Leah Georges – Social psychologist

So, for the first time in America's modern history, we have five generations interacting at work.

The veterans, born between 1922 and 1943, are known as the **Greatest Generation**, the matures, the silents. They're known for their self-sacrifice, respect for authority and work as its own reward.

The **Boomers** came shortly after, born between 1944 and 1960. This is a generation characterized by hard work. In fact, we can thank this generation for the term "workaholic." They appreciate competition, they love effective communication. And they're thinking towards retirement, if they haven't retired already.

Generation X is known as the lost generation the latchkey generation, born between 1961 and 1980. This is the smallest generation, sandwiched between boomers and the big millennials. More parents were divorced in this generation than any generation prior. They also were the first generation to tell us about work-life balance, and the first to really ask for that in the workplace.

And then **Millennials** — you know, the everybody-gets-a-ribbon generation — born between 1981 and 2000. Never knew a time where technology wasn't present in the home. They're incredibly pragmatic, they're hopeful and they're determined. They think they're going to change the world; in fact, I believe they're going to do it.

They might be a little bit idealistic sometimes, but in just the last several years, we've seen millennials overtake Generation X to be the most represented generation in the workforce.

In fact, more than one in three people in the United States labor force is a millennial. And soon to join us there, **Generation Z**, born since 2000, our

high school interns or soon to be high school graduates.

Now, if you open any internet browser, look at Amazon, search any of your favorite search engines, you might assume there's a literal war in the workplace, right?

We see blog topics like "Seventeen reasons why millennials are the worst generation." And "Why baby boomers have ruined it for everybody." Or "Bridging the great generational divide."

It's like turning into this "West Side Story," like, boomers come in one door, millennials come in another door, the lobby, they just fight with each other all day, complain, go home, do the same, come back to work, right?

Well, so what if I told you these generations may not exist? I've been spending some time thinking about this and researching this, and fellow researchers and I aren't exactly sure that these generations are real.

And in fact, if we can agree that these groups even exist, we certainly don't agree who belongs in them. And they span something like 20 years.

So at whatever point in history, a one-year-old and a 20-year-old are said to share the same value system, to want the same things at work, to have the same stereotypes working for and against them.

And in fact, different areas of the world define these generations differently. So we can't even compare generations across various areas of the world. And these stereotypes about each generation have, in a lot of ways, created this self-fulfilling prophecy, that people begin to act as if they're part of that generation because we've said out loud that generation is real. I'm not so sure that it is.

And in fact, this idea of generations has become deeply embedded in United States culture. When we talk generations, people know exactly

what we're talking about. In fact, people have a lot of thoughts and feelings about each of these generations.

And I'll tell you how I know this. I did the thing that every red-blooded American and pre-tenure academic does when they have a question. I Googled some stuff. And this is what I learned.

Google is based on algorithms, and they provide you with commonly searched terms, or suggested hits, based on what other people are searching surrounding the same topic. And it gave me a really good sense of what people think about each of these generations.

ALSO READ: Joel Levine: Why we need to go back to Mars (Transcript)

Take a look. I learned that baby boomers are conservative, that Americans think they're stupid. The worst generation, they're angry, apparently they're racist and they're so important.

Looking at Generation X, I learned Generation X is a cynical group, they're angry, they're known as the lost generation — we know this; they're the smallest generation. Apparently, they're stupid too. And mostly, they're frustrated with baby boomers.

All right, millennials, this is what I learned about us. So, we're obsessed with food. We're also stupid, ah! We're lazy, we're sensitive, we're fired, we're also hated, and we think we're important.

And perhaps the most terrifying search result on the internet — Generation Z is screwed.

OK, so for five years, I've been talking to leaders and followers across a wide variety of organizations. And this is what I've come to realize. Generations haven't become part of the conversation — generations have

become the conversation at work.

What I've learned is that we're working under the assumption that those Google results are true. And so, what I think is that organizations are now desperate to figure out how to "manage" the multigenerational workplace. "Manage" it.

We manage all sorts of things. We're preparing for this wave of millennials to come to work. So we prepare for hurricanes, right? We prepare to take the MCAT, we prepare for natural disasters.

Why are we preparing for 23-year-olds to come to work? I've talked to these organizations, and I've heard amazing things that they're doing to create a workspace for everybody to get along and to have autonomy and to feel like they're thriving.

But I've also heard some really incredibly harebrained ideas about how to navigate the multigenerational workplace. Are you ready? This is what I saw.

I visited an organization, and they adopted this idea that if you can see it, you can be it. A really important concept. But I think they blew it.

They put pictures on the walls of the ideal multigenerational workplace, because if you can see it, you can be it.

Or like this one. Like, I don't even want to work here. You don't get to wear color here, apparently, and HR seriously has problems with people jumping in heels, I promise you that, OK?

I talked to an organization who recently decided against putting a ball pit in the break room because that's how you retain millennials. We're 30, not three.

And in fact, I know a young, at the time, millennial, who was told that if she wanted people to take her seriously, just because she was a millennial, she would have to do this — wear shoulder pads. Yes. People younger than her and older than her wouldn't take her seriously unless she wore shoulder pads.

Straight-out-of-the-80s, can't-even-buy-them-anywhere shoulder pads. This young woman had two graduate degrees. This young woman was me. And this is the best we came up with? How to navigate the multigenerational workplace … is shoulder pads?

So, this is also what I've learned talking to organizations that employ a wide range of people of various ages. We are so much more similar than we are different.

And we're hearing this consistently. People want work that matters, they want flexibility, they want support, they want appreciation, they want better coffee. But none of these things are tied to a generation.

Now, sure, we see small differences in what people want. We know 20-year-olds and 60-year-olds go home and do different things. They have different values. At least when it comes to things happening outside of work.

But I think what's happened is that this focus on generational cohorts, these groups of people, has created a space where we just forgot that people are people.

And to know who they really are, who we really work with, we have to figure out how to better navigate this multigenerational workplace than ball pits.

ALSO READ: Don't Fail Fast - Fail Mindfully: Leticia Gasca (Transcript)

Call me one of those idealist millennials, but I think we can get there. And I don't think the idea is too terribly difficult. What if we radically, simply, not easily, meet people where they are? Individualize our approach.

I've never met a generation. I've had a lot of conversations with people who happened to identify with a specific generational cohort. I know that 80-year-olds text message and 23-year-olds crochet blankets. None of these things are stereotypical of that generation, right?

Nilofer Merchant — she's a thought leader in innovation — she tells us we have to meet people in their onlyness, that is, that spot in the world where only we stand, as a function of our unique history, our experiences and our hopes. But this requires flexibility and curiosity.

And what happens when we meet people in their onlyness, only the spot in the world that they stand, we learn that that boomer who is just acting "angry" at work all the time is scared. Because he's worked every day since he was 16 years old, and on a Monday, sooner than he can imagine, he'll never go to work again.

He's got plans. It's going to take like a week and a half to do all the things on that retirement list. But then what? What if we give a little bit of grace to the person that might be a little scared? Or that Generation X-er who has four drop-offs, three kids, two hands, and is just trying to keep the wheels on the bus.

Sure, maybe she's a little aloof at work. Maybe she's a little independent, maybe she's exhausted. Or that millennial who asks for a raise after two months because they're "entitled?"

Well, maybe it's because that generation has more debt than any generation before them, coming out of college, and they just need the money to keep going, to pay rent.

And suddenly, when you meet people in their onlyness, that spot in the world only they stand, we're not talking about a generation anymore. We're talking about Jim or Jen or Candice.

And so here's my challenge to us. Pick a person, just one, and explore their onlyness. And then learn.

And then in the moments where it's appropriate, teach. And figure out what they bring to work that no one else can bring to work, because that's what makes work richer. And then do it again. And do it again.

And then some day, we're not working with generations anymore. We're working with people. And so to really understand the beauty of the multigenerational workplace, I think we just have to meet people where they are. And that doesn't require that we unpack and live there with them.

But we might find, at least on occasion, it's a beautiful place to visit. And so I think there's just no need to argue about which generation is the most angry or the most entitled or the most so obsessed with food.

We all come to the classroom, to work, back to our homes, a little bit tired and a little bit tattered sometimes. Maybe let's just do our best to humbly meet people where they are, how they show up that day, generation and all.

And in those moments where it can feel a little bit like intergenerational warfare, I think we can at least all agree that shoulder pads aren't the solution.

Thank you.

Resources for Further Reading:

[Building a Psychologically Safe Workplace: Amy Edmondson (Transcript)](#)

[Off-Balance On Purpose: The Future of Engagement and Work-Life Balance by Dan Thurmon](#)

[Stereotypes: Funny Because They Are True by Katerina Vrana (Full Transcript)](#)

[Why Workplace Intimacy Is Like Doing The Wave: Kris Boesch at TEDxMileHigh (Full Transcript)](#)

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