



The Context Gap: A Failure to Communicate Across the Generations

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“A point of view can be a dangerous luxury when substituted for insight and understanding.”

Marshall McLuhan

The differences between the generations continue to perplex leaders of the engineering profession. Generally, senior leaders in the Engineering profession speak about the ‘big picture’. That is, they see that commitment to the firm is the surest way to personal success in the profession. They have seen that doing what’s best for the team is what’s best for individuals.

Young professionals, on the other hand, are less certain about the security a firm may have to offer. Today’s 30-year-olds saw their parents downsized, laid-off, re-engineered and replaced by software during repeated recessionary cycles. They already know they’re likely to change careers five to eight times during their professional lives. So they tend to be skeptical of the idea that putting the firm first will be beneficial in the long run.

These differences extend into outlooks towards technology, salaries, personal development, firm direction, and what is of value both personally and in the firm. There is clearly a gap here -- but how to bridge it?

In 2004 I convened and moderated a panel to discuss this Generation Gap, at an ACEC national event in Phoenix. In preparing for my role as moderator, I created and distributed a short survey about the Generation Gap. I received many responses, but there was little variance in the feedback.

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In the eyes of the older generation, the younger cohort seems to believe they deserve a salary that's higher than what they're contributing; they're eager to take on responsibilities that far outstrip their experience; they're too focused on improving their own personal position – and those personal achievements might come at the expense of the whole firm. But they don't want to work hard enough, or long enough. And they don't look at the big picture.

The younger regards the older as having 'no life'. They see their senior leaders as living lives that are essentially out of balance: they don't spend enough time with their families, or doing things that make them happy. They've put the firm's needs ahead of their own for so long that they've forgotten how to care for themselves. In effect, they've forgotten how to say 'no' to the demands of the workplace. In following this career course, older engineers have 'played out their string' and become change-averse.

Younger respondents to my survey were not as concerned with salary as with having their expertise valued by their seniors. And interestingly enough, senior leaders said, in effect, "these young kids keep re-creating the wheel. They don't ask us to share our knowledge with them."

So in this, we've found one point that both groups have in common: not feeling valued by the other.

There's Values, And Then There's Values

Senior leaders have traditionally held power in their firms and the industry through their knowledge and their connections. Work was based on a grounded understanding of engineering principles, a lifetime of experience in applying those principles, and put together with great care using much the same tools that have served engineers for 5000 years. Design itself was open for all to see and judge as they walked through the office, and the seasoned professional could easily lean over a drafting board and offer guidance to a younger, less experienced colleague.

Today, design and most of its tools are hidden inside the computer. It's those younger, less experienced colleagues who are at home with the newest technologies -- and who now own access to the inside of the 'box'. Even the computer knowledge of professionals in their mid-thirties is rapidly becoming obsolete, and in some cases only the very youngest engineers are proficient in the software being used on a project.

So the dynamic of power has shifted, and with it, a change in values has occurred. Younger professionals are far more proficient in newer technologies, and hold them in high esteem. To senior leaders, technology is important, but of a higher order is a grounded understanding of the principles of engineering that only comes with years of experience.

Which brings us back to the question, “why don’t they seem to value me?”

A Failure to Communicate

What we have here, as Paul Newman learned to his woe in Cool Hand Luke, is a failure to communicate.

Clearly, there has been a shift in priorities that correlates to age. Moreover, few of our industry’s leaders would deny that they were ‘young and hungry’ once. They too were looking for the biggest slice of the pie as fast as they could get it, and their interest in the ‘big picture’ was learned over time. Indeed, senior leaders would have to admit that while they’ve seen periods of scarcity and abundance come and go and have developed some resilience to these cycles, the first time they ever experienced a cut in salary or major project going on hold, it seemed just as devastating as it does today to their young colleagues.

This suggests two orders of ‘generation gap’. On the one hand, there are unique generational differences that result from conditions in the world. On the other hand, there are generational differences that are very much about stages in human development.

Blaming these disconnects between people on a ‘Generation Gap’ has become a useful way of avoiding the fact that we just can’t talk to each other. It’s easier to talk about the ‘Millennials’ and the ‘Boomers’ than it is to talk about ‘me’ and ‘you’. So while it’s a catchy phrase, the term, ‘Generation Gap’ implies an actual obstacle, an unbridgeable communications issue that firms are simply burdened with.

Many firms are now successfully bridging that gap between people, but doing so successfully requires radically different language. So let’s throw away our notion of the “Generation Gap” and see what’s really underneath it.

Stuck In The Context Gap

I can’t imagine, at my 30 years of age, what it was like to sit by the family radio, as my father did, listening to reports of the war in Europe. I can’t imagine going to the market and finding out there’s no meat today, because it’s all gone to the war. My father, for his part, cannot fathom how I type so fast: it is a source of astonishment to him that he apparently fathered a typing prodigy.

These things, these events, have made us who we are: The war in his early life. The computers in my early life. These are part of our context. And our two contexts have been very different – perhaps more different than any previous two generations in history. From our earliest upbringing to what we had for breakfast this morning, ‘context’ is where we live. We speak and act from within our context. Most of the time,

we don't even realize how our context shapes our reactions to events. Context is the invisible set of eyeglasses we can never take off.

In our work with engineering and architecture firms, we've seen that this Context Gap is a major impediment to working relationships throughout the A/E industry. A Context Gap happens when individuals in a firm fail to share their contexts with each other. The young engineer never hears about the big picture, or is never invited to discuss his fears. It's a situation where nobody's talking and nobody's listening; where changes are dealt with in a 'business as usual' manner, without regard for different contexts and therefore different interpretations.

So, within the 'context gap', we have a situation where people are just reacting to each other, without regard for each other's context. Issues like salary, or the value of engineering principles, or seniority itself, these issues are always contextual; they have a particular meaning depending on the context. For that young engineer at the beginning of his career, a salary decrease means something. For that senior leader of the firm trying to steer the firm through a market downturn, that same salary decrease has a different meaning. Each individual lives within his own context. And each has a very different experience of the same event.

What Does It All Mean?

Because we work together, my father (David Aitken) and I have had to confront our differences -- our personal Context Gap -- head on, and figure out how to bridge it. We've learned the hard way that genuine collaboration arises from an appreciation of each other's context. So we've had to become curious about each other -- we needed to lose our assumption that just because we're family we automatically understand each other. I've had to see the world through his eyes in order to appreciate why he reacts in certain ways. I know now that he has to consciously remind himself what it's like to be twenty-five, in order to understand the pressure I put on myself. Over time, we've learned how to ask each other about our experiences, our perceptions, about each other's worldview.

From our work at engineering and architecture firms around the country, we know that very few firms have adequate channels for professionals to share what they know. Even fewer organizations have a place for the word 'context' in their firm culture.

But if nobody asks an experienced, senior project engineer about his most challenging experience, his most innovative project, that time he rescued a client from a bad situation, then how can he be expected to share his knowledge? Without a framework for hearing and understanding the value of different life experiences, how can the current leaders's experiences be leveraged to raise the future leaders? And vice versa -- how can today's leaders be infused with the enthusiasm for technology and innovation that characterizes the younger generation?

The strengths of each generation are locked inside their specific contexts if the contexts themselves are not explored.

Talking 'bout My Generation

It's possible that firms just need to get tough, to command their troops more effectively. But it's difficult to command people to talk to each other – to get along – if they don't speak each other's language. Moreover, it's impossible to tell people to 'get to know each other' when they don't really know themselves. Self-awareness and interpersonal communications are not, and probably won't be, required courses in engineering education. Yet they are exactly the skills required to bridge the Context Gap.

In my work I've seen that the gap begins to narrow as soon as people start talking to each other about their experiences – whether good or bad. Firms can begin by simply developing a space where the older and younger professionals can get to know each other, where they can question and be questioned. What's most important is to get started. Whether it's a comprehensive, cross-generational, leadership development initiative, or a monthly 'town meeting' with the CEO, with a safe space set aside for sharing context, people will come to respect each other, and the unique personal and professional challenges their peers have faced. With respect comes the first pylon in the bridge across both the 'context gap' and the 'generation gap'.

The idea and practice of Mentoring has penetrated the engineering industry as a way to get older and younger professionals to engage with one another. Successful mentor/mentee relationships are often attributed more to good luck – having accidentally found a good mentor/mentee match - than to the good intentions of a structured program. But effective mentoring programs can be put together.

Indeed, many senior leaders want to mentor, especially those who've recently retired, or who are reducing their role in the firm in preparation for ownership transition. And many emerging leaders want to be mentored, but they're not sure how to approach someone, or how find the right mentor. Mentoring skills on both sides of the table don't come naturally. They must be learned, and they must be practiced. Mentoring programs work best when they grow out of, and are supported by, a more comprehensive leadership development program, one that inculcates a common language among the leaders of all generations and that teaches context-awareness and personal responsibility.

So is this it? We have to learn to communicate with each other? Yes. That's all. It's that simple. And it's that difficult.

Appreciating that everyone lives and acts from within a unique context is a challenging notion. It's even more challenging to the engineer, who isn't trained in the social sciences. It requires that we set aside what we think we know, let go of our empirical

data for a time, and listen without judgment to someone else's story. It means letting ourselves become understanding of others, allowing ourselves to have insight into others' lives.

The most successful leaders in the engineering industry are those who couple professional acumen and expertise with masterful communication. You see them lead their firms with integrity, their team knows they are worth following. And these great leaders know about context. They know how to talk to clients, and how to listen to them. They've learned to appreciate where the client is coming from, to discern his needs – explicit and implicit – and get the job done.

This is a skill; it isn't magic. Understanding and insight can be learned. In fact, they must be learned, by both the emerging leaders *and* the seasoned leaders within our firms. Then a bridge between the generations -- between anybody -- can be built.

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Geordie Aitken BA, NLP

Exposed to the art of group leading since a young age, Geordie takes people and teams farther - and deeper – than should be possible for a 30-year old. He gets people communicating better and performing at higher levels with a minimum of fuss - and a lot of humor. Geordie has a knack for disarming the toughest cynics, and thrives on the belief that his work makes people's lives and work more sustainable. Geordie's current focus is the design and delivery of in-firm leadership development programs for young professionals. He is widely in demand as a speaker at convention gatherings and for serious team-building.