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Flex

The New Playbook For Managing Across Differences

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

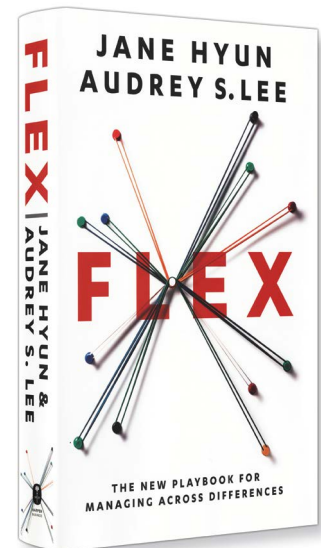
Renowned executive coaches and global leadership strategists Jane Hyun and Audrey S. Lee offer lessons on the vital skill of “Flexing” — the art of switching leadership styles to more effectively lead people who are different from you, allowing managers to successfully manage the multicultural workers of today and tomorrow.

Flex offers a proactive strategy for managers to navigate and leverage diversity effectively in this new global economy, showing managers how to understand the power gap, the social distance between you and those in the workplace of different cultures, ages, and gender; flex your management style by stretching how you work and communicate with others, and bridging the gap with more effective communication, feedback tools and building healthy teams; and multiply the effect by teaching these skills to others and closing the power gap with clients, customers and partners to create innovative solutions.

Creating flex in a company’s management style will impact all aspects of developing the talent you have, attracting future talent and building relationships with customers in this competitive marketplace. Now, *Flex: The New Playbook for Managing Across Differences* shows you how.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why flexing is good for business.
- How to find creative ways to bridge the power gap.
- How to develop the key traits of a fluent leader.
- How diverse thinking can drive innovation in your organization.



by Jane Hyun and Audrey S. Lee, with Leslie Miller

CONTENTS

What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

Page 2

Managing the Power Gap

Page 3

Culture and Communication: Flexing Across Styles

Page 4

Portrait of a Fluent Leader

Page 5

Navigate the Power Gap with Your Peers

Page 6

Onboarding Your Employees

Page 7

THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: FLEX

by Jane Hyun and Audrey S. Lee, with Leslie Miller

The authors: Jane Hyun is an internationally renowned global leadership strategist and consultant to Fortune 500 companies and MBA programs. She helps organizations grow their bottom line and achieve productivity through the effective deployment of human capital. In addition to *Flex*, she is the author of *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling*, and she appears regularly on CNN, CNBC, NPR, and *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, and *Washington Post* to discuss culture, authenticity, and leadership. She is passionate about helping people achieve their fullest potential in their workplaces and their communities.

Audrey Lee is an executive coach and global leadership and diversity strategist who consults with Fortune 500 companies to develop integrated leadership strategies impacting business practices throughout the organization. Prior to her work in leadership development, she managed key marketing initiatives in high-tech companies. She has written for *The New York Times*, Quartz.com, Forbes.com, AMA's MWorld Journal, and other publications.

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Introduction

In life and in business, all great relationships are built on the essential principles of trust and respect. When trust is present, it's exciting to watch relationships flourish, people and teams become productive, and companies prosper. The problems start when there is a breakdown in trust and when you fail to realize that people build trust in different ways. Barriers arise when workers from different cultural contexts expect others to behave the same way they do, without understanding that while the intent might be the same (e.g., to show respect), the behaviors might look very different.

To be sure, organizations have become more diverse — a global/multicultural workforce, more women and a new generation of workers have entered our ranks in large numbers; but many businesses have not yet figured out how to best engage the talent that they have successfully recruited. Due to the speed of change in our current business environment, leaders must be adept at leveraging their employees who work throughout their local markets around the world for input, wisdom and skills to survive.

We all need to learn a new skill set that will enable successful business interactions in our new diverse surroundings. Your country manager in Vietnam as well as your finance director sitting in headquarters in Chicago may lack the fluency required to work effectively with each other. We are simply not taught how to relate to people from other backgrounds, and these skills of *flexing* are not adequately taught in our educational systems, undergrad-

uate programs or business schools. (Flexing is adapting how one communicates, relates and responds to others in a manner that takes into account an understanding of status differences.) Although we are more connected globally as a workforce through technology, managers aren't actually better equipped to interact and communicate globally with people. And the stakes are significant. ●

PART I: GETTING INSIDE THE GAP

What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

Many managers are struggling, faced with a playing field that looks dramatically different from the one into which they were hired. As of June 2012, people of multicultural backgrounds (of Asian, African American and Latino/Hispanic descent) made up 36 percent of the labor force, according to the US Department of Labor. According to a McKinsey study, women held 37 percent of all jobs in the United States in 1970 and nearly half of all jobs in 2009. By 2025, three out of every four workers around the globe will belong to Gen Y.

Although companies might agree that they have done a decent job of recruiting a fair representation of women and multicultural employees, they are far from being certain about how to get the best ones to stay and realize their full potential. Without a more nuanced understanding of the interpersonal gaps between people, managers



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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Ashleigh Imus, Senior Editor; Amanda Langen, Graphic Designer; A. Imus, Contributing Editor

Summary: FLEX

will be at a loss as to how to bridge the distance between themselves and employees who possess different cultural values and drivers of success.

There is a solution to all this misunderstanding, miscommunication and missed opportunity. The answer lies in valuing differences in the leadership development of your employees and developing the qualities of a fluent leader. This ability to flex affects how we deal with power and status differences and how we communicate and relate to each other.

Flexing is Good for Business

The way you handle the social distance between yourself and employees (or clients) of different cultures, genders and ages can make or break your company. This distance, or the power gap, is the “amount of emotional distance that separates subordinates from their bosses,” as defined by Dutch social psychologist Mauk Mulder. Renowned intercultural expert Geert Hofstede showed that the power distance that is socially acceptable by the boss and employee depends largely on their national culture.

We apply the power gap to discuss the chasm that separates managers and employees, men and women, as well as employees of different generations and different cultures. In each of these relationships, we refer to this distance as the power gap. In particular, we see the impact of unspoken assumptions, crossed signals and confusion inside companies large and small across three key groups: culture, gender and generations.

Hardwired for Sameness

When it comes to navigating across differences, research shows that goodwill and positive intent are not enough. In the absence of an adaptive, fluent leader at the helm to encourage different viewpoints, there is tremendous pressure for employees to fit in to the existing leadership norms of the team. But employees may not thrive under this management approach, or they may resent the changes they are forced to make. Over time, some will simply tire of constantly going out of their natural comfort zone to fit in to the new culture and find an organization (or manager) that can tap in to their strengths more readily. Consequently, they will underperform or leave.

The Key Competency: Fluency

Our goal is to enable leaders to achieve what we consider to be the key competency for today’s leaders, what we call *fluency*. Like someone fluent in many languages, a truly fluent business leader is able to work and communicate effortlessly with many types of people who are different from him- or herself. We must be taught to view difference as latent potential, not as a liability.

To develop fluency, take a look at your own leadership. Here are the four management styles you might encounter. Try to assess in honest terms where you fall on your own journey toward becoming a fluent leader.

Style 1: The Blindsided Manager. Working with people who are different from you makes you feel uncomfortable, and/or you might have had limited experience interacting with them. You may not be aware of the gap existing between you and your direct reports due to the power distance, and are blindsided when things don’t always go the way that you expect. Therefore, most of the time, you don’t even notice your lack of ability in closing the gaps with them.

Style 2: The Judging Manager. You find individuals who relate differently to you annoying or feel that there is a better way to do things. You tolerate some differences, but when push comes to shove, you know that you have the right way of doing things. You expect your team to conform to your style.

Style 3: The Golden-Rule Manager. Diversity training and previous experience have taught you that it’s probably safest to treat everyone the same. You emphasize “fair treatment” and also believe that most people will respond positively if you treat them the way that you would want to be treated. You may subconsciously use your own experience and position in establishing the “universal template” for managing people.

Style 4: The Fluent Leader. You accept and are curious about potential differences across cultural, gender and generational lines. Instead of resorting to stereotypes to judge these differences, you begin your exploration and appreciate difference on an individual level. You use this knowledge to help correct negative behaviors and engage employees’ motivated skills and talents on a deeper level. You are able to flex across the power gap to be more effective with your direct reports. ●

Managing the Power Gap

Conventional wisdom would say that the outliers from the dominant culture — the multicultural workers, the more junior people, or perhaps the young, entry-level team members — should work to get their styles, values and communication in sync with their managers and feel empowered enough to close the power gap. However, conventional wisdom might not be right and may not always work. We’ve seen that the same dynamics repeat themselves time and time again as the unique perspectives

Summary: FLEX

of different groups are not understood by their managers, to the frustration of both sides.

As we examine the power gap dynamics, it is helpful to note the management and communication styles that exist at either extreme in the spectrum. Hierarchical management styles depend on standardized systems, value a great deal of control, and expect integration of others into the established system or order. Great deference is given to people in authority, and decision making is generally top-down. Hierarchical management styles roughly mirror traditional corporate company structures.

Egalitarian management styles are based on the doctrine of egalitarianism. In general, in a flat organizational environment, workers may share fairly equal authority in decision making. Egalitarian employees may feel comfortable questioning the manager and interacting less formally with him or her, whereas employees who are more hierarchical might wait for the manager to assign work, and maintain a safe distance.

How the Power Gap Manifests on Your Team

The more hierarchical your culture or background, the greater the power gap is apt to be. This is because hierarchical cultures reinforce the differences between managers and employees. The effect is that any power gap that exists is magnified through the lens of this dimension. A greater power gap can result in decreased communication as well as increased misunderstandings and conflict, potentially leading to missed opportunities for building significant business and career relationships.

But when managers choose to close the gap and meet their employee partway, they are *not giving away authority or respect*. Closing the power gap need not make a leader more vulnerable; in fact, it can do the opposite, creating trust and communication where before there was only conflict and poor performance.

Understanding the power gap dimension is *the* must-have survival skill in the high-stakes game of leading in the new age. As you move along your journey toward fluency, we encourage you to shift your mindset from the fear-based and conflict-avoidant model of the past and adopt a fluent leader's curious, proactive investigation of the new American workplace. ●

Culture and Communication: Flexing Across Styles

There are a myriad of styles and manners in which people build trust, relate to one another, and communicate

their needs and expectations. Your first step toward flexing, as a manager, is to learn to identify and examine the different styles and preferences of your employees through this lens. You should also analyze your own interaction preferences. Are you a group thinker or an individual decision maker? When you have to give tough feedback to your colleagues, do you tell it to them straight, or do you try to soften the blow? Are you expressive or more emotionally restrained? Understanding the nuances of each person's style will aid you in your ability to practice flexing in your leadership.

A Premium on Direct Communication

The acceptable norm in most American organizations is to employ a direct communication style. Overall, in American culture, we are more willing than in indirect cultures to confront a difficult situation, have it out, and get the issues on the table. Direct communicators expect that whatever words they say comprise the entirety of their message. Indirect communicators may rely on other signals, signs, codes and even third parties to communicate their meaning, and depend upon the receiver of the communication to decode their meaning and understand what they are trying to say.

In cultures where direct messages are preferred, people tend to distrust indirect communicators, as they are viewed as too vague or as intentionally deceptive or even manipulative. However, we should keep in mind that most indirect communicators are trying to get their message across just as clearly as their direct-communicating counterparts; they are simply using a different style.

In practice, indirect approaches can also be very effective, another means to get the message across in a different way. It encourages both parties to actively participate in thinking over a problem rather than telling someone that what they'd done is wrong. Being indirect is about mitigating your message to soften it — and that has its value, too, because the focus is building and maintaining a relationship. When being more indirect is warranted, effective techniques include phrasing a demand as a question or making it conditional through the use of *would, could, maybe*, etc.

How Do You Build Trust?

The dimension regarding relationship or task-oriented styles speaks to how you build trust with your coworkers, with your employees and with your bosses as well. This can be described in more succinct terms as tension between “being vs. doing.” Do you delve into the business agenda right away after an introduction, or do you require a more developed relationship before you feel comfortable advancing the business relationship?

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In general, Americans are very task- and results-oriented when it comes to building trust. An existing relationship isn't required in order to sign a contract or make a big business deal. Other cultures are much more relationship focused. Someone might need to know everything about you — from the background of your family, to the college you went to, to your entire career trajectory — before they would dream of putting pen to paper. What seems like wasted time to a results-oriented boss might be critical networking and relationship-building time to an employee who believes he or she simply can't move forward without it. ●

Portrait of a Fluent Leader

One of the greatest hurdles that leaders will face lies in knowing how to engage with people from other backgrounds. The question you will have to ask at every step is, "How do I define and/or identify what gap exists in my department, my division, at every level inside my firm? Then, what do I do to bridge that gap?" Becoming a fluent leader takes much more than just knowing the best way to hear from everyone on your team or reaching out to your direct report instead of waiting for her to come to you. We discovered six critical traits for a fluent leader that encompass the attitudes and behaviors needed to flex up, down and across:

Possessing Self- and Other-Awareness. Fluent leaders have a good grasp of their own strengths, weaknesses and preferences. Additionally, they are able to quickly discern the preferences of others in order to know how to flex their style. This trait in action shows a leader's cultural competence and emotional intelligence.

Adaptability: Adaptability is a key component of fluent leadership, indicating an ability to adapt to stretch your styles and preferences and sometimes exercise other styles to better interact with others. Fluent leaders are not only able to admit their mistakes; they recast them as teachable moments and are able to adapt to shifting styles and circumstances.

Comfort with Ambiguity and Complexity: Fluent leaders are unique in that they are able to break down complex situations and uncertainty. They know how to get to the root of the relevant issues and priorities in any given situation. They manage even tough situations and search for reconciliation.

Unconditional Positive Regard: Fluent leaders demonstrate *unconditional positive regard* (UPR), a term coined by psychologist Carl Rogers that signifies the unconditional acceptance of others, even in their vulnerable and weakest moments. Fluent leaders with UPR are able to envision the future state of a situation or of a person's

development, give feedback, and imagine future leadership potential for others.

Innovation: Fluent leaders are also marked by a tremendous and insatiable curiosity in other people, in their approach to differences, and in their innovative ways of building relationships and doing business. When they encounter something or someone they don't understand, their first reaction isn't avoidance — it's interest.

Flexing Across the Power Gap: Fluent leaders are comfortable owning a leadership identity and effective at managing up, down and across the organization as well as with customers and vendors. They understand their power gap preferences and those of others on the hierarchical vs. egalitarian spectrum. They close the power gap and forge trusting relationships with all levels, through empathy, trust and integrity. ●

PART II: THE KILLER APP: FLEXING ACROSS THE GAP

Power Gap Principle: Flex Your Management Style

We all have a default mode of relating to people. The art of flex lies in noticing when your preferred mode of relating to people is not shared by those different from you and then reaching across the power gap in search of a solution. When working across differences, the same strategies may not work and may not have the same outcome you intended. It's imperative that all of us develop the ability to flex our styles if we want the best performance out of those who work for us.

Remember that flexing requires decreasing the power gap with your team members. It is about exercising a variety of responses to make you more adaptable and fluent. Flexing is also about context: customizing and individualizing your approach to the person and situation, as you might do when raising three very different children, each with distinct learning styles and personalities. Finally, flexing always starts with authenticity. Show who you are and what you value, and then extend your curiosity toward others.

Look for Creative Ways to Bridge the Power Gap

Without realizing it, your open-door policy might actually be shutting a fair number of your employees out. Before you can investigate the motivations for their behavior, you must embrace the fact that we often work with individuals who view the world through an entirely different lens — not better or worse, just different. It's crit-

Summary: FLEX

ical you not judge their behavior as wrong and first simply allow yourself to see the difference.

Most managers and executives are now trained to eradicate or ignore difference in our workplaces as a defense against legal action. However, it is only by forgoing assumptions and judgments that we can explore the potential motivations behind that behavior, then identify solutions. Once you've noticed who's not in the room or who's left out of the conversation, you need to start investigating why they aren't there. For varying reasons, different employees may not feel that they have built sufficient rapport with their bosses to just "drop by." They may feel it's their duty to solve problems on their own and spare you the aggravation and potential embarrassment. Try to understand whether the difference is cultural, rooted in gender or a generational gap.

Making the First Move: Five Steps to Productive Dialogue

If an employee is failing to participate or hasn't given you a key piece of information, here's a step-by-step framework for engagement:

1. Initiate a one-on-one conversation about a situation you have observed that you are interested in exploring.
2. Describe the impact of these actions on you and connect it to business objectives; make sure you avoid blaming the person.
3. Investigate what is beneath the surface of the behavior; examine the intentions, values and motivations that might be driving the behavior and the barriers that might be keeping the employee from developing new, effective behavior.
4. Explain why this behavior is so critical to your productivity and to your team dynamics.
5. Develop a plan of action for new behaviors that the employee can practice to bring his or her intentions, values and core motivations into alignment with the impact of the behavior.

The new challenge is to understand the varying needs of those who bring a different lens to working in your environment. Make the connections, be proactive, and don't wait for your employees to close the gap with you. ●

Navigate the Power Gap with Your Peers

As a leader, you not only need to be able to close the gap with your superiors and those who work for you;

you need to be particularly skilled at managing *sideways*, to flex to your peers and those who work in other functions of the organization to move your project forward. The pros of effectively managing the gap with your peer colleagues include allowing you to maintain your status in the hierarchy; creating allies in the organization; fostering a stronger team relationship; building credibility and your own cultural capital; and identifying you as a leader.

Some peer relationships might appear equal on the surface — two people share the same title, the same level, and perhaps report to the same boss but display wildly different communication and cultural perspectives. Add in differences of culture, gender or generation, and you have an even wider power gap to manage.

Peer or Competitor

People often wear multiple hats in a single role: While you are on the same team and expected to play well with others, there is still the expectation that you need to differentiate yourself from your peers. You are not only colleagues; you are competitors. Some companies assess performance through ranking or quintiling, processes HR departments are charged with to ensure that the star employees are receiving promotions, bonuses and stock offerings while the lowest-ranked employees or bottom 20 percent are probably on their way out the door. Under that kind of pressure, where the competition from coworkers could literally mean your job, reaching out to close the gap with your peer might seem almost counterintuitive.

However, we believe it is important that you do set the tone for how a relationship can progress right from the start. Truly fluent leaders will find ways to flex across to peers, across differences, and even in the face of resentment and friction. Proven strategies to reach across the gap include befriending your peers. Extending a heartfelt "I can learn a lot from you" can go a long way toward eradicating animosity and getting you on the same team. Also, extend yourself and offer your own skills and help. If you have risen faster in the ranks, stem jealousy and competition by sharing ideas about how you can share power in your new position. But don't just say it. Give credit to those who have supported your ideas, and reciprocate often. ●

Connecting with Customers and Partners

Business success is not just about flexing your management style to better reach people who are different from

Summary: FLEX

you inside your organization. It's also directly tied to your relationship building, the underlying foundation to all selling, negotiating and client-development practices. If you are able to notice, appreciate and ultimately leverage the difference between you and your global clients as well as build trust and communication with your external vendors, your business will thrive.

Aligning the Inside and the Outside of Your Organization

What does it mean to align your internal and external business culture? One tangible example of reaching external markets through internal leadership is IBM's creation of its Market Development group, tasked with growing the company's market share with minority and women-owned businesses. It does so by various strategies, including partnering with external vendors to provide sales and service to the many small- to medium-sized businesses run by minorities and women. It leveraged its internal cultural capital to reach into underutilized markets to great effect, understanding that, as David Thomas, dean of Georgetown's McDonough Business School, put it, "diversity was an untapped business resource."

You don't have to be a company as large as IBM to use a similar strategy. Smaller companies and organizations also have affinity groups or employee resource groups (ERGs) already in place. If leadership commits to the power and possibility of these groups and invests in their ability to leverage their cultural capital to the company's and the constituency's benefit, ERGs can function as an excellent bridge to connect your organization with your partners and customers.

Working With Overseas Partners

Whether you have a customer base in another country or have operations in another country for global distribution, it's critical that you bridge the gap between you and your vendors, even if you have the upper hand in the relationship. Simply expecting your vendors to communicate in the same way you do and operate with the same set of values will probably open you up to disappointment and missed opportunity. Using flex skills to close the gap with external partners and vendors, however, can turn even difficult situations into win-wins.

Some of the most effective ways we have found to overcome differences in communication styles and culture include the following:

- Give the partner or customer explicit ownership over their own expertise.
- Provide a platform for open discussion, giving them permission to speak honestly about their needs.

- Establish expectations in a way that honors their contribution.
- Clearly explain your requirements as well as the reasons behind them.
- Close with questions.

These closing questions can prove key. Offering humility on your part and offering your help to meet shared goals are a few ways to share power and get great results. ●

PART III: MULTIPLYING YOUR SUCCESS

Onboarding Your Employees

When new employees receive an orientation, it is typically a single event that takes an hour or two to complete. For the most part, these sessions deliver static data such as benefits, processing information and official company policy. We invite you to rethink how you bring new hires and new team members into the fold, particularly to reflect the vast array of cultural, generational and gender perspectives that your incoming hires will bring. For many, the first few weeks of work provide the best and most fertile opportunity to bridge the gap and create immediate trust and enhance communication with your incoming talent. *Onboarding* is the updated term that organizations have come up with to replace *orientation*.

We see onboarding as a company-initiated talent development process whereby the hiring manager, with the support of HR leadership, designs the most appropriate and useful entrée for new employees to be enfolded into the team. Good onboarding defines the intentional way you introduce new people to how things get done inside your organization and provides a true insider's perspective on who the players are; what the company culture is really like from the inside and how things get done; developing your personal career objectives; GARP (generally accepted rules for promotion) specific to the organization; and understanding the internal power dynamics.

Bridging the Gap with Employees New to the Company

For employees new to the company, the onboarding process is a rich opportunity not only to express clearly your mission, company values and internal processes but also to bridge the gap and understand the values that shape their interactions and preferred communication style. When you notice moments of disconnection or that you don't understand, apply these pre-engagement questions to ask yourself about your new hire:

Summary: FLEX

- What are they thinking? What's behind the action?
- What don't they know about our company culture that's causing a disconnect?
- How do I connect with this person?
- How will I pass on both formal expectations and explain the unwritten rules?
- Can I connect this person with other stakeholders or an internal buddy to help her find her way?

Don't overlook the importance of relationship building in this early and critical stage. It's every bit as important for a new hire to focus on building trust as it is for companies seeking to form new relationships with global partners. The relationships form the basis for all future interactions. ●

Leveraging Diverse Thinking from Your Teams to Drive Innovation

Hiring a diverse workforce is not enough. People must be trained to work with difference, and the importance of diverse ideas and process must be cultivated in order for a company to spur creative thinking. In many ways, innovation is the utmost application of closing the power gap. It requires people to manage up, down and across peers to work through differences, be receptive to good ideas no matter where they originate, and encourage risk taking.

How Difference Drives Innovation

When you're forced to stay out of your comfort zone and are challenged by new information and points of view, the creative part of your mind is stimulated. These are just a few of the ways that having diverse teams can contribute to innovative thinking and processes: A diversity of opinions and experiences encourage creativity, adaptability and original thinking; diverse environments that value individual opinions are more likely to create a sustainable shift in one's mindset; diverse teams are able to leverage their more extensive networks and cultural capital to increase what is possible or thought to be possible to achieve.

Overcoming the Barriers to Innovation Through Flex

To create a culture of innovation, new ideas and risk-taking need to be encouraged and not penalized. As a fluent leader, approach each individual team member and assess how they might push into new territory and what that looks like for them. It's also important to know how each team member takes in information, processes it and then spits it back out. You will need to be attuned to these

differences in thought and process and create a variety of organizational opportunities for ideas to come to the table. Consider these strategies:

Diversify your forums for debate and exchange.

To capture the widest possible variety of ideas and opinions, you need to offer a wide range of organizational opportunities where people can exchange ideas and debate their merits. These can range from a suggestion box or feedback forms or designated blue-sky days.

Create sponsors at all levels. As you're building this environment, ensure there are sponsors for each team member and initiatives at all levels of the hierarchy. Create a culture where everyone at all levels is valued. If someone has a great idea, there is a forum or channel for that innovation to be tapped. Ensure people are open to a full team perspective.

Access internal and external voices to drive innovation. Innovative thinking requires that you hear from all the participants at all angles. Internally, it's crucial that you are listening vertically down the command chain and that departments hear one another's perspectives. Forge ways to connect to external points of view and close the customer gap. Speak to the people who are in direct contact with your customers, or connect regularly with virtual and offsite teams to get their perspective.

If there is one prerequisite to harnessing the full creative power of tomorrow's talent, it is this: We must be able to address and navigate through difference. We mustn't be afraid to have the conversation and work through complicated, misunderstood, messy or loaded issues. And we must become willing to go outside our own comfort zones and extend an invitation toward those different from us to meet in the middle.

If there is to be a change in how we recruit, reward and advance our best talent, it means committing to practice and persistence, continuing to apply the principles of flex while making it a part of your ingrained management process. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Flex*, you'll also like:

1. ***Winning with Transglobal Leadership* by Nazneen Razi, Ph.D., Peter Barge, Robert A. Cooke, Ph.D., Linda D. Sharkey, Ph.D.** The authors deliver an easily implemented process for assessing your organization's global capability and developing the leaders who will drive success.
2. ***The 2020 Workplace* by Jeanne C. Meister, Karie Willyerd.** Meister and Willyerd present a functional guide to help you and your organization create tomorrow's workplace of choice.
3. ***The Inclusion Dividend* by Mark Kaplan, Mason Donovan.** In today's increasingly diverse, global, interconnected business world, investing in diversity and inclusion pays off. Kaplan and Donovan explain how.