

Managing millennials - it's not generational

When you Google "managing millennials", you'll receive about 36,000 hits; "millennials in the workplace," about 111,000; and "millennials and work," some 158,000. There's no question managing, and working with, millennials is a hot topic. A general review of much of the discussion around millennials can lead you to believe millennials are (a) a pain in the neck; (b) need extreme coddling; (c) are resented and mistrusted; (d) a special interest group; or (e) a "subversive" group.

In my experience working with millennials (and adults who think like millennials), I've never come to any of these conclusions about millennials. Why? Because I never managed a millennial as a millennial. I managed a millennial, as I did every other employee, as a citizen of an organization who, if they had a clear vision of the organization's goals and deeply reflected on their choice to work in this organization and on how their attitudes, behavior and performance supported the organization's goals and vision, they were a fine fit with no "generational stuff" that needed to be processed.

When one treats millennials, or anyone else, as adults, who have every reason to respond well to the same kind of high-caliber management and fair setting of expectations that every other adult (and child) responds to well, the "generational" issue melts away.

Here are some approaches I used when managing millennials, and then teaching millennials in undergraduate classes.

When I managed teams, including millennials, the first day on the job (mine, if I were coming in as a new hire/manager and theirs, as they were hired and joined the team), was spent discussing expectations – mine, theirs and the organization's – e.g., values, what healthy and unhealthy teamwork and collaboration looked like, what interfacing with clients looked like, what healthy and unhealthy competition looked like, what effective and ineffective performance looked like, what open and honest communication and disagreement looked like, what positive attitudes looked like, etc.

Along the way, those whose performance indicated they needed support in these areas got it (I'm also a certified coach). The bottom line, explicit and clear, was: meet expectations and be a good citizen and you were fine. Otherwise, there were consequences. The last thing I said at every meeting of this type was, "Life is choices. So, it's up to you to choose if you want to be here and how you want to be here." There are benefits from choosing wisely; there are consequences from choosing not wisely.

During the 21 years I managed and taught university students, the same thing. Day one of every class was the expectations discussion. One thing I made very clear up front is that if they took the final exam on day one, they would most likely fail.

So, "everybody is starting this class with an "F" and it's your responsibility to work your way up to the grade you want." (no entitlements or getting an A because you walk and talk and have blood in your veins.)

Every class I taught centered around peer-mediated interaction, i.e, small groups. 30% of their grade was connected to how well they supported their group to achieve their group's goals. If one of the group members choose (remember the "life is choices" piece) not to do their piece of the work, their other group members' grades would suffer; on the other hand, group members who were doing their work would be expected to make their best attempt to motivate their colleague to seek to improve, to not simply complain about their colleague or ostracize him/her.

So, on day one of class we discussed what cooperation and collaboration looked like, specifically how one could move from an F to a D, to a C, etc., etc. Details. Then, the "life is choices" — benefits and consequences piece.

In all of this, there were no surprises. Everyone knew what was expected on Day 1. They could choose to engage or not, knowing full well the consequences of their choice.

In both the classroom and the workplace, individuals could dress how they wanted within reason. In the workplace, they could listen to their music, etc. within reason. But the bottom line was they needed to be good "citizens" of the organization and the university, operate within the guidelines, enjoy flexibility within a structure, produce, perform and meet expectations if they wished to be successful. Not all chose to do so and they didn't continue. Life is choices.

So, it begins with expectations and leads to trusting that folks will adhere to the commitments they made. Then standing back and observing, coaching and supporting when and where required.

It worked well for me and for most of the individuals with whom I was engaged. There was virtually no "age" issue, or generational, "millennial", issues. The majority of folks achieved and performed well in both venues. Some folks chose to opt out. Me? I chalk it up to values, expectations and always knowing what you want, and knowing what healthy and unhealthy choices gain one. I never spoke, or speak, about age as the "issue." It's about character, values and expectations.

When I manage I never use the word "goal"; I always use the word "choice." What I suggest is that (1) we throw out the word "goal" and replace it with "choice", asking each employee to craft their "choices" (how to do, be and have) they feel would make them good citizens of the organization. "Choice" is more personal, empowering, internally motivating and fosters "ownership", responsibility and accountability; (2) I would then ask each employee to state their commitment to honoring the choices they make and (3) indicate, specifically in an operational way, what commitment looks like in (a) thought-how they will think about what they say they're going to do (b) public voice-what they actually say to customers and clients and why, and (c) action, what they actually do. Management would be well served to support folks to craft their language so their choices and commitments (1) are measurable and observable, (2) are related to their team's or organization's values, mission and vision and (3) exhibit an alignment between what an employee thinks, says and does.

By making choices, and consciously, proactively and self-reflectively focusing on the positive alignment between what the employee thinks, says and does and an organization's expectations, vision, goals and values, performance of management and "millennials" becomes more mutually organizationally and employee supportive and erases the need for "generation-specific"-type concern. The same applies to the classroom.

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