

Getting Millennials to Drink the Kool-Aid

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

It is no secret that there are tensions between the four (soon to be five) different generations in the workplace. It is the topic of hundreds of articles and books. Several consultants make their living helping organizations understand and cope with generational differences. In this article, I want to focus on the Millennials and provide some tips on how Baby Boomers and Generation X groups can be more effective at engaging them. I am using the following age groupings in this article based on the writing date of 2011.

Generation Name	Birth Year Range	Age as of 2011
Traditionalists	1925-1945	66-86
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	47-65
Generation X	1965-1980	31-46
Millennials (Gen Y)	1981-1995	16-30
Digital Natives (Gen Z)	1996-	Younger than 16

In an excellent article in *HR Magazine* entitled "Mixing it Up," Adrienne Fox pointed to several research studies that indicate intergenerational stress which leads to habitual problems having different groups get along. For example, she cited a study of 3200 US employers by Leigh Branham that showed a correlation between low employee engagement and highly mixed general populations in organizations.

One huge caveat when discussing any diversity issue is that one must communicate in generalities or stereotypes. There are always specific individuals within any segment who do not conform to the typical pattern. When one says something like "Gen X individuals are typically frustrated and cynical and tend to be aloof in their management style," that is a sweeping generalization that will not hold true for all individuals.

The area of greatest challenge seems to be how to get the Millennials to respond more positively to the Boomers in charge and especially to the Gen X coworkers or

managers. Here are some ideas that may allow more fruitful relationships when the older generations attempt to lead Millennials.

Recognize their comfort with Technology

Rather than discourage Gen Y people from openly using the tools they were brought up with, embrace their knowledge and skill with the hardware and software that let them communicate with each other as effortlessly as the older generations brush their teeth. Tap into their knowledge and have them teach others how to succeed with the tools of today. I personally know several excellent Gen Y professionals who are seeking to change jobs because they are forbidden to openly use social networking at work. To them the concept is anathema, and it will not be tolerated long term.

Get to know them on a personal level

Everyone has a story to tell about dreams and aspirations. While Gen X individuals might tend to hide true feelings in order to concentrate on the work at hand, Gen Y workers are more willing to open up when asked. Knowledge of a person's ambitions allows a leader to tap in at a gut level, which greatly improves understanding. With understanding comes empathy and respect in both directions.

Praise quickly and with specific information

Positive reinforcement is welcomed by all generations, but it is more powerful for Millennials than Gen Xers. Reason: The Millennials generally have less experience and are more easily shaped by positive reinforcement if it is sincere, specific, and done well. Gen X workers have heard it all before and would be more likely to think the feedback was disingenuous or manipulative.

Make expectations clear

Millennials like to be told they are on the right path as opposed to Gen X workers, who are more independent and focused on tasks. Since the younger workers tend to think holistically about how work integrates with their life, it helps to think in these terms when giving the rationale for specific procedures or sequencing of tasks. For example, a millennial would respond better to an explanation of the "comp time" policies than a Gen X worker would. Knowing the reason why the policy was set up would help the Millennial put it in the perspective of his or her life view and accept the rule, while a typical Gen X person would comply begrudgingly and try to "play the system" if possible.

Be as flexible as possible

In establishing policies for time off from work, show as much flexibility as possible to keep the younger generation engaged. For example, they find stiff and antiquated rules about how quickly after starting a job they can take vacation to be annoying and insensitive. Sometimes this leads Millennials to be tagged with the name "the lazy generation." It is not so much that they are anti-work; they just want to be offered the option to fit work more seamlessly into their life and be able to take advantage of interesting opportunities when they arise.

Be patient with reluctance to use e-mail

Millennials would rather text or use social media than communicate to other people via e-mail. I know many young people who say they rarely use e-mail at all. This has a backlash effect at work because Millennials are often less responsive to e-mail requests than Gen Xers. The business world is still e-mail based, since the asynchronous nature of e-mail lends itself well to the meeting-centered professional schedule.

Millennials sit in meetings and keep up to date with events in real time, where the Gen X and Boomers tend to be less distracted in meetings but get their data through an endless stream of e-mail messages outside the meeting environment. When you do observe people in a meeting environment using PDA devices while multitasking, chances are the Boomers and Gen X individuals are reading and answering e-mails while the Millennials will be mostly texting or tweeting. The best advice here is to compromise and allow Millennials to text, but also set the expectation that they will respond to important e-mails promptly.

I read one rather telling statistic the other day. The use of e-mail by seniors increased by 28% between 2009 and 2010. During that same period, e-mail usage decreased by 59% among teens. As these teens move on through school and into the working world, this will cause the difference in communication patterns to become more of a schism. Perhaps some hybrid technology is out there that can bridge the gap to make the younger generations more receptive to e-mail. This would be good, as the more durable historical trail in e-mail is often useful in a business environment. Likely it will be the other way around. The senior workers are going to be encouraged to use more texting and social networking for daily communications, and e-mail will become less dominant.

Generational differences do lead to stress in the workplace, and the habits and life view of Millennials creates a dynamic that is frustrating for older generations. To help vent the pressure, follow the ideas above and continually seek pragmatic ways to integrate younger workers into the fabric of daily organizational life.

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