The study of generational leadership differences has now broadened and intensified to an impressive body of literature and discussion. The problem is that the conversation continues to be framed as a demographic challenge of difference, which only furthers the division, rather than a relationship challenge that calls for new ways to connect the generations. This article discusses the nature of the relationships needed to ensure vital connections between generations of leaders. It uses the authors’ own cross-generational leadership relationship as a case study in what we believe exemplifies the kind of relationship our research suggests is both needed, and desired, by leaders in both incumbent and emerging leadership generations.

Since our research on generational leadership which helped us develop Leadership Divided (Carucci, 2006) and the sequel field guide, Bridging the Leadership Divide (Carucci, Epperson, & Tepavac, 2010), we’ve learned much more about what the conversation and relationship between different generations of leaders can look like. Indeed, we’ve found much to reinforce our convictions of what the relationship between incumbent and emerging leaders can look like.

We’re more convinced than ever that we continue to do a great disservice to our workplaces and our generations by perpetuating the issue of a demographic difference—the proverbial labels of Millennials, Boomers, Xers, and so on. The divide among them is great enough without further adding “market segmentation” on top of that. The conversation between different generations has never been more polarized, yet the demands of today’s organizations require leaders from these generations to be closer and more connected than ever. All the demographic language has done is provide a more descriptive vocabulary to explain why we find the behavior of leaders of different generations irritating. It has done little to reconnect those of different generations into the kinds of relationships that truly transform and distinguish lasting leadership. If we are to succeed at preparing the next generation of leaders to take their rightful places as tomorrow’s executives, we must come to terms with the fact that it will take far more than an
academic explanation of the differences. We must stop using birth years as a way to explain emerging leaders’ excessive confidence, apparent sense of entitlement, unrealistic expectations of advancement, impatience, and brash intelligence. Conversely, the same “birth year” explanation for why incumbent leaders appear greedy, workaholic, obsessed with results, and overly controlling is equally unproductive and inaccurate. Focusing primarily on the differences between leaders only further an “us–them” division and justifies leaders’ beliefs and practices toward the “other” demographic. As long as “they” are the leaders who need to change, a counterproductive divide between leaders will prevail for generations to come. Emerging leaders will continue to push incumbents to overlook them, and not take them seriously, further perpetuating their sense of marginalization. Moreover, incumbent leaders will continue to alienate emerging leaders from ever wanting to lead, and ensure that the mythical shortfall of future leaders that retirement statisticians continue to trumpet actually comes true. The truth is there are plenty of leaders out there on the emerging landscape with tremendous passion, gifts, imagination, and profound talent waiting to be raised up and prepared to lead. Indeed, they are dying to lead.

But they have no desire to lead as they have been led. This is very different from not wanting to be led. Leading and being led ought to be something both emerging and incumbent leaders are very much involved in. Expecting emerging leaders to only assume the role of trainee and incumbent leaders to assume the role of trainer sells everyone short—leadership is something we must do together.

Cultivating the potential of emerging leaders through meaningful relationships with seasoned leaders will require change from both generations. The views of one another have become stereotypically clichéd and consequently irrelevant. Broad generalizations from both incumbent and emerging leaders about one another have hampered an openness, curiosity, willingness to be influenced, desire to have minds changed, and ability to be vulnerable with one another. We can’t get across this relational chasm by getting more information about who they are or “what makes them tick.” Bridging the leadership divide will take the kinds of relationships that, ironically, we have discovered both generations long for, yet have little understanding how to create. Consider the research conducted for the International Mentoring Network Organization by Rebecca Ryan of Next Generation Consulting, a specialty consultancy focused on market research for the emerging leader population. In a study of nearly 1,400 emerging leader professionals (Ryan, 2010), 45% said they were currently not in any kind of mentoring experience, and of those, more than 65% said they did not know where to find mentors who would participate in a relationship with them. When asked what kind of mentoring experience they wanted from among several options, 74% said what they most wanted was an ongoing relationship with someone of greater experience. What are the implications if we extend these statistics broadly? It means that a growing number of tomorrow’s leaders—on whom we are all betting our futures—are not getting sufficient investment or preparation in their development despite their strong hunger for it, and are not even looking for reasonable alternatives, nor do they know where to find them. That means more and more leaders will be arriving into positions of greater responsibility earlier in their careers less and less prepared to succeed in those positions. The ramifications are hardly trivial.

Our hope in this article is to give you an intimate, front-row seat to a relationship between two leaders of different generations—a mutually transformative, deeply respectful and honoring, caring, challenging, sacrificial, fun, collegial, developmental, loving, messy relationship. In our forthcoming book, Waiting in the Wings: Finding Your Voice, Learning Your Cues, Making Your Entrance, Playing Your Part as a Leader of Tomorrow, we explore the kind of generational intimacy between leaders of different generations that both incumbent and emerging leaders are actually hungry for, but know little of how to achieve. And for good reason. It’s actually very hard. The counterfeits of “mentoring” (which has sadly come to mean “cloning”) and “coaching” (which all too often has come to mean “fixing you”) have not realized the depth of relationships truly needed, and desired, to prepare tomorrow’s leaders for success. As such, comprehensive and programmatic efforts at both, including the rise of a cottage industry of “leadership coaches,” have failed to yield results commensurate with efforts and dollars spent. U.S. annual
corporate expenditure on executive coaching topped the billion-dollar mark in 2004, and coaching as an industry was growing at the rate of 18% for much of the past decade (Sherman & Freas, 2004). But just about every article on executive coaching cautions that it is difficult to judge at the outset if a particular coach will be effective with a particular executive. And, as Daniel Elash (n.d.) says, coaching “is a process that is relatively easy to do badly.” It is, sadly, too common that we begin our engagements with executives who tell us things like, “You’re now the third person who’s tried to coach me.” The wake of damage, and wasted resources, behind ineffective leadership consultations is staggering.

So, after writing about incumbent and emerging leaders in two different books, and writing a book presenting the voices of emerging leaders by emerging leaders (Carucci & Ryan, 2009), we felt that we needed to write something expressly for emerging leaders that provided them both hope, and a deep look into the kinds of relationships they long for, but have lost faith in the possibility of having.

Over the past 7 years that we have been studying, writing about, teaching, and talking with emerging leaders, we have recognized some clear patterns regarding the anxieties, concerns, and questions that continue to stress emerging leaders. They are sincere in their exploration of these questions and concerns, but have little opportunity to explore them in a safe relationship with someone of wiser years and desire to genuinely help. We chose 20 of the more common questions and concerns around which to shape Waiting in the Wings because we felt we heard the most “pain” and possibility to bridge the gap in them. Our hope was to provide perspective (not necessarily answers), safety (not necessarily resolution), and hope (not necessarily certainty) by providing a look at a relationship in which all of these questions and concerns have been mutually explored.

The 20 questions and concerns we explore are:

1. When will it be my turn?
2. I know what I want to say, I just don’t know how to say it.
3. When I do say it, will anyone want to hear it?
4. What if I miss my cue?
5. Oh, these dreams in my head . . .
6. When they told me I could do anything, should I have believed them?
7. Why does my confidence get labeled “cocky”?
8. Why do my desires get misunderstood as entitlement?
9. But I like to go off script . . .
10. Playing “hard to get” when given a shot . . .
11. . . . but it’s not the shot I wanted!
12. Why do I have to “do windows” when I have a college education?
13. Does responsibility always suck?
14. Who can I trust with my future?
15. What if I fail?
16. What if I succeed?
17. I’m afraid.
19. Taking a graceful bow.
20. Now it’s my turn . . . what do I do with it?

Emerging leaders experience the judgments and advice of well-meaning incumbent leaders who believe that “what I would do if I were you” and “when I was your age, I had to . . .” are helpful sources of wisdom. What emerging leaders actually want are mutually transformative relationships where they can participate and contribute as much as receive and be developed. They don’t want “answers;” they want perspectives and a safe place to ask their questions and work out what perplexes them. Incumbent leaders, however, have been conditioned to “solve problems,” so when someone comes to them with one, they are naturally inclined to offer a “solution.” Emerging leaders are eager to learn as much from failures as successes. Incumbent leaders are more inclined to talk only of what they have achieved, having been conditioned to learn privately from failure, while never talking publicly about it. Emerging leaders are used to the immediate accessibility of information so they have been conditioned to want change to happen quickly, regardless of what the change is. They have learned to process and synthesize information much more quickly than their incumbent predecessors, while incumbent leaders have gained the wisdom of experience to know that most change happens slowly, and
that not all answers can, or should, appear quickly. Most significantly, emerging leaders have a paradoxical deep-seated insecurity and fear of failure while at the same time projecting profound self-confidence. Emerging leaders don’t fear failing others, they fear failing their own expectations. They were indeed the generation that was told they could do anything—could change the world—and they believed it. Now they fear falling short of what they so much want to do. Incumbent leaders, again with a genuine desire to “help,” oversimplistically believe that fear just needs to be met with a “stiff upper lip” and overconfidence just needs to be “tamed.” Those, of course, are tragic responses. The inherent tensions in an emerging leader’s fear and confidence are necessary tensions that help propel them forward. They may never be resolved. And that is okay. What incumbents have to help them do is learn to live in the natural tensions of fear and confidence they grew up with, and help them learn to balance them meaningfully and productively—again, not something incumbent leaders have been conditioned to do.

These inherent “contradictions of conditioning” (and, of course, there are more) are actually easier to overcome in the context of meaningful relationships than might appear. Through the course of our relationship as colleagues, friends, boss–direct report, teacher–student, coauthors, and colearners, we have discovered (and continue to discover) our way through, and our lives have been changed greatly for the better.

So we will each provide you with “our take” on this relationship so you can have an up-close look at what it can mean to participate in the kind of multigenerational leadership relationship that both generations of leaders are yearning to enjoy.

**Josh’s Story**

I first met Ron as a student in his graduate leadership course. It was my second year of graduate school, and I was full of grandiose dreams to change the world, all the while believing that I already possessed much of what I needed to make it happen—that is, other than a degree with my name on it.

Ron was brilliantly captivating as an instructor during our course, and I couldn’t help but gravitate toward his leadership. He piqued my curiosity and fueled my desire to learn; he possessed a lot of information, yet was open to and challenged by the brilliance of his students. He captivated my mind and pushed the limits of my thought. He didn’t let my immaturity trigger him or shut me out when my flippant arrogance reared its ugly head. The reality is that I was afraid; I had found a leader I was drawn to, yet I was not sure how to adequately engage. He could have very easily publicly ridiculed or personally leveraged that fear inside me, but he did neither. I saw characteristics, presence, and brilliance in him that I wanted to emulate but feared I would never match up. I was ambivalent; I wanted and knew that I needed to become more if I were going to fulfill the future dreams I imagined, yet worried if I showed that side of me to him, I might forfeit the opportunity I hoped for in a relationship with Ron.

My early interactions with Ron said anything but, “Hey I am really inspired by you, want to learn from you, could really use your help and have a lot to gain from your experience. Would you consider being my mentor?” Yes, I did indeed finally muster the courage to ask him, and risked trusting that I could speak those words to him. But early on, sitting in his class, my move toward him showed up in much less mature forms. I questioned everything he said, sometimes directly, other times through my side conversations with other students, and still other times with my silence or lack of participation. My questions were less about disagreeing with him and more about testing to see if he was going to stay engaged. It is only in hindsight that I have come to understand my earliest interactions with Ron. I worked really hard to prove myself, both to him and to myself. What did I have to prove? That I was smart enough and had something to offer. That I was capable and ready to create value in a world that I had only just begun to understand. That I was responsible and experienced enough to handle life’s biggest challenges. That I could get things done. Unfortunately, I mistakenly understood being enough as the prerequisite for entrance into his world. It’s ironic, really; I was looking to be developed and led by trying to convince both of us that I needed neither.

I wish I could say that my ability to ask for Ron’s help, willingness to receive direction from him, and submission to his leadership happened overnight; it did not. That level of trust has taken many years to develop
between us, and, frankly, it is something we regularly work at. The criteria and exchanging of trust between two leaders is as unique as the leaders involved. In my relationship with Ron, trust was built on the reliability of my experiences of him over time. I had been burned before by leaders disguising themselves as mentors, who really only wanted a utilitarian relationship with me—to get something from me. It was going to take a lot to disconfirm those past stories in my head. My confidence and trust in our relationship was built by the accumulation of experiencing Ron as having my best interest in mind regarding decisions that impacted my life and career, pushing me in a specific direction that I could only recognize as “good” in hindsight and being acknowledged for impacting and contributing not only to our work but to his life. Two things continue to be true between Ron and me. First, we work hard to know each other, and second, our actions toward each other indicate that we matter to each other.

I grew up in an era of “mentorship,” having heard countless times in undergraduate and graduate courses of the need to surround myself with other leaders who could help my desired future come to pass—or, better yet, who could help me find my future, whom I could learn from and emulate. I had experienced a handful of mentor-type relationships prior to meeting Ron, but most were so focused on helping me become like them that there wasn’t much time for me to become more of me, or for us to create something together. I became most disillusioned by the concept when a dear mentor and friend made it abundantly clear through his leadership that he was more interested in mentoring me as a way to fulfill his plans than to help me find my own. To say that realization was a devastating blow to my understanding of leadership and, frankly, what it means to lead others is an understatement. I needed a drastically different experience. If I was going to surrender to an incumbent’s leadership again, it was going to happen not at the expense of my own leadership, but in a way that cultivated my leadership. Over time, Ron and I have created that type of leadership together.

**Ron’s Story**

I first met Josh when I was professor of leadership at a graduate school Josh was attending. Several months after our class, he pursued me to be his mentor and I was completely taken off guard. No one had ever “asked me” to do that before. And I wasn’t sure I knew how. But I said yes, and quickly found myself slipping into the “keep up the good front” mode to “develop” him but also to impress him. I wanted him to be glad he asked and feel value in the mentoring experience he’d pursued. I quickly realized this wasn’t going to work, and that sooner or later he was going to see that I was indeed human. My family and I had recently relocated across the country and were still traumatized by the loss of all we knew from our previous home, trying to settle in and adjust to an entirely new way of life, and settle into new jobs and schools. I went to Josh early in our relationship and said through tears, “I can’t do this. I can’t be the kind of mentor you want me to be. This is just too difficult a time for me right now.” His response changed my views of leadership forever. He said, “I don’t want a mentor who feels they have to be perfect. I’ve had that before and got hurt by it. I want to learn from someone who isn’t afraid to be human. Who is willing to show me not just their accomplishment, but their failure. Their brokenness. That’s what I’ve longed to see in leadership and in my heart believe is what leadership really is. I’ve just never seen it. So I don’t know what you think I want in a mentor, but I don’t want just the parts of you that you want to show me. If you are hiding parts of yourself, it will be hard for me to trust you. The less you hide, the more I will be able to trust you, and the more I will be able to learn from you.” Of course, I knew that authenticity and vulnerability were important aspects of leadership. I’d taught that for many years to students and clients. But now I was living it in a brand new way.

Josh and I have enjoyed many sacred moments of vulnerability since then. We have joined one another in the highest moments of celebration and the lowest moments of despair. What I have learned from Josh is that, to him, his fingerprints on my life are as important to him, and to his development, as mine are on his life. Allowing him to speak into my future, help me stretch and grow as a leader in ways I want to, challenging me and calling out my failures, and applauding my successes has been every bit as transformative for me as having to stay in tuned with his life, and push and challenge him to stretch and grow into his “next.”
There are hundreds of examples of this in our relationship. But the one I will tell is of a Christmas present Josh gave me one year that, at the time, I could have never imagined would have changed my life as profoundly as it did. He presented me with a small set of empty notebooks that he called “12 months of white paper.” They were a set of journals for each month of the year. He had bought himself a set as well. At the time, we had begun writing a book together entitled *Future In-Formation: Choosing a Generative Organizational Life* (Carucci & Epperson, 2008), and his intention was that if we were going to help others with their own formation, we had to “go first” and submit to our own. Each month, we journaled on our own formation, insights we were gaining, and areas in which we were struggling and achieving, and at the end of each month we went to an online journal, where each of us would record the month’s learning about ourselves and each other. At the end of each month, we had a special dinner to talk about what we had learned that month, where we had fallen short, and what we saw in one another and in our relationship. At the end of the 12 months, Josh assembled the 12 months of the online journal into a beautiful (300-page!) bound book, and we went off for several days of skiing and reflection to synthesize all we had gained during the year. I have never been so intentional about my own—much less anyone else’s—formation before, but that year brought me depths of wisdom, restoration, joy, and profound shaping of my character that I would have never discovered had it not been for that year of work.

I also learned more about Josh than I ever could have otherwise. I have had the extraordinary privilege of journeying with him through different seasons of his maturation and formation. I have enjoyed a front-row seat to one of the greatest stories of transformation I have ever witnessed and participated in. And I have taken what I have learned in my relationship with Josh into many of my relationships with emerging leaders, and have continued to be both honored by what it means to help shape the future of very gifted leaders, and to have them return the gift in my formation. Ultimately, what I have come to learn is that multigenerational relationships are never so simple and one-way as I once thought. Some days I am the emerging leader and Josh is the incumbent leader. Other days, I am the incumbent leader and he is the emerging leader. Some days, we have no idea who is who. And in all of it, we know that we will be the better for having lived it together.

**The Heart of the Issue: The War Between Legacy and Potential**

So, if we were to generalize what we believe prevents cross-generational relationships from realizing their full transformative potential, we would say at the heart of the matter is the elusive contest between the legacy of incumbent leaders and the potential of emerging leaders. For many seasoned leaders, facing the terror of obsolescence is a private torment that manifests itself in painful and often predictable ways. Leaders who have enjoyed relatively successful track records in their careers, and are not particularly interested in retirement, can struggle to feel relevant and significant in the face of more nimble, technologically savvy, quicker, and sometimes just smarter, younger bosses. At the heart of the struggle is a sense that their contributions may be for naught—forgotten in the rise of “new and improved,” more hip leaders. Older leaders, often subconsciously, feel threatened by the ambitions and potential of younger leaders. Consequently, they are prone to guard themselves, along with company information, withholding important wisdom that ought to be passed along to emerging leaders, and ultimately compromising their responsibility to help develop leaders behind them. Guarding such assets protects their sense of longevity and indispensability, yet hinders their ability to transfer the necessary knowledge such tenure affords and a sustainable future requires. Without that transfer of knowledge, information, and practical experience, it becomes virtually impossible for such incumbent leaders to thoughtfully and intentionally plan to be succeeded by their emergent counterparts. Thus, the guarding and protecting of such an asset inadvertently turns it into a liability. To further the conflict, younger leaders often interpret and feel threatened by older leaders’ needs to control the pace at which they gain influence as muting their influence and hindering them from realizing their full potential. Feeling marginalized and constrained, they often defect to other organizations where they hope such constraints will not exist, thereby further stripping the organization of the leadership capacity on which its future success depends.
Table 1 identifies some of what incumbent and emerging leaders experience when caught in the throes of the war between legacy and potential.

The irony is that lacking incumbent leaders’ legacy, emerging leaders’ potential is muted. And lacking the potential of emerging leaders, the legacy of incumbent leaders is obsolete. What is missing is the necessary relationship between the generations. The relationship must be strong enough to trust that legacy without potential, and vice versa, is a forfeiture of the future.

**A New Way Forward: Mutual Vulnerability as Common Ground**

The common ground in each of our stories is one of mutual vulnerability—a willingness to subject ourselves to one another’s influence, scrutiny, reproach, encouragement, and advocacy. Similarly, at the heart of the legacy/potential war is also the opportunity for mutual vulnerability. An incumbent leader’s legacy and an emerging leader’s potential find themselves at odds when one fights to preserve itself at the expense of the other. An incumbent leader’s effort to protect her legacy and quell her fear of obsolescence at the expense of an emerging leader’s potential is an effort to separate herself from the emerging leader. Similarly, an emerging leader’s insistence on the supremacy of his own voice at the expense of an incumbent leader’s legacy is an effort to secede from that incumbent leader, to ensure that differentiation from them is absolute. This effort to regard difference, to value separation over commonality, is what keeps cross-generational leaders from entering the most meaningful and effective relationships possible and perpetuates the win–lose contest between legacy and potential. Ironically, the most sustainable leadership between generations embraces the truth that potential is predicated on legacy, and legacy rests on the shoulders of potential. Sadly, most leaders fail to make it far enough into a relationship to make that discovery and end the conversation by directing their energy at ensuring that their uniqueness distinguishes them from the other. It requires no vulnerability whatsoever to accomplish this. It just requires a stubborn exertion of will and the determination to prevail. To create vulnerable common ground, however, leaders must surrender their impulse to be separate. Henri Nouwen puts it this way:

> When we give up our desires to be outstanding or different, when we let go of our needs to have our own special niches in life, when our main concern is to be the same, and to live out this sameness in solidarity, we are then able to see each other’s unique gifts. Gathered together in common vulnerability, we discover how much we have to give each other. . . . It belongs to the essence of this new togetherness that our unique talents are no longer objects of competition but elements of community, no longer qualities that divide but gifts that unite. (Nouwen, Mcneill, & Morrison, 2005)

Sameness, solidarity, and togetherness do not mean homogeneity. Nouwen is not advocating a forfeiture of one’s individuality, but rather suggesting the most likely way of preserving our individuality—by surrendering it to the care and trust of others. Instead of one leader posturing, “You need to look like me and do what I do,” the relationship starts from the premise of “I have a lot to learn from, and about you.” And we have seen leaders in organizations tackle this difficult divide by doing just that. A large, multinational greeting card company was struggling to reach younger, emerging consumers in the marketplace in large measure because many of the leaders inside the organization didn’t mirror that population. And those that did had too little organizational influence to make a difference. In an effort to bridge this divide, they decided to learn how to reach across the generations within their organization before attempting to reach that new consumer segment outside. They intentionally paired leaders from differing
generations to learn about each other and begin to envision what they could do together instead of continuing the divide through further differentiation. To a pair, what each newly formed relationship concluded after the initiative completed was, “We clearly have a lot more in common than not and would have never discovered that had we not worked at it.” Further, the ability of those leaders to join forces to determine the ideal strategy to reach the unmet needs of emerging consumers was that much greater as a result.

**Relationships Worth the Risk**

To be sure, the kinds of relationships we are describing hold great risk. We have deemed our relationship worth that risk. We have made a commitment to each other that our relationship is *worth the work required to make it work*. We have committed to return to each other when everything is pulling us apart. And we practice that. Regularly. Understandably, you may feel great trepidation, even deep skepticism, as you ponder the notion of forming and participating in such a relationship. We can tell you from both personal experience and consistent observation of cross-generational relationships that it’s the only way to bridge the divide. We maintain a deep-seated belief that as long as we return to each other, we can figure out whatever obstacles we have to contend with. We believe we will do this better together than apart.

So if you accept our premise that the path to successfully preparing tomorrow’s leaders is indeed through the heart—both the hearts of incumbent and emerging leaders—and are willing to pursue the effort to make relationship work, then you must confront the important question of “What will make that hard work worth it?” We would be the first to admit that a relationship such as ours is certainly not for everyone. If you don’t have the fortitude to stick it through, white-knuckle the chair when you must, stand your ground when you must, sacrifice your “need to be right” or your “need to be different” for the sake of the other when you must, make horrible mistakes in front of the other, or withstand emotional distress because of the other or despite the other’s willingness to help, then you won’t fare well.

But if those are the only criteria you use to determine the degree and depth to which you will risk participating in a cross-generational relationship, regardless of what such a relationship demands of you, then you’ve missed the point.

It’s not about you.

You must come to the conversation with a much greater understanding of what is at risk beyond your own sense of an intact image and emotional safety. You must come to the conversation with an urgent understanding of what the world will look like in the next 20 years if today’s emerging leaders fail to rise to their potential, not the potential we define for them. This is not the time to count the cost for ourselves of such relationships, albeit difficult, but transformative and needed nonetheless. We must abandon our burlesqued images of one another, surrender our arrogant, often pretentious ideals of “our way”—whichever generation we hail from. We must relook across the table at one another with fresh eyes and realize that without one another, our respective generations risk irrelevance and meaninglessness.

That is what is at risk. And it ought to be too high a price for anyone of us to pay.

And if you feel that’s too extreme, potentially hyperbolic of a diagnosis, you need only to listen to how tomorrow’s leaders talk about their future, and of their leaders, to know of its truth. Tomorrow’s leaders will not develop as today’s did. Accept it and move on. They will, however, develop in the context of relationships neither generation is easily adept at forming and participating in. Accept it and let’s get to work.

What is the future of a generation worth to you?

**References**


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