

Millennials in the Workplace - How to Rev their Engine

Much has been written about the workplace experiences and behaviours of Millennials – born between 1979 and 1994 - and how they differ from their predecessors, Gen-Xers and Boomers. The fact is, however, the Millennial generation has begun to occupy positions of leadership in the workplace. The question for employers is therefore how to ensure Millennials are integrated in a way that enables them to lead and reap workplace dividends, not disagreement and discord?

First, a quick recap on what we already know. Whereas Gen-Xers value independence and Boomers are known for their tireless work-ethic, Millennials are a different breed:

- Millennials expect close relationships with and frequent feedback from supervisors.
- Millennials expect open communication from supervisors and to be given the opportunity to provide input on higher level strategic decisions.
- Millennials don't want their age or lesser years of service to exclude them from meaningful participation.
- Millennials have shown a preference for working in groups. This is rooted in their belief that group work is more fun and provides for less exposure to risk.
- In a less than flattering way Millennials have been characterized as self-absorbed and lacking in respect for the achievements of their elders. Millennials are more likely to change jobs; have been criticized for showing disloyalty to the employers that have provided them with a place to grow and realize success in the early years.
- Millennials are well plugged-in. They are comfortable with technology, presenting great opportunity to add value to an organization. On the other hand, technology has empowered Millennials to challenge traditional expectations about where, when and how work is performed.
- Millennials have not adopted the defining characteristic of either the Boomer generation which is seen as one of ambitious workaholics, or the Gen-Xers who are viewed as sceptics preferring to work autonomously instead of in groups.
- Millennials are impatient to be seen as valuable contributors and resistant to the notion that they have to "pay their dues."

Against this backdrop, HR professionals often question whether and how their organization's practices and policies can successfully integrate Millennials. Are the policies responsive to the needs and desires of Millennials? If not, are they capable of adaptation?

Performance Reviews

Consider the issue of 'performance reviews'. The typical model includes a meeting in which a supervisor and employee review the employee's performance against certain pre-determined criteria, finalize a go-forward plan, sign-off and resolve to meet again to review achievement at the next evaluation period (usually six months or a year). This feedback model worked well for Boomers or Gen-Xers whose attributes are more accepting of a fixed, periodic review - outside of which they wish to be left alone to do their work. However, this model isn't suitable for fast-paced Millennials and may frustrate the objective of the process.

Millennials say that they expect close relationships and frequent feedback from supervisors. Sometimes referred to as the "Look at Me" generation, Millennials have, in large measure, grown up in an environment in which their confidence was falsely bloated by an education system that inflated grades, and a social network of 'thousands' of 'friends' all ready and willing to offer instant communication and feedback. As a result, organizations that want to capture the potential of Millennials ought to consider a model of performance evaluation that is multi-dimensional, with feedback given more frequently than once or twice a year. For example, some employers have reported great success using formal mentorship programs that provide Millennials with a form of performance review and interactive reflection on a regular basis. Such programs have the benefit of addressing not only an individual's work product, but also provide a mechanism for encouraging open workplace communication between Millennials and their Gen-X or Boomer supervisors.

Fostering Work-Ethic

We know Millennials crave work-life balance and, for the most part, prioritize close personal relationships over work. Organizations that want to appeal to Millennials therefore need to meet the challenge posed by work-life balance demands by instituting flexibility including, for example, job sharing and flex time.

There is also an opportunity to achieve significant buy-in from Millennials by placing them under the watch of leaders who are personable and open to close workplace relationships. Studies have shown Millennials develop commitment to individuals, not organizations (in contrast to Boomers). Some Millennials report forming attachments so strong they see their supervisors as workplace parents. In those cases, where Millennials feel as though they are working for a supervisor who they trust and respect and who is committed to them, they often show more of a Boomer-like work ethic including less of a likelihood to job-hop.

Workplace Culture

As Boomers move out and Millennials move in, inherent assumptions about workplace cultures have to adapt. The international accounting firm Deloitte achieved significant improvement on its 33% turnover rate for women when it did away with the implicit requirement that employees work 80-hour work weeks. The firm changed both its formal policies and addressed the unstated rule that excessive hours of work were necessary and would be rewarded.[1] The Deloitte example does not mean organizations need to sacrifice capacity (working hours) to satisfy Millennials. It does mean organizations will need to employ different strategies to motivate Millennials to work hard and happily. More than any generation, Millennials view time as a valuable resource that should not be wasted. Organizational cultures that place number of hours worked above all as a measure of an employee's worth are more likely to be met with resistance and flight. Many organizations have reported positive results tapping into the Millennial mindset by looking beyond hours worked, and (also) assigning value to an individual's contribution to office collegiality or efforts made to raise the company's profile.

Final Thoughts

As Millennials rise to positions of workplace leadership their ascendance presents both human resources challenges and opportunities. Appealing to Millennials can be a critical part of an organization's talent management and succession planning. Understanding their tendencies and desires is crucial to growing them from entry-level employees to company leaders.

[1] Babcock, L. & Laschever S. (2003). Women don't ask: Negotiation and the gender divide. Princeton, NJ: NJ Princeton University Press.

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