



Working with Millennials

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

There are numerous books and articles on the differences in generational work groups and how to manage them successfully. In this brief article I want to share some thoughts of my own on the topic of working with Millennials (defined as people born after 1980). In no way will this be a complete treatise on the topic, rather it points out specific dangers in some of the literature.

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 broad brush and biased labels.

We do need to pay attention to the different environment that each person grew up in as a significant force in shaping the way he or she thinks or acts. Way back in the late 1980's Dr. Morris Massey, who was at 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 it was also important to leave significant room for individual differences before trying to pigeonhole people.

Undoubtedly, the most significant difference between millennials and previous 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. It is astonishing to me that they prefer to communicate via the juxtaposition of individual letters and spaces (with interspersed "emojis" and their own abbreviations) as has been the custom for centuries. 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 and spaces projected onto a little screen.

One generality that I believe is true is that on average, millennials are less patient with a slow pace of their own development. This is a hint for all managers who are working with millennials. It is much more important for people in this group to have a concrete development plan. This plan should include milestones and projected advancement. The danger here is that advancement opportunities are not totally predictable, and that could lead to frustration.

Once a person has gained the skills for the next level of 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 are often going to lose the person to another organization. That pattern leads to high turnover, which is a major cost problem for any organization.

The Wegmans Grocery Chain was just named 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 under 10% turnover in an industry that often runs in excess of 40% turnover. That is a huge financial advantage.

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.

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, develop them constantly, and impress them with your operational excellence and vision for the future.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him** at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

