Managing the Next Generation at Work

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Most of us are aware of the fact that for the first time in history there are four distinct generations in the workplace. They are usually divided into the following categories: Traditionalists/Veterans (born between 1922-1945); Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964); Generation X (born between 1965-1982); and Millennials (born between 1983-2000). While most managers have experience working with the first three generations listed, the group that seems to present the greatest challenge is the most recent – the Millennials.

If you talk to supervisors anywhere, their frustration in dealing with this group bubbles up to the surface before very long. Their observations and concerns usually sound like this: “These kids just don’t know how to work. They don’t show up on time or at all. They want to start at the top in pay and job title. They aren’t loyal to their employer. They question everything. They have the attention span of a gnat. And they think they are entitled to everything. How are we supposed to manage employees with such poor work ethics and attitudes?”

The truth is, we have no choice but to work with and manage the Millennial generation. If we are going to successfully manage this generation of employees, we need to know what skills are necessary to achieve our workplace performance goals. The Veterans only make up about 8% of the workforce, and they are disappearing fast. Baby Boomers are starting to retire in greater numbers. Generation X will be around for a while, but their numbers are small compared to the Millennials. In the next 10 to 15 years, the Millennials will become the largest segment of the workforce. When we look at the Millennials, we are looking at the future workforce.

So the task before us is to strip away the generalizations, the prejudices, and the negative attitudes. If we honestly want to be successful with this group, we need to understand them. What do they want? What do they value? What makes them tick? How do we engage them in what we are doing? If we understand them, we can manage them.

I believe that understanding the Millennials begins with looking at the events and people that have influenced their lives. Millennials, born between 1983 and 2000, are also known as “Echo Boomers” because their parents are mostly Baby Boomers. They are also referred to as “Generation Me,” based on the appearance that they are confident, demanding and self-absorbed. Their final moniker is the “Internet Generation” since they have grown up with computers, computer connectivity, and the widespread use of global computing.

Millennials grew up in non-traditional families with a record number of divorces. Nearly 1 in 4 grew up in a single parent household. Inside those households, nearly 3 out of 4 had working mothers. Both parents usually had an active role in child-rearing. Even though their family structure appears to be fractured in many respects, their parents were very involved in their activities and education. Millennials are also the most educated American generation in history. While many of their parents helped with coaching and leading their school activities, ancillary
activities, and sports teams, this generation of parents also spawned the term “helicopter parents” for their tendency to hover over and immerse themselves in every aspect of their children’s lives. In spite of this over-involvement, many Millennials frequently found themselves on their own for stretches of time at a relatively early age.

Whenever Millennials participated in activities, it was almost always through established programs and systems. If they wanted to play baseball or softball, they would sign up for a team. They had uniforms, manicured fields and schedules. Parents had to develop systems for transportation, team activities, practices, and procurement of personal equipment. If you were to suggest that they go find neighborhood friends and put together a pick-up game in a nearby lot, they would look at you as if you had two heads – but show them a plan and a system for participation, and they thrive.

These family influences helped produce a generation that has a strong sense of self worth; they tend to be ambitious and believe they can accomplish anything. Millennials thrive in systems that have clear goals and objectives.

The events that helped shape this generation over the past twenty years include:

- Rap and Hip Hop Music
- Oklahoma City Bombing
- Lewinsky Scandal
- Columbine and Other School Shootings
- Dot Com Crash
- Religious Scandals
- Enron and Corporate Scandals
- War in Iraq
- Proliferation of Communications and Mobile Technology
- 9/11
- PSU / Sandusky Sex Scandal

Let’s think about the impact that these events must have had on this generation’s psyche growing up. While their parents and grandparents would have great respect for authority figures, this generation saw the leaders of government, religion, community, industry, and education repeatedly fail moral and ethical tests. Domestic and foreign terrorists have taken away any sense that we are safe. When you ask them if programs like Social Security and Medicare will be there for them when they retire, they laugh. Why would they automatically trust authority figures? Why wouldn’t they question everything? Blind faith may be lost on the most educated generation ever. Their guard is up, and with good reason. They view their lives as more important than their careers. They want work that has meaning and the y want to make a difference. They do not tolerate mundane, pointless tasks. And they will not follow a leader just because he or she is a leader. Nobody gets a free pass.
**Millennials as Employees**

Most Baby Boomers seem to have adopted the motto “Work, work, work, work, work, work, work, work. Die.” Careers may be important to their Millennial children, but not at the expense of their personal lives. Salary is important, but so is flexibility in scheduling. Paid leave and part time options are also highly valued. They want variable, meaningful, challenging work, and they want to understand the reasons behind doing something. Work and tasks have to make sense to them. Millennials want to see a way to contribute, to make a difference. They look for engagement and opportunities for achievement and advancement. If these things are not apparent to them in the job they have with you, they will look for them elsewhere. Loyalty? Hey, you only live once! Go for the brass ring, or get off of the merry-go-round...and they do, with regularity. What many of us see as disloyalty by this generation of employees is really dissatisfaction with the number and quality of career opportunities. Another factor influencing whether or not they stay in your employment is their relationship (or lack of) with their immediate supervisor. As a supervisor, you may be most interested in getting the work done. **These employees are most interested in their careers.** If you fail to understand this and do not work toward meeting these needs, you will lose them either physically or emotionally – or both.

Surprisingly, Millennials do respect authority and the life experiences of their superiors and coworkers if it is genuine and earned. They value a good working relationship with their immediate supervisor. Generally, Millennials have high expectations of their bosses and the work experiences related to their careers. They like their relationship with their boss to be informal and engaging; if possible, they want their work and relationships to be fun as well. They appreciate patience and a willingness to explain and clarify job responsibilities. Because they have grown up on teams and participating through systems, they have collaborative spirits and are generally good team players. They understand the value of working together for the common good. As with all employees, communication is a huge key to success: Millennials like to get informal communication that feels positive to them. They appreciate personalization. But having grown up with multiple media and ever-expanding computer capabilities, they prefer electronic communication to meetings or face-to-face conversations. They love social media. They live by being constantly connected to each other. Their well-developed sense of self allows them to be somewhat more transparent, and to place fairly high value on their actions and opinions. However, because of their reliance on electronic media and their immersion in video games, they may lack interpersonal communication skills. It would be a mistake to assume that they understand the basics of customer service, but they learn very quickly with solid direction and a clear explanation of why this is important.

**Technology**

The Millennial generation was raised with technology. It has been a poorly-disguised joke that the Baby Boom generation depends on their Millennial children to hook up their computers, TVs, and electronic gadgets. The new generation readily embraces technology, and eagerly anticipates the next wave of upgrades and evolving development. They will look for the same thing at work. Give them a new piece of electronic equipment, a new software application or social media system and they will jump right in. They can seem to be at odds with older employees who don’t like change and have more difficulty adapting to the speed and complexity
of technological changes. Millennials will not be happy in a workplace that uses older computer systems, outdated technology and no social media or internet programs. Cutting-edge technology and equipment is very attractive to them; because variety is something Millennials value, the idea of multi-tasking or working on several projects at the same time can also be appealing.

**Millennial Motivation**

What is the most effective way to reach and motivate the Millennials? Based on their experiences, several tactics can be very effective. They appreciate being encouraged through positive feedback, just like their parents, teachers and coaches did. Give them opportunities for advancement and more responsibility as early and often as possible. Think like an “Angry Bird” – in the game Angry Birds, every time you complete a level, it pats you on the back (Congratulations!!), gives you points based on your skill, and advances you to the next level. Millennials were raised much the same way. They were not only encouraged on a regular basis, they were constantly told (electronically or otherwise) how they were doing. They want and respond to that. In fact, they expect it. They like clear directions, and they will buy into a vision and goals if they see them as worthwhile.

They want you to be a coach as much as a boss. Don’t just harp on what they do wrong. Work with them to analyze their performance and improve it. What worked well and what didn’t? What needs to change? What is your vision for their career, the team, and the department? Can you get them to buy into it? How can you build creativity and diversity into their job description? Remember “other duties as assigned by the supervisor” in job descriptions? This generation was made for that kind of diversity!

Even though Millennials are younger, they have ideas and talents and want to be taken seriously. They will quickly shut down if you dismiss or belittle them. It is important to them for their ideas to be taken seriously, even if you have tried the same ideas in the past without success – given the changes in technology over the years, previously discarded ideas may be more feasible now.

**Going Forward**

As supervisors and managers, we will face many challenges in managing the Millennial generation at work. If we try to simply rely on what worked with previous generations, we will have limited or even negative results. This generation will not put up with “My way or the highway.” And giving them repetitive, meaningless tasks? Forget it! Millennials may work under these conditions, but only for a while.

One of the main questions we need to ask ourselves is this: **Do we want control, or do we want success at work?** Is it more important to be in charge, or to achieve our workplace goals? If success in delivering excellent service is our ultimate goal, we may need to change our approach with this new generation of workers. If we don’t, it just might be a long and frustrating road to retirement.