

Singapore's workforce will soon span five generations – baby boomers, Gen X, millennials and Gen Z, with Gen Alpha coming soon. Managing this diversity is both a challenge and an opportunity. The best leaders will bridge generational divides, turning potential tensions into creative energy by valuing experience and welcoming fresh perspectives.

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The era of the top-down leadership model is over. Companies need to adapt

Singapore's next chapter needs employers who pay more attention to understanding diversity of values and expectations in their workforce.

Emily M. David

Sixty years ago, Singapore's workers had a simple mandate: follow orders, respect the hierarchy, and maximise efficiency. But if the past decades prove anything, it's that success belongs to those who are willing to change and innovate.

Today, that rigid top-down model is outdated. Singapore has reinvented itself through a process of continuous adaptation by both leaders and employees.

Yet, we now face unprecedented challenges involving the complexities of artificial intelligence, geopolitical uncertainty, and a multi-generational workforce. Leaders are responsible for steering their employees through

these industry changes.

What qualities are needed for modern workplace leaders? In the republic's next chapter, technical proficiency, which has served the country well, won't be enough to flourish.

PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP

During Singapore's early nation-building years, organisations were defined by hierarchies. With an economy heavily reliant on manufacturing and trade, the emphasis was on productivity and discipline.

Leaders made decisions on behalf of their employees, who were expected to demonstrate loyalty and compliance. As one MBA hopeful once told me: "I am the brain and my employees are my limbs."

The 1980s and 1990s brought

change. The rise of multinational corporations and the growing importance of knowledge work led to a greater emphasis on collaboration and employee involvement. Participative leadership, where leaders actively seek input from their teams, gained traction.

This was also when Singapore's economy began moving from labour-intensive industries to high-value sectors like finance and technology, requiring a more educated and skilled workforce.

Employees, in turn, began to expect more from employers. Job satisfaction and career development became important considerations, and the concept of work-life balance emerged. Organisations responded by investing in training programmes and offering more flexible work arrangements.

NEW LEADERSHIP PARADIGMS

The past decade saw rapid technological changes and globalisation, requiring leaders to manage diverse teams and adapt with emotional intelligence. For employees, technology blurred the

lines between work and personal life.

While this created opportunities for remote work and greater autonomy, it also introduced challenges such as burnout and the expectation of constant availability.

Millennials and Gen Z workers, who began entering the workforce during this period, placed a premium on meaningful work and sustainably driven organisational values.

According to Deloitte's 2024 survey, over 80 per cent of Gen Z and millennial employees deem having a sense of purpose essential to job satisfaction. Work-life balance was also highlighted as a key priority for this group of employees.

With these shifts reshaping the workplace, balancing traditional values with modern expectations has become critical, and employers are being pushed to rethink traditional practices.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

So, how can leaders and employees in Singapore adapt to changing norms?

The relentless advancement of technology including AI and automation will continue to redefine what work means. Leaders face the challenge of embracing these tools for productivity, while addressing fears about job security and changing roles.

Yet even as job descriptions evolve, human motivation remains constant. At our core, all human beings are driven to belong to a tribe, provide unique value, and champion a cause greater than themselves. Leaders need to find new ways to pull these levers to ensure their human workforce remains engaged and creative.

At the same time, work is becoming deeply personal. Employees expect more than just a salary, they want careers that contribute to a greater good. Just as consumers seek personalised products, workers now look for individualised career paths and benefits that allow them to make an impact on the issues they care about most fervently.

Harvard Business Review notes a growing trend towards treating work itself as a customisable experience. Leaders must listen closely and adapt, using data and empathy to ensure every

employee feels seen and valued. Upon doing so, leaders can design jobs that correspond with individual employee passions and strengths to get the most out of these employees.

Sustainability and ethical leadership are also now essential. With growing demands for corporate responsibility, Singaporean businesses are aligning with the nation's green agenda. My own research shows that corporate social responsibility not only helps the environment but also fosters more supportive managers and happier employees. These intangible benefits ripple through workplaces and families.

CHALLENGE OF A MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKFORCE

Singapore's workforce will soon span five generations – baby boomers, Gen X, millennials and Gen Z, with Gen Alpha coming soon.

Managing this diversity is both a challenge and an opportunity. The best leaders will bridge generational divides, turning potential tensions into creative energy by valuing experience and welcoming fresh perspectives.

Balancing traditional values with modern expectations is not without friction. As Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer from Stanford points out, dominance and assertiveness often remain more effective in leadership than the collaborative ideals that are increasingly favoured in modern discourse. Given the different preferences of workers from different generations, tensions are likely to be exacerbated.

Yet, being decisive should not mean being disrespectful. Research consistently shows that bullying or rudeness from leaders is toxic. Teams perform best when led with respect and psychological safety. When people feel valued and safe, creativity and resilience follow.

Culture, too, shapes what "good leadership" means.

In the West, bold, charismatic leaders are often celebrated. In parts of Asia, a leader who seeks the spotlight may be seen as self-promoting, clashing with values like humility and group harmony. Here, steadiness and reliability are often favoured over flashiness. Effective leadership should always be rooted within a given context.

ENCOURAGING SIGNS

I venture that the most effective managers of the future already exist among us. They are confident yet humble, and encourage their teams to question decisions, experiment with new technologies, and reshape the very way work gets done.

The complex and ever-changing world we find ourselves in requires more than the competences and experiences of one person alone. Leaders are tasked with finding a way to bridge differences and invite new perspectives and ideas from people with a variety of backgrounds.

Only by looking at problems from different angles and with different motives in mind will we be able to harness the innovation and creativity needed to tackle modern problems.

As innovation is inherently a team sport, leaders must also create the right kind of work climates that encourage cooperation and solidarity, uniting workers behind a noble and meaningful common goal.

Akin to how the nation has adapted over the past 60 years, the next chapter will be written not by leaders who give orders and employees who follow blindly, but by those who ask the right questions.

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