

Millennial Madness

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At the advisor conference *iNSITE 2018* put on by Pershing, an experienced panel discussed leadership of millennials in a session titled “Train, Retain and Transform the Most Valuable Asset of Your Success Model: People!” Moderated by Morgan Vazquez of BNY Mellon, the panel included Dayna Ingoglia of Pershing, Shawn Quant of Piper Jaffray, and Terri Walsh from Seminole State College. Much has been written about how the Millennial Generation (born 1981-1996) communicates, acts, and thinks. Given that it is often said by any older generation about a younger that “they are a bit different, you know?” the leadership question isn’t how they are different, but how to cooperate.

Leading millennials requires and understanding fundamentals about the millennials, albeit generalities, and what cooperation means to them. Cooperation for this article is about getting things done in the workplace. It is about leaders and followers meeting goals. Team leaders affect team members through their behaviors so understanding how members might perceive the leader’s actions is important. Leaders can act in ways that improve the cooperation of millennials in the workplace to better achieve goals. There are three special areas where leaders can act in ways that

positively affect their experience with millennials particularly. These are (a) facilitating communication, (b) providing meaningful work, (c) and tapping into that generation's defining characteristics.

Communication

The use of social media by millennials exemplifies the first key issue regarding leading that generation of workers: communication.

Communication is critical to achieving goals at work and a leader who understands how their team members communicate, why they do it those ways, and how to facilitate the right communication is far ahead. One piece of advice given by Dayna in the session was the "need to provide a way for sharing ideas and provide a safety net." Millennials exhibit qualities of introversion when it comes to thinking about ideas, forming them, presenting and then defending them. Even if not introverted, they still want time to informally discuss alternatives regarding important matters before presenting their position. When they present their position or question or comment, they do not want to be jumped on with alternate thoughts no matter how well meaning. Of course, social media is full of spontaneous posts and immediate attacks back. But this just points out what Dayna is saying, the spontaneity and the attacks (although probably rude) are there because they consider social media a safe place to communicate. A workplace committee meeting is generally not considered a safe place for

this generation if it includes senior members who use their authority to control the discussion or activities of the committee.

As an example, a firm needs an evaluation of new software to decide on the next generation to use to prepare financial plans. Dale, the practice leader, sets the goal: summarize the top two packages in terms of ease of use and effectiveness in output by the next Director's meeting. Dale has a team of millennials as planners. There are three initial decisions to be made:

1. Which software to evaluate,
2. What are the relevant criteria,
3. Who is going to do the work?

Dale, understanding millennials, announces this project to the team and appeals to them to figure out how to get it done. There are four aspects to note about handing out this assignment correctly:

1. No leader is explicitly chosen by Dale,
2. Only an outline of the goal, timeframe, the issues to consider, and some beginning suggestions is distributed.
3. Dale does not provide an opinion on any of the questions or other side issue unless asked,
4. Dale makes sure the team knows that the resources of the firm are there for them including the experience of the senior members. Dale will be available as needed.

These four points are how Dale creates a safe place with a safety net with a project with a clear goal, resource commitment, outline to follow, and an attainable deadline. His team members are smart and work well together. They will find a way to the answers and on time. Dale may need to manage the process to ensure it is under control, but the leadership exhibited here goes to the heart of trusting team members to do the job right.

Dale can keep in mind Terri's advice from the panel: "Let them see the entire project... Share the stresses as a manager you go through... Give them a community project to cure their boredom." The team's communication probably looked something like this:

1. A beverage session to throw around ideas off the top of their heads just to establish parameters. In organizational behavior terms this could be the "forming" stage. Usually little conflict occurs since there aren't any strong positions to defend. If members have existing opinions there may be some of the second stage group behavior, "storming", which likely devolves to "let's get some ideas together, share them around, and then reconvene." This is also the result of a non-storming session, it just may take longer to disburse.
2. Team members will spend time alone coming up with ideas to share. They will share them throughout the day via email and text. A shared Google Doc may come into play. The thoughts, ideas, opinions, and

counter-opinions are tracked informally. Disagreements are rarely made personal. Consensus is not important in early stages.

3. The team reconvenes, this time more formally as they are ready to formulate the group decisions on how to proceed. They may choose a leader or may not. The result will be an action plan to achieve the goal of answering the three questions. There may be some storming, but eventually they will norm and perform. There will be agreement on the goal's specific requirements and the plan to achieve those. This is how they choose movies to watch together, restaurants to try, what car to buy, and many other decisions that Baby Boomers just don't understand the need for groupthink.
4. More sharing, etc. reconvene for decisions, report to Dale.
5. Shawn's advice from the panel is, "They want to know why. They want feedback" so Dale should be fully prepared to go through the reasoning of any decisions.

Research shows that the above process while generalized is how this generation works as a group whether at work or home. It differs in significant ways from their parents' ways of doing things and really differs from how their grandparents do them. Their parents are 38-50 and their grandparents are 50+. Leaders need to be cognizant of how many "Dales" they have that are of these two older generations. It is important that those

that lead younger generations accommodate how that generation communicates, especially how they communicate to get work done.

Here are some workplace tips for facilitating communication:

1. Create shared space that belongs to no one such as a central table and seating area where team members can congregate informally. Supply snacks for the table. Have good coffee and tea nearby.
2. Provide anonymous posting of ideas, thoughts, concerns, etc. so the team members who do want to be heard but not step forward can provide input to the firm.
3. Solicit ideas and thoughts in advance in writing and through informal one-on-one discussions before group meetings. In this way, leaders can ensure good ideas are included in the discussion, even if no attribution is made (“A caller from Iowa suggested....”)
4. Provide opportunities for out-of-office social events. The team members may not naturally group up outside of the workplace, so making informal work events happen is a way for good grouping to come about with co-workers and this facilitates their way of communicating. Celebration events (even small celebrations – “Who has birthdays in the next quarter?”) are good for this.

These are just a few ideas. The internet has plenty more.

Meaningful Work

Many baby boomers are just figuring out that they would have enjoyed their careers more if the work had been more meaningful. They are curing this by tremendous activity in supposedly retirement years that is meaningful to them whether paid, volunteer, social, sports, or hobbies. Millennials have noticed this and want the meaningfulness now. Terri put it this way, they are "searching for an industry that matches their values. They want their passion to be matched... They have no problem job hopping. Attracting may be easy but keeping them may be harder." Dayna added that while she is a millennial she hasn't job hopped because Pershing's "management training program gave me an opportunity to see what other jobs were available. This can be a great retention vehicle." Shawn noted that at Piper Jaffray they have "implemented protected weekends" to accommodate their millennial's desire to not be at work when they are with their friends. He continued, "They want more input into decisions. They want to see their contributions. They like access to senior management and client earlier in their career." Good thoughts to consider when designing meaningful work.

Voluntary termination intention is social science's way of measuring how much a person is thinking about quitting and the likelihood of them quitting. High intention doesn't mean that quitting is on the horizon, but it is indicative of dissatisfaction. There may be many high barriers to quitting

such as needing to eat, but if the intention is high there may be many bad organizational outcomes such as absenteeism, drug use at work, destructive communication patterns, and low productivity. It's almost like they want to be fired it can be so bad. Leaders should work to keep voluntary termination intention low and this is done one team member at a time. With millennials several factors have already been mentioned that will lower this intention such as facilitating communication, involvement in decision making, and working with senior management. Several more points were brought up by the panel that directly relate to lowering the intention to quit (thus lowering the occurrence of bad outcomes and increasing positive outcomes):

1. Shawn: "They are looking to use a different set of tools... This requires the company to be more agile." The company could form a "business resource group" that includes all ages of users of resources to come up with new ideas especially around how work gets done.
2. Morgan: "Look for opportunities for millennials to go above and beyond." Known in social science as organizational citizenship behavior, millennials love to volunteer. Manage that desire by leading them to useful and enriching projects. Partner them senior managers on projects that might not be related to their day-to-day work.

3. Dayna: "What's going to keep employees engaged is a feeling of empowerment, control of their job... We need to harness their energy... to keep them engaged even if it is not in their entry-level position" echoing Morgan.
4. Terri: "Lay out a career path. Their whole life has been scheduled. Come up with trendy titles aware they are sharing everything with their followers." Trendy titles equate to participation ribbons and are an excellent reward that HR generally has a hard time with.
5. Dayna: Regarding her time in the management development program she said, "They pushed me. They supported me. When I thought I wasn't ready they helped me push through that. They supported me." This double mention of support is critical.

Tapping into their Defining Characteristics

This has been touched on in the Communications section, but so much more behavior can be harnessed to enrich the firm. A good fishing guide knows how schools of fish act, a photo safari leader knows herds, a poet pulls together words. Knowing how team members behave naturally and using that energy is a lot easier than fighting with it. While some of the group behaviors of millennials are dysfunctional at work, most are not and even the dysfunctional can be managed back into functionality.

Millennials are characterized in the popular media as more altruistic, more family-oriented, and more success minded than their parents' generation. Social science has not found this to be true. Nor are they less concerned with making money. Extrinsic motivators still work! What is different is how interacting with technology changed how this generation knows the world, and their experience in institutions during school years shaped their interactions with institutions.

Digital technologies, for example, are indigenous to this generation. Some neuroscientists believe there is a re-wiring of the brain due to digital immersion. Many members of this generation are much better at multi-tasking, have better visual acuity allowing for better response to visual stimulation, and filter information faster and better than the previous cohorts. Interestingly, one of the beneficiaries of these qualities is the CIA (Business Week's 37th ranked place to start a career). The CIA has found that their newly recruited analysts are much faster learners and have higher productivity scores than previous hires. Leadership at the CIA has created meaningful work through job content taking advantage of these characteristics.

Another characteristic is that they grew up creating content and continue to do so. While it is debated whether they will in their 40s and 50s, right now they do and they like doing it. They desire to express their opinions and spend a lot of time online reading others' opinions and

reacting. Leaders will recognize this proclivity as one that their firm can use. Engage this generation of team members in creating content for the firm, hold contests for best new ideas (they will scour the internet for gaps in products and services, or what is happening in India, etc.), or have them judge what senior management thinks are good ideas (in a safe place.) In a session at iNSITE 2018 on reverse mentorship, one panelist commented that their best ideas came from setting the newbies free to criticize what the company is doing now, what the competition is doing, and to say what they and their friends think what will be next. Allow them to comment on and create content for the firm's web presence and social media communications as they know what looks good and what is current. Note that this can all be "extra-role" work; they don't have to be in marketing, or product design, or senior management. Sounds like fun.

However fun these projects can be, an interesting millennial characteristic is that this group does not work well without structure. Providing a goal without some means of getting there creates anxiety. This anxiety can be molded into positive action, but the reality is that it is easier to provide at least some direction on how to get there. A leader who models how they would do the job is respected even if that method is soon discarded. The team member needs a starting place. Ancillary to having structure, the goals should be explicit; ambiguity is not rewarding. Millennials learned in school to expect clear outlines of the project's goals,

procedures to follow, and rewards. Some “blame” the No Child Left Behind Act and the parent generation. Leaders should recognize this means that this generation prefers to work in institutions with centralized management decisions, clear job duties in-role and extra-role, and formalized procedures. They do well in large, well run organizations. They are not rebellious, but they still can be a handful as they will use all of this structure to the outer limits, sometimes resulting in unintended consequences. Clarity of boundaries is key.

Regarding senior management, millennials exhibit two characteristics that senior management can harness for positive outcomes or use to destroy this cohort. The first is the millennials’ belief in meritocracy. They trust institutions and expect institutions to treat everyone fairly based on work effort, productivity, and participation. Second, they want to be acknowledged for accomplishments, encouraged, and to be granted access to bigger, better, more interesting projects. They want inclusion, respect, rewards, chance for improvement, and want leaders who model success. The bottom line is that leading otherwise will cause high turnover and other negative outcomes. The CIA does a good job of this evidenced by a 94% retention rate.

One tool mentioned by the panel is to have clear career paths published in a way that the team member can track progress (much like the timeline to college admission). There must be objective points of reference

and team recognition when achieved so they can tell their friends. The career path implementation must be honestly adhered to or millennials quit. They aren't really job-hopping, they are boss/team/company/culture shopping. The good news is that from the standpoint of senior management, these are great employees to involve in accomplishing strategic and tactical plans.

Summary

The panelists shared many stories, ideas, and directions audience members can use in their firms. Pershing throughout the conference emphasized leadership behaviors as the key to a successful firm. The focus on attracting and retaining millennials in this session was warranted as this is challenging many firms with growth and succession plans. Many of the ideas presented apply to all leadership roles and team member make-up as it is important to remember millennials are still human and all humans have basic extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. The generational differences provide shades of grey for these motivators, and good leaders shape their own behaviors and organizations to fit those team members they want to keep.