

*For Emre and Esra -  
some things for you to keep in mind*

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*JUST TO KEEP IN MIND* CAME INTO BEING IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 pandemic and went to press in Turkish in 2022. Several of the essays reflect changes brought on by the pandemic and the isolation we endured. The Turkish book is rendered here in translation, and it reflects a knowledge standpoint from 2022. What was going on then? Life and work were returning to in-person. The planet was continuing its warming streak. We hadn't yet heard of ChatGPT.

In the essay titled "Nations United," I grapple with climate disasters heading into 2022. At the time, the planet was on a seven-year streak of record heat. As I write this preface, we have reached a streak of nine. When I mention we have 10 years left to find a solution, it's now only eight.

For readers who are not familiar with Türkiye, it may also be useful to say a few words about the Eczacıbaşı Group. Founded in 1942 by my late father, Nejat Eczacıbaşı, the Group is primarily known for pioneering the modern pharmaceutical industry in Türkiye. (Our surname, which means "chief pharmacist," reflects our family history.) Today, as one of Türkiye's leading industrial groups, Eczacıbaşı has 50 companies in various sectors, including bathrooms, tiles, consumer goods, natural resources, and health, most with global operations. Following our founder's example, the Group remains a well-known initiator and supporter of some of Türkiye's foremost social institutions, particularly in the arts, sports, and business.

In these essays, the Turkish language plays an important role, not only as my language of thought and composition, but also as a subject of interest and concern. Together with my translation and editorial team, I've worked to bring these aspects to life in the English version, particularly in "Fighting Pseudo-Turkish on Every Front."

It's my hope that you come away from these essays with a keener sense of business life in Türkiye and much food for thought on topics that concern us all globally.

A note on language: Turkish spelling uses diacritical marks to distinguish different ways to pronounce letters of the alphabet. For example, our family name, Eczacıbaşı [ɛdʒza:dʒəba'ʃə] has the un-accented "i" vowel without the dot and the "ş" that sounds like "sh." Except in cases where a Turkish word is common parlance in English, like Istanbul or Izmir, we have maintained Turkish spelling for names and words that appear in the book.

*October, 2023*

B Ü L E N T E C Z A C I B A Ş I

009

FOREWORD

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010

“WE LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE THAT MEN NEVER LEARN ANYTHING FROM experience.” So says George Bernard Shaw, a keen observer of humankind. It’s not a statement that sits well with “senior” businesspeople, like myself, who take pride in being “experienced.” I must register my strongest objection!

Young people run faster, but we know the shortcuts better. Did you ever hear that one, Mr. Shaw?

To be truthful, I’m not here to make undue claims that my nearly 50 years in business will serve as a guiding light for younger generations. In this age of extremely rapid change, I think it’s natural for young people to feel they’ve just swallowed a powerful sedative when someone starts a story with “Back in our day...”

My generation, the baby boomer generation, has less and less to say to Gens X and Y, who have long since found positions of their own in corporate management. In fact, the opposite is true: These younger colleagues will guide us in reading the future for as long as we baby boomers retain our management roles.

That said, it’s not easy to embrace the notion that decades of experience are of no use at all. There are times when we learn a lesson from something that happened to us, or reach a conclusion about a topic we’ve been pondering, and we make a mental note to keep it in mind. I wrote this book to share notes of this kind, ones I believe are relevant for readers interested in a life in business today.

Ever since completing my first book, *A Rip in the Sea* [*İşim Gücüm Budur Benim*], published first in Turkish in 2018, I’ve wanted to try a different approach to establishing a dialogue with readers. I imagined a conversation, an evolving exchange of questions and answers. Encouraged by how easily readers can access information these days, I wanted to write essays that say: “This is what I recall, this is what I know, this is what I think,” without going into academic arguments to prove the views expressed.

Montaigne’s *Essays*, a book that never leaves my nightstand, was my inspiration. In an act of audacity, I followed in the footsteps of the great master and started to write essays of my own. I reached the point of 39 and a half, and I stopped. Why 39 and a half and not 40? Readers will learn the answer!

During the writing, I became aware, once again, that the very effort of composing a few lines about a subject is the best path to understanding it. I’m delighted to share the results of this process – one that taught me a great deal – with readers who take an interest in business life and management.

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**My Son  
and I,  
and the  
Talking  
Frog**

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THE ECZACIBAŐI GROUP RECENTLY ADOPTED A SLOGAN TO CONVEY THE value we place on younger generations: "Young people matter at EczacıbaŐı!" We're making every effort to ensure this assertion isn't an empty promise by supporting it with tangible policies. We're studying the kinds of work conditions young people desire. We're developing programs that enable young people to attend events organized by the culture and art institutions we support, at highly reduced entrance fees, even free of charge. Only in the next generations will we find the vital energy to carry our organizations into the future, along with the knowledge and skills we'll need in tomorrow's world.

Our Group isn't alone in these efforts, of course. The vast majority of companies around the world are doing all they can to be attractive to young people, to draw the most talented among them to their organizations, and to sell them products and services. What could be more natural? There's a platitude people like to use: "The future belongs to young people." It's an obvious statement, a tautology devoid of ideas.

But now, in addition to attracting young people, we see organizations are consumed by another concern: not understanding people from younger generations, not being able to respond to their expectations...

When the alarm bells grow louder and louder, organizations sometimes hire consultants to facilitate intergenerational dialogue. They, in turn, issue steep invoices – up to US\$20K an hour – thereby fulfilling the primary condition of being "in demand." You will find hundreds of specialists in this field on LinkedIn.

My generation is called the baby boomers. We came into this world between 1946 and 1964, after World War II, when there was an explosion in births. We're followed by Generation X, which comprises people born between 1965 and 1979. People born between 1980 and 1995 are Gen Y, or Millennials, while Gen Z refers to people born between 1996 and 2010. Gen Alfa is the name for babies born in the present period. Researchers may differ slightly on the dates of these generational intervals.

There are bookshelves of studies on the differences between members of each generation. According to some researchers, each generation has certain unique attributes with respect to their value judgements, lifestyle choices, and work habits. Differences in these attributes are at the

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root of why the generations have trouble understanding and cooperating with one another.

I have absolutely no objection to grouping people according to their date of birth and then naming these generations. If someone's age can tell you something about them, their generation can tell you almost as much. But if labeling leads to biases, things get messy. When studies assert that people born in such-and-such a time have this-and-that attribute, they begin to resemble the interpretations of astrologers who categorize people according to their Zodiac signs. It seems to me such classifications fail the basic test of science because they're not "falsifiable."

There's another matter I can't puzzle out: It's said the years between age 9 and 19 are very important in determining personality traits. Events during this period of life leave deep marks on a person's character, especially with respect to family, friends, and country. How is it possible, then, that people born in the same time period are similar to one another if they spent their childhood and teenage years in very different geographies? Can children who grow up in Japan, India, Türkiye and the United States, shaped by very different conditions, exhibit the same personality traits?

Worldwide, there are close to two billion "young" people in the 15 to 30 age group; that's nearly one quarter of the global population. How do we fit all these people inside two boxes labeled Gens Y and Z?

These days, employees from the four generations spanning from baby boomers to Gen Z are working side by side in our companies. I don't think personality traits attributed to each generation differentiate them, nor do I see sharp lines between them. We've all heard about the selfishness and laziness of Gen Y – the Millennials. In 2013, one of *Time* magazine's cover stories was "The Me, Me, Me Generation." Members of Gen Y are the children of the original "Me Generation," the baby boomers, whom they greatly outpace in selfishness. According to statistics, the rate of narcissistic personality disorder among Millennials is three times higher than their parents' generation.

The truth is, I don't find young people to be overly self-righteous or selfish. When they apply themselves to exciting work, they're as hardworking as older employees. Either there are cultural differences between our environment and wherever the research was done, or we have a tendency

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to engage in unnecessary classification, forgetting we're all "products of our time."

This sort of classification leads to a number of problematic generalizations. Psychologists call this "stereotyping." When we say "So-and-so is selfish because they're from Gen Y," we're stereotyping them. Then there's meta-stereotyping. When we say, "This person is from Gen Y, so they look down on me," that's an example of meta-stereotyping.

Not only do stereotypes prevent us from evaluating people according to objective criteria, they also influence our relationships and breed conflict. Every age has its unique conditions. These days, more young people like working remotely, because they can – they have access to technologies that didn't exist before. They can open their laptop wherever they are and provide a service to a company from anywhere in the world. Young people want authority and responsibility because they know rigid organizational structures with command and control management are passé. When they haven't found what they're looking for, young people change jobs more easily because well-educated young people have more options. According to many studies, I should point out, this frequently cited observation isn't quite true; it's a stereotype based on hypermobility in the highly visible technology sector.

If we ignore evolving conditions and get stuck in generational stereotypes, we'll reach the wrong conclusions. For example, a stereotype related to older generations learning with greater difficulty can mean that some key executives don't receive the training they need, and the company ends up paying the price.

There's no doubt a person's age influences their worldview. When I encounter diverging opinions arising from age and generational differences, I prefer to say, "They think this way because they're young," without looking at the labels attached to the generation.

A joke:

An old man and his son are walking along when they see a frog on the side of the road. The frog begins to speak and says, "If you kiss me I'll become a beautiful princess."

Upon hearing these words, the old man reaches down, puts the frog in his pocket, and continues on his way.

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His son, whose dream of meeting the beautiful princess with one kiss was shattered in an instant, asks in bewilderment: "What are you doing, Father?"

To which the old man replies, "A talking frog is of much more interest to me than a beautiful princess."

I think the joke is funny, but I also think it's worth considering the message, which is this: The views of father and son are diametrically opposed, but both are right from their own perspective...

Disparities between generations can cause younger and older people to see things as polar opposites. Naturally, these differences in viewpoints can affect rapport at work.

Just as intergenerational teams may experience diverging opinions, they may also give rise to valuable learning opportunities for all parties. Sometimes, through our mentoring program, I meet up with young people who've just entered business life. I benefit so much from our productive conversations that I often wonder who is mentoring whom. Younger people have a lot to learn from older people, and older people from younger people... For exactly this reason, reverse mentoring is becoming more common.

Once, at a university event, a student is reported to have said to former US President Ronald Reagan:

"Your generation can't understand us young people. You grew up in a different world. Today we have television, jet planes, space travel, nuclear energy, computers..."

"You're right. We didn't have any of those things," Reagan replied. "We invented them."

Young or old, no one has the right to look down on anyone. But complaints about young people are never-ending. You can find frequent references to disparaging remarks made by ancient Greek philosophers, including Aristotle, about the rudeness and disrespect of young people. I'm not sure about the reliability of these sources, but they ring true; it wouldn't surprise me in the least that the old people of 2500 years ago thought young people had gone astray.

Young people want to change the world; older people want to change young people. So it always has been and always will be...

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There's no point in looking for deep fractures in the transition between generations. True, the internet has opened the way for tremendous change. For the first time, young people entering the business world have grown up with digital technology, never needing to learn it later in life like us. They carry personal access to all the data in the world in their pockets. Sometimes we're amazed by skills that are foreign to us. But their basic aspirations aren't any different from those of previous generations. Since the Stone Age, 600 generations of humans have passed through our world. Though change is now very fast, I still don't believe that the 601st generation will suddenly fill our companies with creatures whose language we don't understand, whose thoughts we can't decipher, and with whom we can only communicate via consultants.

"The youth of today think only about money" and "Young people will turn everything upside-down" are clichés we can do without. Instead, we can establish effective communication with young people. We can focus on how our societies can give them a world-class education and assist them in acquiring expertise and skills applicable anywhere in the world. We can consider carefully how the work we give them will increase their creative power, help them develop themselves, and, most importantly, add meaning to their lives.

Whichever generation a person belongs to, people look for "meaning" in all they do. The only thing that changes between generations is the content of that "meaning." These days, the new generations' search for meaning revolves around sustainability.

Young people are right... As always!