

**came out of the recession with a tremendous amount of debt, divorce, and disappointment. The years that should have been their career prime, crowned with promotions and raises, ended up being the years they took pay-cuts to work harder. And now they want a return on the sacrifice they made. They want appreciation for working in the trenches of the large corporations that graciously chose not to lay them off, if they were so lucky.**

**"'Generation X is clearly behind the eight ball,' says Catherine Collinson, president of the Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies. 'They need a vote of confidence. But they still have time to fix their problems.' Arguably, Gen X was feeling most beat up even before the recession. This group is in the toughest phase of life: kids at home, a mortgage, not yet in peak earning years..."**

**-Dan Kadlec, Time Money "Why Gen X Feels Lousiest about the Recession and Retirement"**

**Ask any working man or woman in their 40's-50's and they will lament the stress they feel from the brunt of the recession. Although economists and financial planners have optimistic expectations for the saving potential of this generation, the years of financial dooms day messages have certainly dimmed their energy in the work environment.**

**Millennials**

**saw their Gen X parents get laid off and left by the wayside by large corporations and consequently do not trust institutions. They believe government and large organizations do not have people's best interest in mind. Therefore, they believe that companies should be able to defend a strong case for why they should be chosen over others as a means for employment. If they're going to work for anyone other than a startup or themselves, they want to see proof that this relationship will work out for them:**

**"Young people today consider traditional 9 to 5 companies to be just as risky as start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures. Entrepreneurship is attractive because the desired rewards from work have changed for modern talent, from just collecting a paycheck to living life to the fullest. Because of technology, millennials have many more options outside of a traditional 9 to 5 to make a living. Millennials have more exposure to what it means to "be in charge" and be a part of a start-up atmosphere than previous generations, through experimenting with businesses at young ages. Having a job is not seen as having a privilege in itself; today it is often seen as a disadvantage. In fact, those that make a living outside of "the system" are the ones who are idolized and respected by other millennials."**

**-Crystal Katakia, TEDx Speaker and Author, "The Millennial Myth: Transforming Misunderstanding into Workplace Breakthroughs"**

**3. Information**

**In tandem with the millennial generation has been a flood of information. Instant mass communication, artificial intelligence, and robotics increasingly replacing human jobs are all overhauling traditional work experience. We have instant access to the latest data and research, as well as live news and video feeds of real-time events.**

**However, this information and knowledge does not guarantee success. Critical thinking, creativity and collaboration are three key elements to be successful in this brave new world. And yet, elder "prove it to me" attitudes block contributions that can come from millennial agility and passion from being unlocked fully and effectively. Imagine being a generation that is watching parents struggle, technology trump and information explode. The workforce currently in their 20's-30's has grown up in a culture where we are up to date to the minute on everything that matters (and doesn't matter), and that completely changes the game for every industry.**

**" 'Digital' is not something that is happening to organizations, it has and continues to be the means through which work is accomplished. Similar to the advance of standardized process in the early 20th century, digital is not just the new product to offer our customers (e.g., the one-click mobile purchasing app), it is the means through which we get work done (e.g., robotics for package loading on and off the truck, the disaggregation of an accounting job, the transition to free agents on a talent platform), the mechanism through which we engage with all our stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, free agents, communities we operate in) and so much more.**

**Mastering digital requires leaders to be agile amid disruption. To effectively lead, knowledge of technology certainly matters but there's much more to leaders mastering and optimizing digital for their organizations. Leaders must have the vision and forward-focus to anticipate how technology could disrupt the business model and the skill to mobilize the organization for change and drive a culture of collaboration."**

**-Ravin Jesuthasan and Marie S. Holmstrom, HBR As Work Changes, Leadership Development Has to Keep Up**

**There is good news and bad news about the catalytic effect of technology on business. The good news is that, if you learn how to manipulate and even influence information, it is easier than ever to work smarter, not harder. The bad news, for those who want to leapfrog over the technology age, is that it isn't going away any time soon. The more post-1985 people who enter the workforce, the more information and technology will prevail. Perhaps we would do well to re-frame our mindsets accordingly? It seems this is much less about generational preference and more about progress. Millennials are figuring out how to survive as we all are, but they are figuring it out with a smart phone in their hands as they have been since they were toddlers.**

**In some ways, technology has created an even stronger "throw away" mentality. While depression era survivors were all about saving and salvaging, this is the era of obsolesces and short shelf life. What does that do to a young person's psyche? Do we understand these implications? Are we sensitive to their heightened sense of struggle against becoming irrelevant themselves as they see everything around them becoming obsolete?   What defies time and space and human consumption demands?   If they are not careful, millennials could get caught in a vortex of meaninglessness. Business owners have a unique opportunity to breathe purpose and opportunity into this generation; to shift our focus from what they can prove to what we can provide. But not if we continue to position ourselves as "prove to me you're worth it" prior to actually investing in them.**

**What many executives are failing to realize is that the change in work-life balance and "extras" in compensation packages are not solely due to millennials demand. Again, this is less about a generation's preferences, and more about a researched and educated society that happens to be surfacing at the same time that millennials are taking over workforce. We have known for a long time that a walk around the block to clear your head makes you more productive and having child care onsite keeps you less distracted. It's just that now, there is more accountability around businesses adapting and being better, not just knowing better. The millennial workforce is rising to the surface saying "prove to me you're the leader you say you are. Prove to me that you're prepared to take what you say that you value and invest it in your employees before you expect those values to monetize in profits and loyalty. I believe you can lead, develop, and motivate me, but prove it."**

**So.... What's the Solution?**

**Consider for a moment - what culture do you have right now and how is that directing your company's future? Culture has to be intentional and has to be for future workforce. "Now" is already passing. You have to build for future.**

**You have the ones aging out, the ones hanging on, and the ones coming in. I have spoken with numerous organizations that are trying to navigate whether to flatten the organization or create depth. The tension is that millennials want independence and yet need guidance and hand holding. Boomers want to lead, but are often inept with current technology. How do you build structure that supports current teams and future leaders?**

**The answer, may I propose, does not actually lie within a structure. Career tracks can be made in flat organizations just as easily as deep ones; it's all in how you shape it. Growth doesn't necessarily mean a bigger title, which is important for both ends of the age margin to know. For boomers who have been in their positions for 30 years, in likely one discipline, they're probably as high as they can go organizationally. However, if they want to remain valuable to the organization, they need to grow complimentary skill sets. Likewise, for millennials, they may not get a new title, but they can be offered opportunities to become more valuable to the company. Leaders can help them identify growth paths where they learn to do more than one thing and then take all facets of their knowledge multiplied to contribute greater value.**

**Additionally, consider adapting how and what you measure. Look at specific departments and what their retention rates are, and then have a round table conversation about "what are we doing and what results are being returned?" Consider stakeholder engagement. Ask them, "who are you tasked with serving and how well are you doing that?" In a sense, take the "prove it to me" stance, and turn it in to a positive and productive prod for growth. Validation of impact with more than anecdotal evidence is quickly becoming crucial to an organization's success.**

**"Data was once critical to only a few back-office processes, such as payroll and accounting. Today it is central to any business, and the importance of managing it strategically is only growing. In September 2016, according to the technology conglomerate Cisco, global annual internet traffic surpassed one zettabyte (1021 bytes)-the equivalent, by one calculation, of 150 million years of high-definition video. It took 40 years to get to this point, but in the next four, data traffic will double. There is no avoiding the implications. Companies that have not yet built a data strategy and a strong data-management function need to catch up very fast or start planning for their exit."**

**-Leandro DalleMule and Thomas H. Davenport, HBR What's Your Data Strategy**

**A third non-structural adaption that can be made is appointing deliberate councils. Consider a council that has both external voices (your suppliers and your customers) to feedback about what within your culture makes it good or bad to do business with you. And then bring insight into a conversation with key stakeholders about "do we live out our values in the way we practice business?" HR used to be solely responsible for culture, but now higher functioning corporations are realizing that culture is everyone's responsibility. Create environments where no one is afraid to talk; where there is acceptance of view-points and desire to understand perspective. Train your teams to shift from a demeaning and disruptive "prove it to me" mindset to "what are you thinking and seeing?" You're not saying you agree nor that you will move forward with recommendations. You are however, communicating value, purpose, contribution.**

**In Conclusion:**

**For the millennials, recognize that you are the bridge. You understand technology, but are close enough to your Gen X leaders to have empathy for the challenge set before them. Yes, growth and progress must happen, but the best kind of progress is the kind that brings as many people along as possible. See yourself as a leader regardless of your title. Be big enough to realize that growth paths are good, but don't always change business cards.**

**If you're the Gen X crowd in this conversation, have the foresight to realize that perhaps you are in your current position for such a time as this. You are in a unique position to be an intermediary and a catalyst for equipping the next generation. Yes, you lost financial security. Yes, you lost opportunity. Yes, that is entirely unfair. But do not let your disappointment overthrow your appointment. A prime opportunity for still getting return on your investment is viewing your leadership pipeline as a source for that return. Whether that pipeline is one person or a whole team, in a work environment or mentoring the whole person, you have a goldmine at your fingertips if you're willing to dig for it. You aren't the leader yet, but you also aren't the rookie anymore. So, lead from the middle or let go of your right to have a seat at the table.**

**And for the boomers out there, it's time to consider, what is your legacy? Who are you developing, and are you creating space for them to grow, even if that means getting out of the way? The experience you have to add is invaluable, but so is your opportunity to empower and release future leaders. Maybe it isn't your time to step away, but it's always your time to feed growth. Millennials are hungry for your input and feedback. What could happen if you teach them by example how to take the first step toward unity? That step could be as simple as asking an associate-level team member to go to an event or meeting with you, and then having an intentional coaching-like conversation afterward such as "Here's what I see you doing well. Here's where I believe your potential is not yet being reached and practical ways you could get there, because there is value you can add to this organization by growing forward." Those of us who were a diamond in the rough once upon a time were glad someone chose to polish and refine what was underneath. And those of us who didn't have someone take the time to invest in us, likely wish we had. Today is a better day than ever to find that person to polish.**

**Let's all commit to shift our focus from what "they" have to prove to what we have the opportunity to provide. We just might find some common ground, and through that achieve progress - as one.**

**About Cheryl Scanlan**

***Cheryl Scanlan, MCC, CMCC, BCC is president of C3Advantage. She has worked with CEOs that are in Fortune 100 through next generation small business owners. Having also run a multi-million dollar firm in New York, Cheryl knows the importance of business goals and the impact of teams. Cheryl's thought partnering method helps leaders see clearly what is fuzzy, articulate what is currently unintelligible, and generate coherent and executable strategy.***