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Why We Stereotype

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The first study of generational issues was published in 1953, before any generational labels had been coined. Baby boomers were not even baby boomers at that time. The term *baby boom* existed to signify instances of peak birth rates, but it did not refer to a generation or group of people. *The Coshocton Tribune* wrote about a baby boom in post-World War I England in 1920, for example. In December 1941, *The Galveston Daily News* reported that a baby boom had increased the population of the United States. The term *baby boomer* referring to those born after World War II in America was first used by Landon Jones in his 1980 book titled *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*.

Therefore, in 1953, when Roger Angell published in *Holiday* magazine the first study of a generation, titled *Youth and the World: USA*, still no label had been applied for the young adults they studied: individuals turning 21 in 1953. We now call them the silent generation. The author studied 23 young people from around the world and found that they had very few commonalities. They found no clear pattern or single voice that represented this group. Lacking any clear conclusion or definition, one of the photographers on the story, Robert Capa, called them “The generation X.” (Ulrich & Harris, 2003) And so the first label was born—a label that indicated that no label was justified.

The term was then commandeered by Charles Hamblett and Jane Deverson (1964) to describe a completely different group. Their book, titled *Generation X*, described 1965-era teenagers, who are today’s baby boomers. In the mid-1970s rock star Billy Idol popularized generation X by using the name for his band. Finally in 1991, Douglas Coupland wrote *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, referring to those reaching adulthood in the late-1980s, now still called generation X. For those keeping track at home, the label generation X has been used throughout the twentieth century to label three

different generations and a rock band, despite the fact that it was originally coined to honor the diversity found in one generation.

Millennials (also known as generation Y) was the name coined in 1991 by Neil Howe and William Strauss in their book *Generations*. Then, the name-coining and generation-stereotyping began in earnest. As generational studies became popular in the media and as consultants saw opportunity knocking, further studies were commissioned and reported. Business leaders and human-resource managers saw this practice as a convenient shortcut on the road to understanding, motivating, and retaining their employees.

Despite the popularity of generational labeling, most people with whom I speak tend to agree when I suggest that generational definitions are overly simplistic stereotypes; yet our culture continues to use these reductive labels. If the perfectly normal human tendency to categorize and label were under our conscious control, the problem of stereotyping would be a smaller one. But it is not. Let's briefly examine our brain's role in our proclivity to rely on categories—even false and damaging ones that we consciously admit are unfair.

The Brain Makes Categories

Dr. David Rock (2009), the director of the Neuroleadership Institute and co-editor of the *Neuroleadership Journal*, coined the term *neuroleadership* to explain how the largely unconscious part of our brain handles change, as well as team collaboration and leadership style. One aspect of Rock's research explains how the brain craves certainty and avoids uncertainty when at all possible. Data gathered through measures of brain activity and hormonal secretions suggest that the brain sees uncertainty as a threat. The threat triggers an alert response in the limbic system.

The more ambiguity in any decision-making process, the greater the threat response in the brain. On the other hand, the lower the ambiguity level, the greater the sensation of reward.

As a result, we are constantly on the lookout, consciously and unconsciously, for ways to create certainty in an uncertain world; and in today's rapidly changing society, we look for all the comfortable predictability we can find.

One way to do this is to categorize and label things around us. The labels we assign to each generation help alleviate this sense of unpredictability. They allow us to believe that we know the people in that generation at least well enough to understand and possibly predict their behavior. If managers with new millennial employees can find an article that suggests millennials have entitlement issues but still need a lot of feedback, they can feel more confident in their roles as managers. They feel, at least, that they know what to expect and that they may be, even if just a little, ahead of the game. The truth, however, is much more individual, complex, and rife with possibilities. Millennial behavior cannot be predicted, but the brain does not like that.

Predictions into Convictions

Some may argue that they, themselves, have seen differences in generations. Their personal experience is enough to confirm the traits we associate with each generation. Rock's neuroleadership theory also demonstrates how the brain converts predictions into convictions.

The brain gathers information, converts the information into patterns, and stores the patterns as memories. These memories then become the foundation of beliefs that guide predictions for the future. Predicting patterns is a pleasure trigger that leads us to search for more patterns and predictability. And this leads

inevitably to a condition rampant in all cultures: MSU (Making Stuff Up). Here's how it works:

When a stranger walks into the room, we instantly form a judgment about him or her based on appearances. We look at the clothes he or she is wearing; the way he or she stands; his or her hair, gender, skin color; and, yes, even his or her age group. Based on the information we've gathered in the past through our education, upbringing, and experiences, we have found patterns that we converted into memories. Based on those memories, our brain goes into prediction mode. We make stuff up (MSU) about intelligence, integrity, kindness, and personality. Unfortunately, we often act on these predictions and do not take the time to get to know the person in front of us. Our pleasure center was triggered based on our prediction; therefore, we do not always question our assumptions, revise our first impressions, or remain open to the reality that actually exists before us. Who has not been the victim of false first impressions? Who has not been treated unfairly by a manager who simply was not aware of his brain's tendency to Make Stuff Up?

MSU also affects how we interact with colleagues. Here is an example:

Jon is the chief marketing officer of a small start-up firm. He has been working on the new marketing strategy for months and is finally presenting his work to the chief executive officer (CEO) and his leadership team. Mia, the chief operating officer (COO), is in the room, but she is not focused. In fact, she spends most of her time looking at her phone. Mia, however, is a trusted adviser to the CEO, and Jon assumes because of her lack of attention, that she does not like his presentation. He begins building a prediction. He wonders if she has a problem with him personally and if that is clouding her judgment about his marketing plan. Midpresentation, he begins to plot a way to undermine her opinions and/or prevent her from speaking to the CEO about her reservations. He has unconsciously switched his focus from presenting a good plan to defending himself

from the COO's possible future attack. But this is all MSU! In reality, Mia's son was called into the principal's office, and she has been getting text updates from her husband. Had she been paying attention, she would have been positive about Jon's presentation.

MSU is also how generational labels are formed, solidified, and acted upon. In the quest to reduce uncertainty, we have created an entire culture around generations, a culture that promises to alleviate anxiety and offers a plan for action, but is wholly inaccurate.

The Ladder of Inference

The example of Jon and Mia demonstrates how people can be, and often are, misunderstood. But how does this explain the entire industry of intelligent, educated gen-experts who misunderstand and mislabel whole sections of our society, labels seemingly unquestioned by professional human resources specialists? In order to understand how our brain's innocent misunderstanding can grow into widespread discrimination based on erroneous labels, we turn now to the Ladder of Inference model. Described in Peter Senge's (2006) popular book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, the Ladder of Inference model demonstrates the thinking process as humans move from a simple, observable piece of data to a belief or conclusion, and, ultimately, to action.

To illustrate the model, meet Melvin, a baby boomer, human-resources professional who is convinced that millennials do not behave appropriately in the workplace. His company has hired 200 college graduates in the past few years. As he sees more and more millennials at the office, his experience reinforces his belief. Melvin begins at the bottom of the ladder in the world of fact and observable data and moves up each step of the ladder, until he reaches MSU.

He Observes Objectively

Melvin is aware of his surroundings. He sees and hears things as a video camera might. What he records is that there are more millennials in his workplace than there used to be.

He Selects Data

Melvin sees hundreds of millennials every day. One day he enters the elevator and notices a woman in her 20s wearing a very short skirt and leopard-print high heels. This is the piece of data on which he begins to build his story.

He Adds Meaning

Melvin now applies his own values, culture, or experiences to the selected data. He believes that short skirts paired with leopard print high heels are inappropriate workplace attire.

He Makes an Assumption

Since Melvin believes the woman is wearing inappropriate workplace attire, he assumes that this woman shows poor judgment. He has also seen a male millennial wear sweatpants in the office and begins to recognize a theme around millennials and inappropriate clothing. This theme becomes a pattern—a brain-friendly, recurring pattern that attracts his attention.

He Draws Conclusions

He has now noticed multiple millennials wearing inappropriate attire in the workplace, and he draws the conclusion that millennials do not dress appropriately.

He Adopts Beliefs

Melvin adopts the belief that millennials are ignorant of social cues and workplace etiquette.

He Takes Action

Melvin then speaks with his friends and colleagues about how millennials are out of place, inappropriate, and unconcerned with workplace norms.

The Ladder of Inference model also demonstrates how the beliefs we adopt affect the data we select to focus on in the future. The next month, when Melvin sees another young person wearing what he feels is inappropriate attire, he walks through the same process. Because Melvin has a belief that millennials are ignorant of workplace etiquette, he pays no attention to the hundreds of millennials he sees every day who *do* dress appropriately. Melvin is now stuck in a reflexive loop.

The process of climbing up the Ladder of Inference explains our brain's tendency to create false judgment and also explains why generational stereotyping is so widely accepted in today's business culture. However, if generational stereotypes are wrong, why do many people identify with their own generational identities? Many people are proud to be associated with their generational label and the stereotypes that go with it. That, as we see below, is a by-product of social identity.

In-Group, Out-Group Dynamics

In the 1970s, Henri Tajfel and John Turner wrote extensively about in-group, out-group dynamics to explain social identity. The theory describes the process by which we classify people as

“us” or “them.” Tajfel and Turner (1979) state that this process takes place in three steps: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison.

The first step is social categorization. We categorize things in order to understand them. Our ability to categorize the world around us is necessary to our survival. Categorization allows us to understand the world more simply and helps remove some of the ambiguity with which our brain is uncomfortable. The categories can be very specific, like a family or a team at work, but they can also be broader, such as a religion, social class, race, or generation. Social categorization is the first step on the path to creating stereotypes.

The second step is social identification. Once the categories are in place, we self-identify. For example, high school students may identify themselves as jocks, goths, theater geeks, or nerds. Associating with a group helps them define their identity by understanding and mimicking appropriate behavior within the group. A sense of self-understanding and pride comes with being affiliated with a group. For example, the term *nerd* was once derogatory, but as more people identified with the category, a sense of belonging and understanding emerged. Now a large subculture proudly claims to be nerds, even adopting iconic role models, such as Bill Gates.

The final step in the social-identity process is social comparison, the process of comparing our group (the in-group) to the others (the out-group). To build self-esteem, members of the in-group must see themselves as better than the out-group. This is how sports team rivalries are formed and perpetuated. Red Sox and Yankees fans both see themselves as better than the other for various invented reasons: they may be more loyal, more vociferous, more logical, more down-to-earth, and so forth. Not only do we increase the status of our group to enhance our own self-esteem, but we also deflate the status of the out-group to inflate our own self-esteem. People tend

to believe that the best generation is whatever generation they belong to.

Further, according to Tajfel and Turner, the characteristics we acquire as a result of identifying with a group are not artificial; they are real characteristics, adopted and practiced so that they become vital to a person's identity. This is why millennials are proud to be called millennials, despite the negative connotations often associated with that generation. The same applies to for gen Xers and baby boomers.

Tajfel and Turner's findings are more than mere social science conjecture. In fact, a study by Gary Lewis and Timothy Bates (2010) at the University of Edinburgh revealed an underlying biological mechanism that seems to sense such things as social, racial, generational cues that drive us to identify with those groups. There is a genetic mechanism that drives us to favor members of our in-group, just as Tajfel and Turner described more than 30 years ago.

In my work, dealing with generational dynamics, I often find that each generation tends to hold less favorable judgments about the others. When I ask baby boomers to describe millennials, I will often hear negative descriptors, such as: "antisocial," "no common sense," "entitled," "lazy," and "selfish." On the other hand, when I ask millennials to describe baby boomers, I hear equally negative generalizations such as: "out of touch," "workaholic," "stubborn," and "technophobic."

One fascinating study of a single midwestern company, by Lester, Standifer, Schultz, and Windsor (2012) of the University of Wisconsin, examined actual versus perceived generational differences within the workplace. The researchers found evidence that each generation held mistaken beliefs about the others, based on the stereotypes perpetuated in our culture. For example, millennials perceived baby boomers as valuing formal authority much more than the baby boomers in the study claimed they did. Likewise, baby boomers perceived generation

X as valuing technology and social media more than the gen Xers in the study claimed for themselves.

Our society seems to have determined that each generation is different; our brains have eagerly agreed; and the media have perpetuated the myth. Powerful social, psychological, and biological forces motivate us to create groups, label them, and act on them. Combatting the errors in judgment—judgments we are programmed to commit—requires effort and education.