

BE MY BOSS

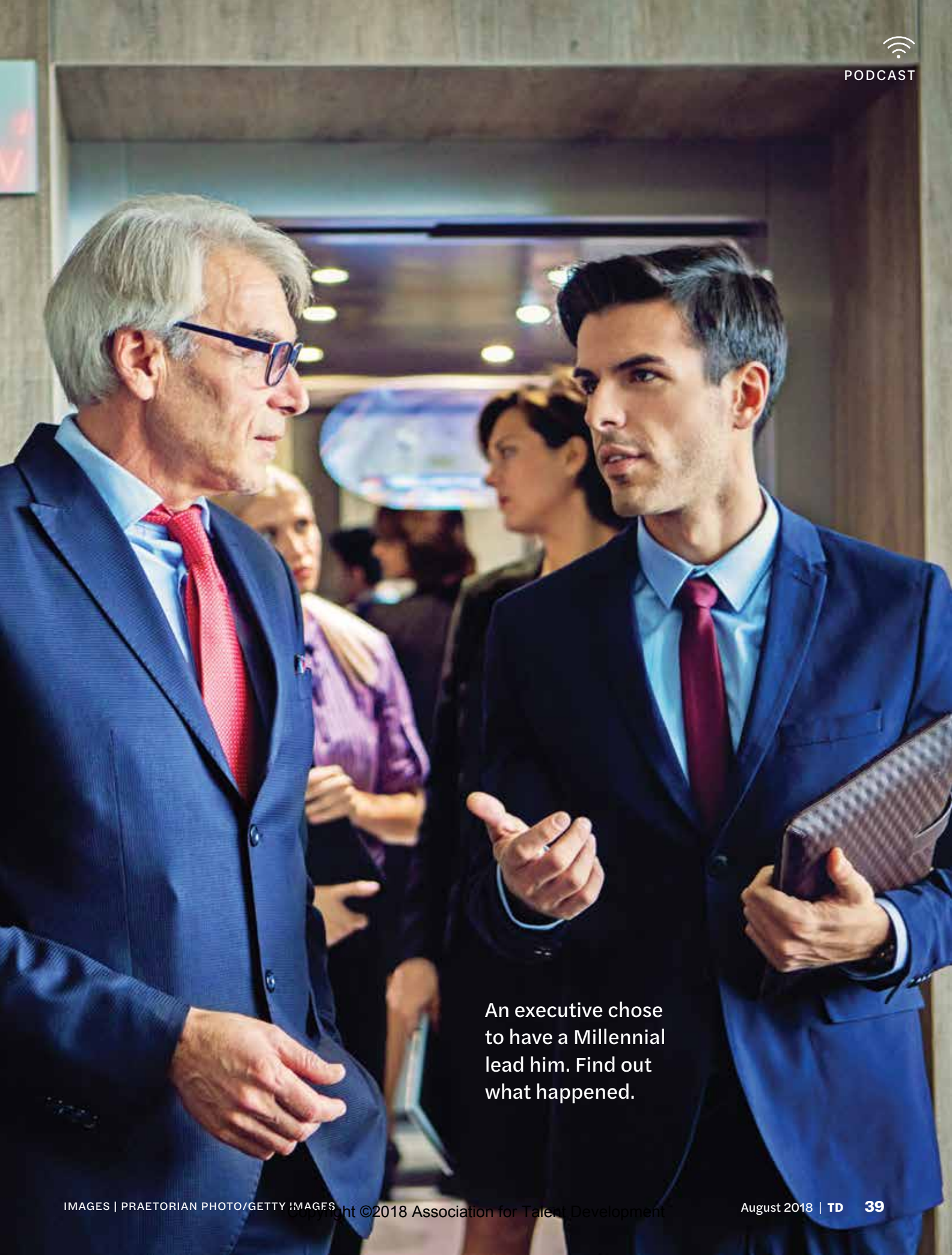
BY GLENN LLOPIS

I am a 51-year-old founder of a company, and a year ago I told then-25-year-old Guilherme: “I want you to be my boss.”

This may seem unusual for several reasons:

- My company is in Southern California; Guilherme is based in Brazil.
- I’ve earned my stripes as a fast-track corporate executive, and I’ve been a C-level consultant for a decade; Guilherme was just a few years out of college.
- On paper, I have all the “boss qualifications”; Guilherme has none.
- It’s my company.





An executive chose to have a Millennial lead him. Find out what happened.

But still, when I met Guilherme (pronounced ghee-yér-meh), I saw someone who could help me reach a new audience. He could help translate my old-school corporate approach to something that would connect in new ways with new people—individuals I hadn't even tried to connect with in the past. Traditionally, my target market has been C-level executives at major corporations, so I have focused on reaching out to high-level leaders who make all the decisions, perhaps relying too much on corporate speak and old leadership templates.

While it's true those C-level executives may be the decision makers at their organizations, the people they're making decisions for are younger professionals. As a younger professional himself, Guilherme kept questioning what I was doing and sharing ideas for how to change things. He had been helping me with entry-level marketing, but I realized his curious mind and questions were adding a new dimension to our products and services and to how we could market them. That's when I told him I wanted him to be my boss.

Obviously, I'm the owner, so there always will be decisions I have to make myself. But I genuinely wanted him to take charge. I saw this as an opportunity to learn from someone who is part of the generation that is reshaping everything.

It's not just about age; it's also about demographics

A note about language: I will occasionally refer to this cohort of younger professionals as Millennials, because that's a term most people recognize as referring to a generation that is both large in number and large in cultural impact. In reality, though, the term *young professionals* could encompass people from Generations X, Y, or Z.

Even more important, I believe age is just half of the equation when thinking about this population. We can't consider the younger population without acknowledging the demographic shifts that shape them. Based on data from the 2010 Census, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that the United States will become a majority-minority nation for the first time in 2043. While the non-Hispanic white population will remain the largest single group, no group will make up a majority.

That's just 25 years from now. People age 25 today will be 50 years old at that point. They will have spent their early career growing with that change. They are part of that change. In fact, Millennials are "more ethnically diverse, more technologically savvy and more educated than their predecessor generations," writes Paul Keckley in "My Take: Millennials Aren't Buying What We're Selling." He adds that one in five Millennials has immigrant parentage, and the majority have friends with a different ethnic background.

This is the Inclusion Generation. Guilherme is part of that. Why wouldn't I want him to influence my business? Why wouldn't anyone want to tap into the brains of the younger professionals who will be shaping the future of businesses—as consumers, employees, and leaders?

Guilherme is helping to open my mind to be more inclusive, and, as a result, I am exposed to perspectives that ensure I stay well ahead of the trends in my work.

Younger managing older is the new reality

According to the *Fast Company* article "5 Ways To Avoid Tomorrow's Leadership Mistakes," in the United States 10,000 people a day turn 65 years old, and nearly 80 percent are retired by that age; and by 2020, more than half of the workforce in most countries will be Millennials. As Baby Boomers retire, there are not enough Gen Xers to fill roles, so members of the younger generation will need to move up faster than previous generations did.

Millennials are expected to overtake Boomers in population in 2019, according to Pew Research Center. Generation X won't pass the Boomers in population until 2028. Millennials represent a larger share of consumers of company products and services, so companies need their insight.

Business is evolving fast, and younger employees often are more in tune with the changes that cater to a more informed and educated individual in the workplace and marketplace.

Deloitte's 2018 *Global Human Capital Trends* report reveals that a fundamental change is under way: "Organizations are no longer assessed based only on traditional metrics such as financial performance, or even the quality of their products or services. Rather, organizations today are increasingly judged on the basis of their relationships with their workers, their customers, and their communities, as well as their impact on society at large—transforming them from business enterprises into social enterprises."

Compared to their younger counterparts, seasoned professionals have more experience and probably have more expertise in their areas of specialty. But, in my experience, many younger professionals have different expertise that is more closely aligned with those fundamental changes in progress:

- an inclusivity that comes naturally, freeing them from traditional, com-

partmentalized approaches to organizational management

- an awareness and appreciation of people's differences, which leads to embracing diversity of thought
- a desire to do work that makes an impact on society, which keeps an organization accountable to its communities.

All these strengths help build the kind of organization that will be successful in what Deloitte is calling the rise of the social enterprise.

My company has been doing qualitative and quantitative research for many years, with thousands of people at hundreds of companies. One thing I've learned is this: People are most proficient executing the work they are assigned to complete but unable to see beyond the obvious opportunities. This is largely because that's how business has been organized until recently.


The old way: The business defines the individual. Leaders tell employees what to do and how to do it. Employees are measured based on how well they can do what they are told to do inside the box they are given. Employees operate from a desire to avoid failure and to get promoted.

The new way: The individual defines the business. Employees are rewarded for having and sharing ideas and for seizing opportunities previously unseen. They operate from a desire to exert influence and be significant for the betterment of a healthier whole.

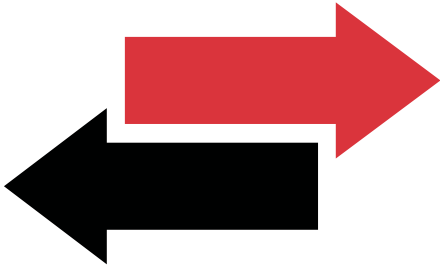
Many younger professionals are more in tune with the new way.

What it can look like in action

Guilherme and I proactively seek diversity of thought. I still come up with strategies, but I now run them through Guilherme—and vice versa, because he will see opportunities that I don't. What I'm doing is running my ideas through the filter in which he thinks. He tells me why he's interpreted something differently than I have. Now I understand what I can expect from how he leads and how he thinks, and his thinking has rubbed off on me.



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It also works the other way. There have been situations when a client made a decision Guilherme didn't understand, and I helped him see why a company would need to move more slowly on something than he would like.

The important thing is that we make it safe to be honest with each other. He recognizes and tells me when I'm agreeing to something out of expediency rather than being authentic. For example, one of our clients wanted to do something that was not in keeping with our value of authenticity—it was a small issue involving what to name an initiative. To me, it seemed easier and small enough to do what the client wanted rather than argue my case. Guilherme called me on it: "You teach people to be authentically themselves, so you have to be authentic, too, even in something small."

He was right. I was acting out the old pattern of just give them what they want, in a world in which that is not relevant anymore.

What Guilherme and I ended up with is mutual respect. That will happen organically as people work together if companies encourage inclusion in these new types of relationships.

Best practices to make it work

To make younger-managing-older work relationships effective, talent development professionals should follow this guidance:

- Recognize opportunities. Help both parties recognize the value of the other party and the growth opportunities available in this situation.
- Keep expectations open. The younger professional's management approach may differ from the organization's norm—and that is likely a good thing.
- Give all parties room to have, share, and pursue ideas that challenge the status quo.
- Encourage mutual respect. It may be hard for some older professionals to accept the entrepreneurial ideas of someone younger. Likewise, it may be hard for some younger employees to respect the ideas from someone they see as out of touch. In these situations, encourage them to ask each other why and how they came up with their idea. Make sure they actually listen to each other's reasons and keep pushing each other.
- Share success. Make sure contributions are recognized so that when one succeeds, the other does too.
- Help develop leadership personal brands. Give the younger

managers the tools to identify their leadership identity, so they can understand the unique contribution they can make to a project or team and the legacy that they are able to leave for the organization.

It takes wisdom, trust, and courage to be willing to let someone younger lead you. It was uncomfortable for me at first—not because I didn't trust Guilherme; I trust him with my life. It was uncomfortable because I realized that I needed to stretch myself beyond relying on my own hard-won expertise or experience. It's hard for most seasoned employees to admit we can benefit from the insight of someone who doesn't have the years or official credentials that we have. But I'm glad I recognized an opportunity for reinvention. I am still on top of my game—thanks to a Millennial.

If people are having a hard time adjusting to a new dynamic of someone younger than them leading, it's possible they are having the same realization I had: that things are changing fast. It's best to get out in front of it.

Change can be scary, but it also can be invigorating for those wise enough to see the opportunities of having access to younger leadership and a firsthand view into the future and what it will take to thrive in that future. For me, I saw someone who was not part of the problem—he would be part of my organization's solution, and the benefit of his influence would multiply through to our clients.

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