**Chapter 6: It’s Not Authority Issues, It’s Respect Redefined**

Today, respect is not given solely because of the demographics we can easily put on paper—age, level, role—but is given for what you authentically contribute every day. Where simply being in a leadership position or having tenure once garnered respect, today it is compounded with an expectation to be transparent, vulnerable, and open to others’ thoughts. While this may seem disrespectful, preposterous, or even dangerous, these behaviors will continue to grow because of digital technology and can be used to everyone’s advantage.

**One Coin, Two Sides Model: Authority Problem or Respect Redefined?**

For this particular stereotype, the observable behavior is that millennials question or challenge people equally. Whether they feel comfortable to voice new ideas, challenge others’ thoughts, or skirt the chain of command to meet a need, modern talent acts as though level or tenure are not too relevant. From a traditional perspective, this can be perceived as not having respect or lacking a sense of decorum for hierarchy, tenure, or elders in general. From a modern, top talent perspective, they are redefining respect to focus on experience and a concept I call “coversity,” not simply on time served. They are acting from a broader mindset concerning equality.

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| **One Coin: One Observable Behavior**Questioning or challenging people equally, regardless of tenure or level. |
| **Side 1: Traditional Interpretation**Authority issues; disrespectful; lack a sense of decorum | **Side 2: Top Talent, Millennial-Based Modern Interpretation**Redefining respect |
| Supporting Beliefs:* There are some things you just don’t do. There is a hierarchy or chain of command that should be respected.
* I shouldn’t have to prove myself to a younger person. In fact, I shouldn’t be challenged at all.
* Because I’m at the top, I shouldn’t have to change to meet your needs; you should have to change to meet mine. If you have a particular way of communicating or working because you aren’t similar to me, it’s your job to adapt to my style.
* Getting to the top took more grit and necessary navigation of the workplace that the younger generation dismisses. Knowledge and experience are not interchangeable. Knowledge can often be Googled, but situational leadership cannot.
* We have made great strides in embracing diversity already in the not so distant past. Millennials don’t know how good they have it!
 | Supporting Beliefs:* A real leader should recognize that the source of the challenge or new idea doesn’t matter: young, old, male, female, etc. Challenging isn’t a threat; I’m showing you that you have engaged me enough to want to suggest an idea or ask a question.
* Everybody has something to teach someone else. We all should be respected and feel comfortable bringing our diverse thoughts and experiences to the table.
* You hired me for me: my style, my way of thinking.
* If you are threatened by having to justify your position, it makes me think you have something to hide or your position isn’t that strong in the first place.
* Transparent, collaborative leaders lead more profitable, engaged, happy workplaces. My way or the highway is a dinosaur approach that leads to unproductivity and disengagement.
* I’m not sure I understand the value of deep experience in an age where it seems like everything is Google-able and changes very fast. The knowledge a tenured person has may be outdated.
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Table 6.1. One Coin, Two Sides model for authority issues vs. redefining respect interpretation of modern behavior. Source: Invati Consulting.

***Exploring the Traditional Interpretation: Authority Issues***

Some scenarios that are perceived as disrespectful to authority occur when younger talent:

* Invite leaders to lunch or to coffee just to get to know them.
* Speak to leaders without the knowledge or interference of their manager.
* Suggest ideas openly to leaders or more tenured individuals, especially when no feedback was requested.
* Expect a conversation that results in compromise when it comes to desired work and communication styles.
* Do not assume they will have to assimilate to the existing culture.
* Question leaders’ or more tenured individuals’ offered advice, approach, or opinions.

From a traditional perspective, giving respect was based in a command and control world. A few figures controlled communication and held the keys to shaping strategy in the workplace and for society at large. We respected leaders solely because they were at the top. That meant that they did not need to prove themselves or change their style.

For all these reasons, the older perspective is that one should not expect leadership or tenured individuals to flex their approach and answer challenges. One should respect the chain of command when meeting needs and accept the answer “no” when a superior tells you.

***Exploring the Modern Interpretation: Respect Redefined***

In stark contrast, millennials grew up in a time of transparency, equality, and globalization. Because they’ve been immersed in the Internet all their lives, they were constantly surrounded by alternative ways of thinking and people challenging one another, regardless of who was an actual off-line expert. They also had increased transparency of questionable ethics and morals of respected leaders as showcased by scandals like Monica Lewinsky and President Clinton, Enron, and the housing bubble crisis. In a highly transparent, anonymous digital world, they are hard-wired to reexamine concepts of hierarchy, respect, and equality in the workplace.

As a result, millennials don’t share in older generations’ tendency to respect elders solely for age and tenure. Modern talent asks questions and voices thoughts to leaders and tenured individuals just as they would a peer. If a leader or tenured individual is threatened by having to explain an opinion or approach, it may be perceived as having something to hide, or as having a weak argument to begin with.

Top talent millennials respect tenure and age, but they also have a broader view of respect that includes valuing all perspectives regardless of characteristics like age, ethnicity, and gender. Modern talent assumes that diversity exists and is embraced in the workplace. If it doesn’t exist, they automatically sense an unproductive, disengaging, unattractive atmosphere and focus on other workplaces instead.

**Leveraging a Broader Definition of Respect to Build a Modern Organization**

Modern talent believes that the best workplaces are successful because they embrace people’s micro-differences (qualities below the surface) rather than focus on their macro-differences (obvious traits such as age, ethnicity, and gender). They are more innovative, more creative, more able to serve their customers when they do not try to put people in boxes based on macro-differences or when they do not have too many similar people in the workplace.

To embrace micro-differences, there is a need for a critical shift in the workplace. Instead of focusing on embracing diversity through diversity training and affinity networks, the focus should be on creating a culture based on a new concept I coined: coversity. Coversity programs are those that intentionally bring diverse people together around a common challenge and exploring together the differences in perspective, experiences, thought, communication style, strengths and weaknesses. The goal of building a coverse is to bring to life the traits below the surface. From a millennial perspective, that is how things are organized on the Internet—dividing people by topics and interests instead of physical traits. Instead of a women’s network, imagine a gender network, where gender issues are explored together and subgroups within are formed to provide a space for like-minded individuals.

The next step to embracing the new definition of respect is for leaders to start authentically and transparently contributing and communicating with those around them. A connected, transparent, socially accessible leader garners respect more easily than the invisible, command and control, behind closed doors leader.

**Tales from the Trenches**

***Generation University: Building Coversity Culture for the Multi-Generation Work Environment***

Generation University (Gen U) is an eight-week blended learning program designed to progressively build collaboration skills across generations and create a cultural movement around embracing different generations in the workplace. While most generational training programs focus on sharing content about birth date ranges and data-unsupported attitudes and values, Gen U focuses on creating conversations, attitude shifts, and understanding between members of all generations, supported by providing a new lens on each generation. The program doesn’t just teach participants how to work across generations; it provides them with tools to embrace macro-diversity as well. The results of a recent program with the University of the Pacific were astounding: an overwhelming 100 percent of the participants reported improvements in productivity, engagement, and working relationships.

***Building Respect (Among Many Other Benefits) Through Social Media***

Richard Branson, CEO of the UK-based entertainment, music, and travel services conglomerate Virgin, cultivates transparency and authenticity through actively and personally engaging in social media communication with his employees and customers. This has led to a highly engaged community of 9.5 million followers on LinkedIn and 8.2 million on Twitter, not to mention 7,000+ shares of each of his blog posts on Virgin’s main site. Virgin’s subsidiaries consistently rank on global and regional best places to work surveys and overall, reported revenues of £15 billion in 2012. By using social media as a tool for increased transparency and taking in feedback, no matter what the source, Virgin has built a culture that is respected and recognized by modern talent globally. With the role modeling of the CEO, all individuals, including managers and tenured individuals, participate in creating a culture that’s transparent, open to feedback, and open to micro-differences.

**Summary: From Authority Problems to Embracing Coversity**

Millennials skirt hierarchy and treat relationships more equally than previous generations. They believe micro-differences (the differences below the surface) matter more than macro-differences such as age, gender, and race. The nature of digital technology has created new rules for who is respected based on ongoing authentic contribution and grit instead of age, level, tenure, or other accolades. Instead of feeling threatened, those with tenure and leadership roles can use this level of feedback to continue to personally grow and influence others.

**How Modern Is Your Culture?**

Take the [“How Modern Is Your Culture?” diagnostic](https://goo.gl/forms/Me6MhSMeUv8tzBaI2) to determine if your organization is leaning toward a traditional perspective of authority and respect that is at risk of disengaging modern talent.

**10-Minute Champion**

[View and contribute](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1t8JXUyYyyjSBjqOii3UkM6AKxGf_Fm7nR05TqhtKreY/edit?usp=sharing) ideas for actions you can take in 10 minutes or less.

**Chapter 6: Questions for Further Discussion**

When you first entered the workforce, did newer or younger employees engage or challenge company managers and leaders? How did the prevailing dynamic shape the work environment?

Have you ever had an idea or established work process challenged by a younger employee? Did you feel the challenge was justified? Why or why not?

List three to five ways that you think younger employees can teach leaders and managers about how to better run your organization.

**Chapter 6 Resources and References**

Art Kleiner, *The Age of Heretics: A History of the Radical Thinkers Who Reinvented Corporate Management* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

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Richard Branson, “Questions from Kids,” Virgin, February 1, 2016, accessed August 24, 2016, <https://www.virgin.com/richard-branson/questions-kids>.

“Younger Managers Rise in the Ranks: Survey Quantifies Management Shift and Reveals Challenges, Preferred Workplace Perks, and Perceived Generational Strengths and Weaknesses,” Ernst & Young press release, September 3, 2013, accessed August 24, 2016, <http://www.ey.com/US/en/Newsroom/News-releases/News_Younger-managers-rise-in-the-ranks>.