CRACKING THE MILLENNIAL CODE

5 SECRETS TO BETTER LEADING MILLENNIALS

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For the last five years, the influence of Millennials (people born approximately between 1980 and 2000) in the workplace has put pressure on many leaders and their organizations. But generational tensions are as old as generations themselves (even Socrates complained about the societal disruption from the following generation!). Thus, when it comes to the workplace, why are Millennials getting so much attention? What makes this generation so different? And how, as managers and leaders, do you lead Millennials to the best mutual outcomes?

Millennials are the result of a crucial change in parenting and educational styles. For centuries, most models of education were normative, meaning that children had to adapt to the social norms of their elders – willingly or by force. However, after the counterculture movement of the 1960s, educational styles shifted to a more emotional style, where society was required to adapt itself to the needs of the child. This society-focused to child-focused shift is fundamental in understanding the underlying structure that shapes the Millennials' experience and expectations of the world around them.

First, Millennials grew up in a uniquely-rich media environment. For them, technology perpetually evolved in short, quasi-Darwinian cycles. Their games and heroes told stories of teamwork, quests and explorations, as well as constant sequences of personal transformations. Most of their best-selling video games and cultural icons were built around the idea of giant evolutionary trees and fluid mutation structures, where recombination and modularity were central to their experiences (think, Pokemon, DragonBall or even the culture of remix music). This unique exposure to technology and media affected both (1) how Millennials, now as adults, view their own **leadership journeys** and (2) how they **see interconnections between people**. For example, Millennials don't conceptualize their career trajectory in a linear way – as previous generations did. That is, they don't expect to start and then stay with a single company for their entire careers, climbing the corporate ladder. Instead, they view their careers as a series of starts and stops, unique explorations, jaunts and journeys – all converging on some unknown place of self-discovery and fulfilment. For Millennials, teams, nested within the company, come before the company itself.

Second, conventional corporate organizational charts don't resonate with Millennials. For a generation exposed to massive structures of interwoven and deeply complex inter-relationships, the idea that Person C always reports to Person B who reports to Person A doesn't mesh with how they think. Instead, Millennials see the inter-relations between people in the hierarchy as more fluid, constantly changing based on task and competency. So, while their Gen X predecessors may perceive Millennials as trying to subvert the existing reporting structure, Millennials merely see this behavior as a way of building connections and exploiting and extracting expertise to its fullest. What many non-Millennials perceive as merely internal politics can feel opaque and restricting to Millennials. However, this aptitude to reach horizontally across an organization can be a particularly useful asset to drive cross-functional and -disciplinary collaborations.

Third, our research shows that one of the most important topics to address with Millennials is the relationship between **learning and mentoring**. As Millennials are more oriented toward visual and group-based learning – having, as children, received a very different amount and type of attention from parents and caregivers – they request a less authoritarian leadership style and prefer (as well as respond better to) a more relaxed and present mentoring style. This means that rather than be told what to do, Millennials need to be explained the context of the task so that they can see the purpose in it, and perhaps even be allowed to shadow an older colleague performing the task.

Fourth, in our digital age, **cross-generational collaborations,** which bring together the wisdom of the earlier generations and the technical know-how of the younger generations, are at the heart of success. Such collaborations require making sense of the collective perception of the group's "quest" – that is, what the group collectively needs to achieve and why it is important. Similar to the concept of "starting with why," this idea of a quest creates something bigger than the work or team itself and requires that the task be connected to societal issues and leaves room for integrating diverse points of view. Such alterations in working style will require leaders to become the enablers and facilitators of exchanges rather than the arbiters of tasks (think "mediator" rather than "arbitrator"). To motivate Millennials, leaders need to be able to address questions such as, "Why are we doing this?", "What are our milestones and how do we know we're making progress?", and "What impact are we aiming for?"

And lastly, in this context, **feedback** is a critical tool for managers. As Millennials prefer ongoing conversations rather than the institutional style of formal performance evaluations and year-end reviews, leaders must adapt to a generation that has very different expectations on giving and receiving feedback. Generally speaking, Millennials are driven by fulfilment rather than money. Therefore feedback, which taps into a person's intrinsic motivation and sense of self, will be at the core of unlocking Millennials' potential. Feedback is about building trust and showing that leaders listen and react quickly. This means delivering feedback in an ongoing, more informal way rather than a formal, bi-annual or annual way. By not giving Millennials the feedback that they crave to stay motivated, managers risk discouraging these younger workers from sharing their perceptions with their managers, killing their motivation and inciting them to eventually leave the organization.

While they may seem like it at times to their older counterparts, Millennials are not an entirely new species; they have the same fundamental needs of affiliation, achievement and autonomy as previous generations. But the way they fulfill these needs is quite different from (and sometimes foreign to) the generations that preceded them. Millennials retreat from many traditional consumer behaviors in mobility, real estate, finance or retail. An entirely new set of narratives and experiences affect how they engage with the corporate world. They are rejecting not only the notion of endless growth, which has shaped the worldview of previous generations, but also the idea of the hero leader and "his" top-down command. The Millennials are a collaboration-based and team-first generation that appreciates a fast and fluid culture of remix and transformation.

Rather than feel discouraged and confused in how to interact with Millennials, to "crack the Millennial code," leaders must be open to adjusting their style of interacting with this generation to fit Millennials' ways of seeing the world, as well as to be open to learning from and listening to those who will be the next leaders of our organizations and society.

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