How to Lead Direct Reports Who Are Older Than You

Leadership - 27 July 2026 - By Dr. Amitabh Kumar

A common, rarely discussed discomfort

Leading a direct report who is significantly older, or who has considerably more tenure or experience than you, is one of the more quietly uncomfortable leadership situations, for both people involved. The new leader may feel they need to prove themselves more than usual, and the older team member may feel, fairly or not, that they are being managed by someone with less real-world experience than they have. Left unspoken, both of these concerns tend to create friction that neither side can quite name.

Why pretending the dynamic does not exist rarely works

Some new leaders try to manage this by avoiding the topic entirely, hoping competence alone will settle the question over time. This can work eventually, but it often leaves an unspoken tension in the relationship for longer than necessary. Addressing it directly and respectfully, typically in your first or second one-to-one, tends to resolve the discomfort faster than letting it go unaddressed.

What tends to help

Lead with genuine curiosity about their experience. Early in the relationship, ask directly what they have learned in their time in the role or the organisation that you should know. This is not a performance of humility; it is an accurate acknowledgement that they likely know things you do not yet, and it signals respect without undermining your own authority.

Be explicit about what you do and do not bring. A brief, honest acknowledgement, "I know you have more experience in this area than I do, and I want to draw on that, while also being clear about the decisions that are now mine to make," tends to land better than either false confidence or excessive deference.

Base authority on clarity and fairness, not on claimed superior knowledge. Jim Collins, in Good to Great, describes a style of leadership built on humility combined with fierce professional resolve, what he terms Level 5 Leadership, which tends to work particularly well in this situation: a leader does not need to out-experience an older report to lead them well, only to be fair, clear and genuinely committed to good outcomes.

Make decisions when decisions are needed. Deferring too much to an older report's opinion out of discomfort with the age gap can itself become a problem, read as a lack of genuine leadership. The goal is respectful incorporation of their input, not abdication of your own role.

Watch for your own overcompensation. Some younger leaders, aware of the dynamic, overcorrect by being unusually directive or formal with older reports specifically, which often reads as insecurity rather than confidence. Consistency of style across your whole team, adjusted for the individual rather than for age specifically, tends to be read as fairer.

What this is ultimately built on

Most of the research on trust in leadership, including the widely cited trust equation popularised by David Maister in The Trusted Advisor, credibility, reliability and intimacy, divided by self-orientation, points to the same conclusion here: age is a weak predictor of whether a leader is trusted. Consistency, fairness and genuine low self-orientation, visibly prioritising the team's interests over your own need to appear in control, tend to matter far more, and are entirely within a younger leader's ability to build.