

CLOSING THE DIVIDE: COMMUNICATING WITH MILLENNIALS IN THE
WORKPLACE

by

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Abstract

Although some literature exists to describe the difference between Millennials and other generations in the workplace, I have developed my own ten steps that will help match what Millennials want from their bosses and workplace with what the company needs from them based on the research available and my own personal experience in a workplace that did not cater to Millennials.

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Introduction

Because most Americans spend more time with their coworkers than their significant others, a positive work environment is key to retaining employees and increasing productivity (Mainiero, & Sullivan, 2006). One of the most recent dilemmas in the workforce is the clash between older and newer generations as Millennials enter the workforce. Research has been done through the lens of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers and even Generation Y, but in comparison, very little has been generated by Millennials themselves. Millennials have unique behaviors, meanings they've ascribed to things through interaction in society, and original characteristics that distinguish them from previous generations at the same age, creating a new set of hurdles to overcome in the cross-generational communication realm as the aging Baby Boomers leave the workforce and Millennials hop in their place.

Theoretical Framework

Each generation has unique traits as well as trials and tribulations, which conflict with previous as well as future generations. This cross-generational opposition caused by very different influences, experiences, and values can be best understood through recent historical changes as well as the symbolic interactionism theory. Blumer (1969), who coined the term "symbolic interactionism," also known as the study of human group life and conduct, set out three basic premises of the perspective. He suggested that humans act and react toward various things through an interpretive process based on the meaning they've attributed via interaction with things, in society, or with others (Blumer, 1969).

He argues that symbols alone do not have meaning; but symbols develop and are assigned meaning once an interaction with the symbol has occurred. This interaction or a series

of interactions constitutes the present meaning one has for some symbol. That meaning is typically communicated through language and maintained through thought. These complete the core principles of one's self and socialization with a larger community as well as Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory.

Meaning

Blumer states that meaning is "central in human behavior" (Blumer, 1969). We ascribe meaning to an object and each individual has a slightly different meaning based on his or her own personal experiences. A man might see a dog and think, "man's best friend," because he has had several dogs as pets over the years, but a child who was attacked by a dog at a young age might think, "vicious animal."

Language

Language gives individuals a means to negotiate the meaning of his or her object or symbol (Blumer, 1969). Though each individual has a varied knowledge of words through which to express him or herself, there are differing degrees of descriptors that separate objects into various categories. This process also explains why the meaning of words changes, both slightly and drastically, over centuries and even from generation to generation. The term "gay" in the English language may have originally meant "happy," but it has morphed to mean "a homosexual male" and more recently the meaning has again morphed to mean dumb or stupid, which is quite the opposite of its original meaning.

Thought

Thought is the final principle and relies on the first two because thoughts modify the individual's interpretation but are based on language (Blumer, 1969). Essentially, thought is a

self-talk using language. An individual might have an inner dialogue where he or she negotiates meaning and plays out various scenarios in his or her head to do so. This leaves room for meaning to change at any time. It is also difficult to understand the thought and meaning portion if the individual is unable to properly express through language his or her personal interpretation of an object, yet it is effective in evaluating human interaction.

Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory can easily be applied to the study of workplace interaction between Millennials and other generations by taking into consideration the internet's influence on their daily lives as well as their parent's child-rearing tactics.

Literature Review

Defining Millennials

Researchers have several different labels and ranges to refer to the group of individuals born after 1980 and up to the turn of the century. This group has been called Generation Y, Millennial Generation (or Millennials), Generation Next, Net Generation, Echo Boomers, but researchers can agree they're the group who succeeded Generation X, defined as those born in the mid '60s through the very early '80s (Strauss & Howe, 1992). Lancaster (2004) reports there are about 76 million Millennials today, which rivals the Baby Boomer generation of about 80 million in its population.

In order to really understand Millennials, we have to look at the generations preceding this group. Sweeny (2006) and Lancaster (2004) both agree that the earliest generation pertinent to the workforce is the Traditionalists, defined as those born before 1946; next comes the Baby Boomers, a well-known name given to those born between 1946 and 1964; this leads up to the Generation X, which researchers vary on exact defining dates, but may be categorized as those born after 1965 and before 1981. While Millennials have a similar population level to the Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, Lancaster points out that Generation X has nearly 30 million less than any other generation, leading to the Millennials having the biggest impact of a young generation in nearly three decades.

Defining Characteristics of Millennials

Influences

Sweeny (2006) initially provides an overarching stereotype of Millennials as “gamers,” citing the extensive use of technology in their upbringing as a major influence on how they view the world. Lancaster (2004) describes Millennials as “globally concerned, integrated, cyber literate, media and technology savvy, realistic, environmentally conscious and will try anything.” (p. 4). The advancement of technology available during Millennials were youth up through their teen years and into adulthood is probably one of the most notable influences; constant connectivity and the ability to google anything at anytime has influenced Millennials personally, professionally, emotionally, mentally, etc (Lancaster, 2004). On the personal side, Kohut (2007) points to social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, as a main tool for Millennials to utilize technology in order to maintain several relationships by posting photos and descriptions of interests and life updates, which he explains is why he refers to the Millennials as the “Look at Me” generation.

An increase in media availability and presence – which is closely tied to technology – drugs, gangs, wide-spreading violence, the widening divide between the rich and poor - which Lancaster (2004) describes as “haves and have-nots” - as well as the growth in immigration, are other serious influences that have created a Millennial-only set of symbolic interactions.

Traits

A new set of influences has led to an original set of traits. One of the most notable Millennial traits is immediacy, according to Sweeny (2006), because it affects the way Millennials

interact with others, both in the face-to-face world and online; he says they're impatient and constantly multi-task in order to remain engaged.

In accordance with Kohut's (2007) "Look at Me" description of Millennials both on and offline, this generation has been told they are each unique and special from birth onward. This generation has been encouraged to "embrace this specialness wholeheartedly" (Eubanks, 2006). In fact, when asked if they thought their generation was unique, 68 percent of Millennials said yes, they did (Kohut, 2007). "They're special in the eyes of the media, politicians, their community and, above all, their parents. The parents are always around. Today, decisively ... they say, I spend much more time with my kids than my own parents spent with me" (Rimel, 2010). And along with that specialness comes a sense of entitlement as well as the acceptance of sheltering, both on a personal and professional level (Rimel, 2010).

Negative Stereotypes

While each generation is just "those crazy kids" to their predecessors, Millennials have their own set of negative stereotypes to fight against. Lancaster (2004) points to the fact that other generations view them as "unaware of their lack of skills" and say they "require excessive affirmation." Sweeney (2006) explains that Millennials are highly selective and expect interactions to be customized and unique to them. "They don't want to work 80 hours a week and sacrifice their health and their leisure time, even for considerably higher salaries. Yet they expect to earn incomes exceeding their parents" (pg. 5).

Values

While Millennials may have a set of negative stereotypes they're fighting against, researchers also point to their values, which are very important to this generation. In accordance

with the trend of more students in higher education, Lancaster (2004) states that Millennials place a high value on education, which may be due to the fact that they also place a path to future opportunities high on their list or the possibility of being their own boss, and the ability to be innovative and high tech – also listed – allows them that opportunity. And while higher education and a successfully career may be top on the list for most generations, Pew Research cites home life higher than work for Millennials (Kohut, 2007).

In addition to a high level of education and a balanced workforce, Lancaster (2004) says Millennials want a diverse workforce because they are “the most tolerant generation yet,” and they expect those surrounding them to be as well.

The Workplace Future: Both Positive and Negative

Millennials are the most unemployed/out-of-the-workforce generation in modern history, but on the flip side, they’re the most engaged in college, community college or graduate schools, with just less than 40 percent enrolled in or already completed some college (Rimel, 2010). This trend is often attributed to the recession, and if students can’t get a job, they might as well get a degree – or another degree, but Rimel states that the generation is still incredibly optimistic about their economic future, which brings us to the first of many effects the Millennials will have on the current workforce. Matin (2002) defines Millennials in one simple phrase “high maintenance equals high performance” (p.15). This idea of needing a lot to get a lot can be broken up into three categories that help explain Millennials in the workplace.

High Expectations

Millennials have high expectations for themselves and their company. If they put 110 percent in, they expect their superiors and peers to do just as much to keep up with the high-

speed nature of this generation. Though they may be young now, they have big dreams for the future. “Nine in 10 of this Millennials say, yes, I’m going to eventually have enough money, or, I already do,” (Rimel, 2010, p.5). This is because Millennials have grown up in an environment where they’re told they can do anything or be anyone (Kohut, 2007). Millennials are the first generation to play in a youth baseball league where there were no winners or losers, or they were all winners. “You now have a generation coming into the workplace that has grown up with the expectation that they will automatically win, and they’ll always be rewarded, even for just showing up” (Safer, 2008). When asked to envision their lives five years from now, Kohut (2010) explains “74 percent of [Millennials] put themselves on the top three rungs of a 10-step imaginary ladder (where 10 represents the best possible life), 8 percent place themselves on the middle of the ladder, and 10 percent put themselves on the lower end of the ladder” (p. 6)

This goes hand-in-hand with Martin’s (2002) view that Millennials have high expectations for themselves and aim to work faster and better than other workers as well as a high expectation of employers, through which Millennials demand direct interaction with their superiors to make the most of their professional development. “The Long-Tail” phenomenon Millennials suffer from is one of “infinite choice.” Because Millennials have grown up with an ever-growing myriad of choices that were cost-effective via the Internet, they expect these choices in every day life, including the workplace (Anderson, 2006). For example, when a group of Millennials was asked what their favorite pair of jeans was, a very small percentage of them answered with a brand; most described a type of fit or something unique to themselves instead of defining themselves as a brand wearer (Sweeney, 2006).

This generation is also tech savvy and they have financial smarts, which they expect from their employers and coworkers as well. Nearly 40 percent of Millennials expect to start saving

for retirement before they reach 25, with 46 percent of those already working indicating so; nearly 50 percent of them say retirement benefits are important when they choose a job (Safer, 2008). After seeing previous generations struggle with dwindling retirement and late-in-the-game layoffs, Millennials seem to want to be more than prepared, and they expect their companies to help them reach this goal, so it's no surprise that among those who have the ability to contribute to their 401(k) plan, about 70 percent of Millennials do (Safer, 2008).

Immediacy and Goal Oriented

Millennials have very little patience or tolerance for delay, and Sweeney (2006) states "their desire for speed and efficiency cannot be over estimated" (p. 3). Matin (2002) explains the need for immediate response in all forms, especially from their superiors as this generation wants to make "an impact on day 1" and "experience a sense of accomplishment hourly" (p. 17). This need for speed also allows for Millennials to excel at multi-tasking. This is evident in the rise in text messaging among the younger generation as it allows them to hold a conversation – or many – while completing several other tasks, while a phone call might inhibit their ability to complete their current tasks (Sweeney, 2006). On the flip side, Millennials want small goals with tight deadlines so they can build up ownership of tasks; they have been told they can really make a difference in the world, and combined with their ability to immediately seek out anything they need, they have the tools to do it (Matin, 2002).

Change

Millennials aren't afraid of change. They don't go out into the workforce expecting to stay in one job or career forever – or even all that long. Matin (2002) explains that this generation, who grew up watching the Enron and Arthur Andersen scandals unfold, is incredibly

skeptical of staying loyal to a company they don't have their hands in directly for too long.

To keep a Millennial within one company, Sweeney (2006) says the corporation needs to allow Millennials access to career advances and new tasks and projects frequently so they don't feel stagnant. One issue Martin (2002) says she's seen Millennials is that they're not given the background information for policies and procedures, so they immediately dismiss them and look for new ways of completing the task at hand; they refer to this as the Millennial "work around".

Sixty-year-olds are working beside 20-year-olds. Freshly minted college graduates are overseeing employees old enough to be their parents. And new job entrants are changing careers faster than college students change their majors, creating frustration for employers struggling to retain and recruit talented high-performers. (Armour, 2005, p. 15)

So how do employers keep Millennials happy and productive in a workplace with up to three other generations? Although the literature exists to describe the difference between Millennials and other generations, I have developed my own 10 steps that will help match what Millennials want from their bosses and workplace with what the company needs from them based on the research available and my own personal experience in a workplace that did not cater to Millennials.

The Project – 10 Steps to Manage Millennials in the Workplace

1. Take the time to get to know all of his or her capabilities

A resume is just a small snapshot into the vast world of Millennial skills. Neglecting one or many skills this worker may possess will lead them to feel underappreciated or stifled. For example, a Millennial may be hired to seek out sponsorship and advertising for a company, but she might also have design experience. Allowing her to design all of her proposals and some advertisements for the clients will save the company money by keeping the designs in house while allowing the Millennial to showcase her special talents. If the supervisor and Millennial didn't take the time to discuss this talent, this extra resource would be lost.

2. Provide the resources, tools, and learning goals they need to progress when they need it.

Timeliness is a big factor in whether a Millennial stays with a certain company or decides to move on. Having a yearly review allows for too long of a time period in between the initial hiring and the development of the Millennials skills in the workplace. An initial quarterly review and then subsequent monthly reviews asking the employee what he or she needs and how the company can assist in growing his or her abilities will allow the employee to be more productive and prevent him or her from feeling stifled, stuck and decide to move on.

3. Be flexible enough to customize schedules and work assignments.

Millennials value quality over quantity. Employers may think they do as well, but most offices adhere to a strict 8 to 5 (or later) work schedule. Allowing a Millennial to alter this

canned schedule will, most likely, cause the employee to be happier and more productive. For example, if a Millennial is most productive and creative in the evening, consider allowing him or her to set a schedule later in the day when the employee doesn't need to be present for a meeting or other group-based gatherings. This will allow the Millennial to be much more productive and provide a strong relationship built on trust that the employee will provide quality work unsupervised.

4. Consistently provide constructive, personalized feedback.

This tip can be applied to nearly every generation, but Millennials cite it as exceptionally important. Because they grew up with constant reassurance from their parents, they expect the feedback to continue into the workplace. When they don't hear positive feedback after a project or after they go above and beyond their position requirements, Millennials will experience dissonance and are much less likely to continue doing more than average work. If this continues, they may seek out a new position or company that provides them with personalized positive feedback regularly. For example, if your employee was asked to price out other cell phone companies to see if you can save money by switching and he or she prices out five companies with a full presentation, including charts and discounts, call him or her by name and state that you liked something specific, such as the chart comparisons. This personalized feedback will ensure a repeat performance.

5. Tie rewards and incentives to one thing only: performance.

Providing the entire company with a yearly picnic stating "good job" to the entire group unjustly rewards a few mediocre workers and undercuts the great employees' hard work. Incentives should be based on performance, and exceptional performance at that. Performance is

usually measurable and puts everyone on the same playing field. And for a generation who is widely accepting of social taboos, other cultures, religions and views, it's important to stick to performance when it comes to promotions and other incentives. An "odd" sense of style, forearm tattoo or casual shoes shouldn't stand in the way of a Millennials advancement because they don't see it as a hindrance, so management shouldn't either.

6. Facilitate helping Millennials meet their high expectations of themselves.

Give them the tools to be the best that they can be. With many Millennials, it's all or nothing. If they're not going 100 mph in a direction they feel makes an impact, they'll lose focus, spin out and start searching for another path – or another job in this case.

7. Facilitate helping Millennials meet their high expectations of their coworkers.

Millennials have a high bar for their own expectations, but they also expect the same – if not more – from those who work with them. They prefer to go around hierarchical ladders and go straight to the source for answers. Therefore, create a database of people Millennials can easily access when they need answers to questions, strategies for handling a project, support and encouragement.

8. Teach basic self-management skills.

While Millennials may be self-motivated, versatile, and able to multi-task, they also need direction and structure. After growing up in a world of school, followed by soccer practice, followed by a job and a jam-packed schedule each weekend, it's no wonder that Millennials can feel overwhelmed if they're not given direction. To do lists and clear deadlines help keep these

employees' short attention spans on track.

9. Customize.

No two workers are alike. If you don't have time to customize workloads and assignments, delegate it out. Customization is one easy way to make employees feel special and needed, especially Millennials.

10. Blend work with the rest of the Millennials' life.

Pew Research Center (2011) states that 52 percent of Millennials cite being a good parent as the most important thing in their lives followed by having a successful marriage at 30 percent; 21 percent said helping others in need was most important while 20 percent wanted to own a home. Just 15 percent of Millennials cited having a high-paying career as the most important thing in their lives, which conflicts with past generations and creates a different set of motivators employers need to appeal to. Allow Millennials to openly take time off for family-related events or concerns without feeling like they're letting the company down or not contributing enough. By emphasizing a strong home life, you'll have a much more dedicated employee while he or she is present.

Conclusion

Millennials are still growing, changing and absorbing the influences around them. We still have a lot to learn from them as they age, but several key themes continually pop up when researching this generation: they're extremely diverse and more open-minded when compared to generations past; tech savvy, multi-taskers who require praise, customization, and a balanced life with emphasis on family; their life social interaction is unique to anything other generations have

seen before, creating a unique bunch of technology-based workers for the future. If we take this information and use it to communicate effectively across generations, Millennials may be our greatest asset to date.

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