A Guide to Reading Fitch and Van Brunt: Leadership and Management Across the Generations

David Bateman-Schieler

Florida State University

"*A guide to leadership and management in higher education: Managing across the generations*" is a self-proclaimed "useful manual for the reader" (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016, p. xiii), seen by the authors as "an opportunity to share some of the practical and spiritual leadership lessons [the authors] have learned in leading teams, in being led, and learning from colleagues around the United States" (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016, p. xiii). As the text's subtitle should make clear the authors make use of their opportunity to explore leadership and management in a work environment comprised of four generations (millennials, gen X, boomers, and matures).

The authors' viewpoints regarding leadership and management across the generations are clearly stated in the opening pages of the book, Fitch and Van Brunt are two proud members (one male, one female) of Gen X, with over 30 years of combined experience in higher education, both serving in senior organizational roles at the time of publication. Beyond these socially ascribed identities, the authors self-prescribe positive generational attributes, including "our own Gen X biases for respect, diversity, justice, flexibility, informality, and work/life balance" (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016, p. xv). Heeding this acknowledged bias, and listening to the potential motivations of the authors -  "…many stories of frustration with our own staff and the staff of colleagues, around workplace preferences, priorities, and values" (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016, p. xiii), allows for the identification of the purpose of the text - "…we introduce the concept of bringing four letter words to work: love, care, and hope" (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016, p. xiii). Or more simply, the book serves as an answer to the authors own inferred plea: 'Can't we all just get along?'

The authors assert that by focusing on generational assets, and by incorporating love (through empathy and authenticity), care (through human-centered leadership and management), and hope (through positivity and reciprocity) into offices/departments/divisions that institutions of higher learning will be more likely to succeed against a backdrop of significant change. The first and perhaps greatest point that the authors make is that generational thinking based on stereotypes and clichés should be challenged. This critical reframing and asset-based way of thinking about generations is tied through Fitch and Van Brunt's use of positive psychology and later the use of the Clifton StrengthsFinder

assessment. Second, the authors suggest that by infusing skills emphasized in three approaches of clinical psychology (namely the humanistic/person-centered approach, the narrative approach, and the positive psychology approach) that intergenerational relationships can be prioritized in work. Fitch and Van Brunt continue throughout the entire text to remind readers that generational difference, supervisory relationships, and institutional success are not antithetical to one another, and in fact that they are complimentary.

Unfortunately, Fitch and Van Brunt build their case for generationally relevant supervision on anecdotally driven "data," that struggles to adequately convey their own belief in generational assets. The following paragraph may begin to show how disparate the authors frame the generations:

> "The contemporary workforce includes Matures (also, the Silent Generation), known most commonly as company men; Baby Boomers, a generation of civil activists and the echo effect of post-war era prosperity; Generation X, by the numbers a smaller and gentler generation whose focus on human rights and equity define them; and finally, Millennials (also, Gen Y), commonly referenced as the "me generation" and an echo of the prosperity of the 80s and 90s" (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016, pp. 18-19).

Several pages are then spent outlining similar sentiments, highlighting the value of the "aging skilled workforce" in contrast to the "new-to-the-work-world Millennials." The authors are ultimately forced to confront their own inability to positively frame the Millennial generation – "For leaders and managers, this role requires that we move beyond the clichéd views of specific generations – e.g., Millennials as the 'me' generation" (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016, p. 21), but 20 pages in and such effort has only been directed to the other three working generations.

It is also important to discuss Fitch and Van Brunt's decision to publish a book about intergenerational workforce management in 2016 with a focus on four generations that included individuals born before 1945 (the Matures or Silent Generation). Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) themselves note that at the time of their writing Matures represented "only 2% of the total workforce" (p. 19). Their

choice to focus on 71-year-old individuals, rather than on the implications created by the soon-to-be-graduates of Generation Z, makes the book ultimately less than useful just four years later in 2020.

As for the evidence regarding the potential for meaningful leadership and management through the use of skills emphasized in three approaches to clinical psychology, the authors rest more appropriately on cited and peer-reviewed psychological research. Although, most (if not all) of the research cited by the authors was not conducted specific to intergenerational supervision. Separating Fitch and Van Brunt's (2016) recommendations for a form of leadership and management that prioritizes relationships (love, care, hope), from their weaker claims of generational assets, only reduces the application of their recommendations, it does not eliminate them. This second section of the book continues to demonstrate that relationships and workplace success are exceedingly likely to be in compliment to one another.

Rudolph, Rauvola, and Zacher (2017) provide a critical review of generationally relevant workforce leadership and management. In their review, which included "A guide to leadership and management in higher education: Managing across the generations," the authors argue for a lifespan developmental approach to leadership and management. While Rudolph, Rauvola, and Zacher's (2017) lifespan development approach emphasizes "continuous maturational differences" (p. 10), these differences can be seen using a similar asset motivation as Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) (although hopefully to more success).

Perhaps a quick way to draw this connection, Edmund Burke, the Irish statesman (1729-1797), is believed to have first said, "He who is not a republican at twenty compels one to doubt the generosity of his heart; but he who, after thirty, persists, compels one to doubt the soundness of his mind." If Fitch and Van Brunt see leadership as serving to inspire employees (see p. 33) and management as addressing the day-to-day operations (see p. 34), they may be able to see the importance of heart-led youthful "immaturity" in leadership and head-led "maturity" in management. In fact, Table 3.4 "Generational Characteristics: Leaders and Managers" (p. 44) all but prove this understanding; Millennial leadership is seen in positive contrast to Millennial management; whereas, Mature management is promoted over Mature leadership. Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) themselves admit (earlier) that the generational traits that they describe are set to change over time – "The Millennials' focus on teamwork positions them well to

be future leaders, once professional experience and gravitas can be added to their resumes" (pp. 20-21).

For what certainty then can we ascribe any generational traits espoused by Fitch and Van Brunt, that are

not more accurately described by Rudolph, Rauvola, and Zacher's (2017) lifespan development model,

captured by the political heart-and-head conflict of Burke.

   This is not to suggest that in 2016, when the book was published, that the generational traits

described by Fitch and Van Brunt (asset or deficit) were inaccurate. Their lived experiences as senior

organizational leaders and managers give them the credibility to document recommendations for positive

supervisory affect. Their lived experiences however are bound in context, not dissimilar to "the

combination of developmental time in place layered atop historical context that produces the rich and

varied tapestry of the generation" (p. 17). The very real fact exists that all of the workforce has continued

to develop atop a historical (or in this case contemporary) context. Meaning, each passing day the book

and its recommendations become less relevant/accurate to depict the generations.

      Seeing the maturational assets of generational cohorts (a space between Fitch and Van Brunt and

Rudolph, Rauvola, and Zacher) allows the loyalty of the Mature generation to not be lost with their

retirement from the workforce. Rather, as Baby Boomers age we may be inclined to loosely predict that

their likelihood to leave an employer would decrease. Similarly, the focus on human rights and equity that

Gen Xer's came to view as their generational-trait, will be passed to Millennials as they transition from

entry-level positions to entry-management positions. A maturational asset approach to workforce

leadership and management proves far more sustainable, than the unpredictable waiting provided by

generational traits. Dedicated readers of Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) by 2020 are left anxious for the

publication of a Gen Z update.

      The second section (on the integration of skills emphasized by three approaches to clinical

psychology), as well as the conclusion (that relationships and institutional success are in fact

complimentary) present wonderful opportunities to enact recommendations presented by the authors. I

found myself entirely captured by the ability to translate the community values of Burning Man (the

afterword) to leadership and management in higher education. Perhaps unsurprising to my capture was a

lack of generational discussion, instead the focus was on relationships, personal accountability, and presence. While the beginning of the book caused me conflict (see my cited frustrations above), the closing paragraph presented a call to action I can easily embrace;

> "A group of employees is almost always a temporary arrangement, shifting and changing, as complex systems are known to do. While there is a value in strategic planning, reviewing goals, assessing productivity and creating positive communication and collaboration, there is no better way to end this book than to stress the power in a supervisor stopping by an employee's desk and asking them how their day is going. Attend in a mindful way to the people who work in your department and nurture the relationships through caring, kindness and, ultimately, love" (p. 185).

Future readers of "*A guide to leadership and management in higher education: Managing across the generations*," should be encouraged to read with their own truths in mind, while also suspending judgement (in any direction). They should consider; Do the generational anecdotes presented by the authors hold true? Do their recommendations seem plausible? Do the answers to these questions create conflict? After my honest reading, I do believe there is opposition in these answers ('no' to the generational anecdotes and 'yes' to the recommendations) but not conflict. I think that the recommendations provide a starting point for any current or future supervisor (leader or manager) to engage in healthy relationship building, but that they should not rest on increasingly inaccurate generational "traits."

References

Fitch, P., and Van Brunt, B. (2016). *A guide to leadership and management in higher education: Managing across the generations.* Routledge.

Rudolph, C.W., Rauvola, R.S., & Zacher, H. (2017). Leadership and generations at work: a critical review. *Leadership Quarterly.* [In Press Accepted Manuscript]