

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/a-fish-out-of-water/>

When he joined Airbnb in 2013 as the head of global hospitality and strategy after selling his boutique hotel business, 52-year-old Chip Conley found himself surrounded by millennials who seemed to be speaking a different language. He describes how he was able to flourish far outside of his natural habitat by embracing curiosity and asking questions about how different generations could learn from each other.



Transcript

- It was my third day on the job at a hot Silicon Valley startup in early 2013.. I was more than double the age of the dozen engineers in the room.. I'd been brought into this hot startup because I was a seasoned expert in my field.. But in this particular group of geniuses, young geniuses and engineers, I felt like a complete newbie.. So I did everything I could to actually be invisible.. And then the 25 year old wizard, who was leading the meeting, turned to me and said, "Chip, if you shipped a feature "and no one used it, did it really ship?" I looked at him, my jaw dropped and I said, "Chip is in deep ship because I have "no idea what you're talking about." (laughing) There was an awkward silence.. He moved on to someone else.. I slid down in my chair and I could not wait for that meeting to end.. That was my introduction to Airbnb more than six years ago.. I'd been asked by the three millennial Co-founders to come in and be the head of global hospitality and strategy, as well as the in house mentor to Brian Chesky, the CEO and Co-founder..

Now I'd spent from age 26 to 52 being a boutique hotel entrepreneur.. And so I had a lot of hospitality knowledge accumulated, but after my first week on the job at Airbnb, I realized that the brave new home sharing world didn't need most of my old school bricks and mortar hospitality insights.. A stark reality rocked me.. What in the hell do I have to offer these people? I'm twice their age, on average.. I've never worked in a tech company.. By the way, back then in early 2013, when Brian said to me, when he was trying to convince me to join the company, he said, "I'm gonna Uber over to your home "and let's talk about it." And I said, "What's that? "What's Uber?" (laughing) I didn't have an Uber or Lyft app on my phone in early 2013.. So I was in a place that was not my natural habitat.. I was also 52 years old, which is not exactly the age where people try new things to sort of see if they're gonna succeed or fail.. But instead of actually turning my nervousness, my anxiety into judgment against these young geniuses, I decided to see if I could match my wise eyes with their fresh eyes.. And I actually started to imagine myself as almost like a modern Margaret Mead amongst the millennials, because I actually got curious..

I got curious about what we could learn from each other and I came to realize that we had a lot to learn from each other.. So, that brought me to a point in my first few months at Airbnb, about six years ago, where I started to ask the question, why is it that we, as different generations, we have five generations in the workplace, for the very first time.. Why is it that we almost treat each other like separate countries on the same continent.. We actually haven't learned how to open up the borders and the dialects so we can actually learn from each other.. And I truly believe that one of the critical trade agreements of our time, in the 21st century, is learning how to create an intergenerational potluck that all of us can actually take advantage of..