Learning from the Millennials in Our Multigenerational Workplace

Each generation has its own "personality," and education leaders can learn something from each one.

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I t's Monday morning, and you arrive at work with your day planned. Shortly after you arrive, however, you discover that a technical glitch has resulted in incorrect information being sent to every employee. As expected, your phone starts ringing before you take off your coat. As the calls come in, you scramble to figure out what went wrong. Your plans for the day are put on hold.

As you field calls from fellow employees, you soon realize that they approach this situation in different ways. Some apologize for calling; some demand an instant resolution; others don't even contact you.

Why do responses to the same event differ? You notice a pattern to these varied responses—which is not because of department, building, or job title but because of age.

For the first time, we find ourselves working with members from four distinct generations:

1. Our most senior colleagues, born between 1922 and 1945, belong to the silent generation.
2. Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964.
3. Gen-Xers were born between 1965 and 1980.
4. Our youngest employees, the millennials, were born after 1981.

Each generation has its own "personality." The collective personal experiences, world events, popular culture, and technology during the formative childhood years of each generation affect the attitudes, skills, values, and communication styles of its members. Understanding these generational characteristics can help us communicate more effectively, avoid or resolve differences, and capitalize on strengths.

Silent Generation

Even though the youngest members of the silent generation are approaching their 70s, a poor economy has forced many to rethink their retirement plans and keep working. Members of the silent generation constitute 5% of our workforce today. They grew up in the shadow of the Great Depression and World War II. For entertainment, they listened to big bands, danced the jitterbug, and went to movies. At home, their main source of entertainment was listening to the family radio.

The silent generation's experiences growing up affect how they react to situations. With a strong sense of personal sacrifice, this generation is patriotic, loyal to their employer, and respectful of authority. Although they are as concerned as anyone else about a mistake, you may never hear from them. They trust that you know what you are doing and that you will fix it.

Baby Boomers

The baby boomers, on the other hand, are likely to call you. Between the ages of 48 and 67, they may be long-term employees and probably constitute much of your senior staff. Baby boomers were influenced by the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy. Technological advances gave them the transistor radio, and their parents cringed at the rock-and-roll music they listened to.

The baby boomers are the workaholics in your organization; they are probably the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave in the evening. This generation invented the 60-hour workweek. Along the way, they learned to question authority and stand up for themselves. As such, baby boomer employees may be the most critical of mistakes coming from your department.

Generation X

Our generation X colleagues, ranging in age from 33 to 48, are seasoned employees and may hold or may be moving into leadership positions. They grew up with the personal computer, MTV, and the AIDS epidemic. Their parents divorced at unprecedented rates. If they lived with both parents, both parents likely worked. Gen-X children came home to an empty house and were the original latchkey kids. They witnessed corporate downsizing and the demise of lifetime employment.

Gen-Xers' experiences taught them to be independent and skeptical. They are technologically literate, having grown up alongside the personal computer. When they learn about the misinformation coming from your office, they might first try to figure out what went wrong on their own before calling you, and they may suspect that the "mistake" was part of a more sinister master plan.

Millennial Generation

We are accustomed to working with our silent, baby boomer, and generation X colleagues. But our newest and youngest employees from the millennial generation (generation Y) are tough to figure out.

It's an age-old struggle trying to understand the youngest generation: Almost 2,500 years ago, Socrates described youth as having "bad manners, . . . disrespect for their elders and lov[ing] chatter in place of exercise." Fifty years ago, frustration with the younger generation was exemplified in the musical *Bye Bye Birdie* with "Kids! What's the matter with kids today?"

Our role as leaders is to learn how to effectively harness the collective strengths of this generation, as their presence will surely affect our organization. To understand the values and motivations of our millennial colleagues, we must first understand how they were raised. Their parents played an active role in their lives and were the original soccer moms and Little League dads. Out of a concern to boost self-esteem, everyone was a winner and everyone received a shiny trophy simply for participating. These kids were told from their earliest years that they could be anything they wanted to be. As a result, they are confident in their abilities. This confidence can be off-putting to their older colleagues.

As children, the millennials were programmed, scheduled, and shuttled from activity to activity by their doting parents. Their parents not only drove them to practice but stayed and participated with them. The students did their homework while watching TV, responding to Facebook posts, and texting their friends. Now as adults, they are true multitaskers, capable of juggling many activities at once.

Growing up, adults played an important role in their programmed lives, and they forged close adult relationships. Millennials were involved in family decisions and were consulted about vacations and large purchases. They viewed their parents as friends and team members more than as authority figures. As adults, the millennials have definite opinions and do not hesitate to share them. As was the case at home, the traditional lines of authority at work are blurred.

As children and young adults, millennials were bombarded with "screen time." Although the explosion of mass media influenced their parents, they were the first generation to grow up with the ability to create "personal media" via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. They are digital natives, having grown up surfing the Internet with cell phones in their pockets. They are not only comfortable and skilled with technology, they also expect it to be available 24-7.

Their senior members are just 32 years old, working alongside us as employees, teammates, and, increasingly, our supervisors. How does their background influence who they are in the workplace? What are they looking for at work, and what motivates them?

If we watch and listen, they are trying to give us advice. Here's what they are telling us.

"Multitasking. Doesn't everybody?" From early childhood, millennials have been programed, scheduled, and connected. As employees, they want to work on several projects at once, and they resist well-intentioned rules that inhibit their social media time or their ability to connect with their friends via text or email. If we rethink our ideas regarding how millennials prefer to do their jobs, we may find that they can be even more productive than their veteran colleagues.

"Employer loyalty? Not so much." Millennials see their current job as just that, *their current job*. They consider several jobs on their résumé as a great way to build connections, increase income, gain job status, and have influence. They value relationships with people over loyalty to an employer. Knowing this, supervisors should take the time and make an effort to get to know their young colleagues on a personal and informal level. Keep them in the loop. Through personal interactions, you can foster loyalty and commitment to your district.

"We're not afraid of work, but it should be fun!" Millennials have an entirely different viewpoint on the work-life balance than do their workaholic baby boomer colleagues. They do not like prescribed hours or set schedules and locations. They want their colleagues to be friends, and they believe that work should be fun. Developing personal connections with millennials is a good first step, but they also need opportunities to relax and have fun at work. Millennials appreciate their work being as portable as possible and respond well to work-issued laptops and other technology.

"Whatever you say, Boss. Not!" Millennials grew up viewing their parents and other authority figures as friends and teammates. These adults told them they were amazing and included them in all discussions and decisions. Now as adults, they do not hesitate to share their feedback and opinions. They want to be heard, taken seriously, and have an impact. They believe that respect is earned by knowledge and skills, not simply by title and experience. As colleagues, we need to establish opportunities for their meaningful input.

"Give us frequent and positive feedback." Growing up, millennials were heaped with praise and rewards, as evidenced by cluttered shelves of childhood trophies. As employees, they want frequent feedback and direction on their work. They want to be told often what they are doing right. The old adage of their more veteran colleagues that "no news is good news" is foreign to them. They crave news, especially good news. At the same time, they seek freedom to do their jobs the way they want, without someone looking over their shoulder. Consequently, employers need to balance frequent reinforcement with opportunities for independence.

Embracing the New Generation

Looking back at the concerns of Socrates and the query "What's the matter with kids today?" we recognize that frustration and confusion with our youngest colleagues are nothing new. The millennial generation is affecting our workplace. We can choose to adhere steadfastly to our traditions, fighting to force the new generation to adapt to our ways; however, doing so will likely result in our watching some of our brightest and most talented coworkers leave us for greener pastures.

Instead, we can choose to embrace the characteristics of the newest generation and capitalize on their strengths, recognizing the potentially positive effect they have on our overall organization. After we begin to understand our youngest colleagues, we can adapt our practices to maximize productivity and maintain a focus on our collective efforts to serve our students.

And those phone calls? Listen and learn.

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