

Successful Supervisor Part 32

Generational Issues

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Ever since we stopped obsessing about the Generation X individuals (born 1965-1980), we have seen an uptick of writing and energy having to do with Millennials (born after 1980). At this point, we have an approximately equal number of Boomers, Gen X, and Millennial workers in the U.S. workforce. As a supervisor, you need to keep the built-in communication and style issues from causing problems within your group.

In my leadership classes, I hear a common lament, especially from supervisors, that it is so much more difficult to reach Millennials and to keep them on board than was experienced with the Gen X workers. I am sure the phenomenon is true, and have some suggestions in this article that may provide some assistance.

Tips for Supervisors

Beware of stereotypical generalities

We often read that Millennials are lazy or less loyal than previous work groups. There may be some truth to the trend in specific cases, but individual differences make it dangerous to label everyone in a specific group as having specific traits. It is important to understand each person as an individual and not deal with an entire generation with one technique and biased labels. Each worker is a person first and foremost and a member of a stereotypical age group second.

Understand the Generational Environment

Pay attention to the different environment that each person grew up in as a significant force in shaping the way a person thinks or acts.

Way back in the late 1980s Dr. Morris Massey, from the University of Colorado at Boulder, did a series of programs entitled, "What You Are is Where You Were When (you were value programmed)." At the time, Dr. Massey was focusing on the differences between Boomers (born between 1945-1964) and Generation X (born between 1965-1980). His conclusion was that significant behavioral patterns could be explained by the environment that an individual grew up in, but we had to leave significant room for individual differences before trying to pigeonhole people.

Undoubtedly the most significant difference between Millennials and prior generations is in the area of communications. Millennials were the first fully digital generation, so their whole approach to interfacing with other people is different. Curiously, the keyboard layout thumbed by all Millennials to “text” each other was invented by Christopher Sholes in 1867. You would think that their main mode of communication with each other would be voice and video. While there is plenty of that, the preferred method of conversation (even when sitting right next to the other person) is by the juxtaposition of letters, spaces, and “emojis” projected onto a little screen.

Just because most Millennials have over-developed thumb muscles does not make them less capable to think or to be dedicated. It is only the vehicle by which they gain and share information that is different, although older generations are catching up in terms of comfort level with texting. Inside we are all people who have dreams and aspirations, regardless of our age.

Have a Concrete Development Plan

One generality that I believe is true is that on average, Millennials are less patient with a slow pace for their own development. This is a hint for all supervisors who are working with Millennials. It is much more important for people in this group to have a concrete development plan, which includes milestones and projected advancement. The danger here is that advancement opportunities are not totally predictable and appear to be glacial to younger people. That could lead to frustration.

Cross Train

Once a person has gained the skills for the next level career position, it is tedious to wait in line until the next opportunity to move up appears. Hence, we see Millennials willing to job hop in order to move up if no opportunity is available in their current organization. The antidote here is to cross train the person on additional skills, so he or she becomes more valuable to the organization through the passage of time.

The lesson here is that if you try to keep a millennial static or keep promising movement that does not occur, you often are going to lose the person to another organization. That pattern leads to high turnover, which is a major cost problem for any organization. If you have such a great culture that each employee, regardless of age, is convinced no other organization is going to be better, then retention takes care of itself.

The Wegmans Grocery Chain was recently awarded one of the best organizations for Millennials. They have been on the list of 100 Best Workplaces for the past 19 years. The secret of their success is to train and cross train the young people constantly. It adds to bench strength and it allows Wegmans to operate with about 8% turnover in an industry that often runs in excess of 40% turnover. That is a huge financial advantage.

Be Principle Centered

Another way to appeal to Millennials is to have a principle centered business. These people are more interested in the social responsibility of the organization for which they work, because they are convinced that it leads to long term success. The younger generation is less tolerant of hypocrisy and bureaucracy than more seasoned workers because they see it as a **conscious choice**, and they want to work at a place that has staying power. Make sure you let all employees know the purpose of your business and that you always act in ways consistent with that purpose.

Foster Respect in Both Directions

As a supervisor, you need to instill a culture of trust that is not dependent on the age demographics of different work groups. You need to teach younger people that the more established workers have vital process knowledge and a history of experience from which they need to learn. Conversely, you need to work with the more seasoned workers to help them see the benefits that the younger generation brings to the equation and appreciate them in affirming ways. It is a two-way street, and you are in the middle directing traffic.

One frustration for supervisors is that younger generation employees often have less sensitivity when communicating with others. They share their feelings with unvarnished candor, which often can offend older workers. Teach them to avoid addressing an older person the same way verbally as they would a peer in a 140-character “Tweet” or a “text.” Stress that to get the result they want, Millennials need to be tactful and respectful when addressing other people, regardless of their age.

In any organization, the culture is set from the top. As a supervisor, you need to foster an atmosphere of respect that is not taught in school anymore but that is needed to build an environment of trust between people, regardless of age.

Working with Millennials may seem frustrating if you are trying to apply the operating philosophies that worked for the Boomers or Generation X. You cannot fight the trends, and they are not going away. The best approach is to embrace the younger generation into the workforce and impress them with your operational excellence and vision for the future. Make sure your culture is the best one around, and you will have few problems with turnover.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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