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THE NEW GUARD

By now, you have heard about the impact the Millennial generation has on today's workforce — but employees in this group are very different from those in the past.

BY MARK OKUN

It is generally accepted — although sources will fluctuate — that the upward age of the Millennial generation is 38 years old. The moniker “Millennial” has been marketed to the masses as a generation living in self-absorbed perpetual youth, forced to live at home with the ‘rents, and straddling the gap between adolescence and adulthood.

Yet, when the layers of the Millennial onion are peeled away, you discover a group that is industrious, eager, and digitally savvy. What you also find is a group of people seeking knowledge.

In almost every interaction I've had with “Gen Y'ers,” when they need basic information, they will do a Google search first. It is their other commonality that I find inspiring: the desire for mentorship and real-life examples when it comes to the soft skills of management, leadership, and the incorporation of emotional intelligence into their professional lives.

HISTORY BEING MADE

One challenge the Millennial Manager faces that no other group has faced before is that there could

be as many as five generations occupying the same workforce. This creates a unique predicament if a Millennial is managing an older, younger, and same age workforce.

Believe it or not, this distinctive workplace condition provides a cloaked benefit for the Millennial Manager. They have the opportunity to glean from the experience and examples of the older generation while applying their own style, techniques, and skills as they guide their teams in these testy times. With these skill-building benefits, however, there are also some daunting challenges.

Clearly communicating with your team members is a difficult task. Double it if your group has a vast age span. Learning the communication nuances that each generation has will assist in reducing some of the associated generational tension.

BREAK THE STEREOTYPE

When moving towards any goal — whether for business or personal success — being blind to pre-conceived generational differences will accelerate the progress. The common assumptions that Baby

Boomers are impatient digital disasters and Millennials are cell phone-clutching kids who lack a work ethic are both horrible generalities and equally false. Effective Millennial Managers lead their teams from the front and manage based on an individual's actual performance, not by age or assumption.

Some stereotypes are true, like realizing cell phones and tablets are much-needed tools in business today. These devices offer tremendous convenience to both the team member and the client. Timing is essential — and with everything relative to sales, communication is no different. Response speed today is measured in minutes. It is no wonder that the previous managerial generation, which often banned cell phones to lockers, file drawers, and glove boxes, would find difficulty in accepting these essential instruments of productivity.

SKILL SET MATCH

Even when we dispel stereotypes, it is the Millennial Manager's job to identify and apply the generational strengths of each group. This is how we build a collaborative workforce. One example of a task that several generations can work on together is social media.

Both Boomer and Boomlets can work together to make a better social post. The melding of soft relationship skills with digital dexterity taps into the wheelhouse of both staffers. It also helps those individual staff members to develop a team relationship and see the benefit the other person brings to the table. In the background, there is critical cross-training and team building (respect) going on.

COMMUNICATION

When asking Millennial Managers what they felt was the most challenging aspect of their role, they were unified in their response that communication is the most difficult. When dealing with a multi-generational workforce, the goal becomes not only what is being said, but also how it is being said. Boomers like to have their information presented to them verbally, while Millennials prefer text, email, or company group or web pages.

The Millennial Manager's test is to get each group comfortable with all of the communication tools used by your business. Sharing the same message on all platforms is the way to do that.

Selling is about communicating emotion, and what better way to share generational talent than

by having members of the various generations role-play a presentation? Which characteristic does each group mention first? Which features and benefits are talked about or excluded? The answers to these questions help the manager develop the overall presentation skills of the group while building mutual respect among the team.

For the Millennial Manager, when dealing with many of your internal team communications, choose your voice first. The two-fold benefit is that the Boomers are being “spoken” to, and the other gens are observing the art of conversation. Reinforce the discussion topic in an email and tell them that you will be doing this so nothing gets lost in the spoken word. Since back and forth texts or emails explaining details can be time-consuming, using a detailed verbal communication method will considerably reduce the chance of lost information.

PEER MANAGEMENT

One of the most challenging transitions that a Millennial Manager faces is shifting from friend to boss. As one Millennial Manager I spoke with said, “I discovered quickly that not everyone likes you or is your friend. This was hard to accept. As a group (Millennials), we have been raised to be all-inclusive and to like everybody.”

This realization has given many Millennial Managers pause since they want to like — and be liked — by all the people they work with. While this may not always be the case, it is a worthy goal.

MILLENNIAL MANAGERS AS PEERS

Find a balance between the roles of being a hard-driving, fair, and authoritative leader with being an easy-going workplace buddy. The skills that help



“I do love to be on my cell phone. I text employees, send email, and call accounts. My cell is my home office.”

— Lisa Needer,
Wabash Lighting,
Indiana

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“Our (team) relationships became very strong, due to our respect, appreciation, and understanding of each other’s strengths and weaknesses.”

— Drew Mihelish, Western Montana Lighting

in this transition begin with humility. Being humble is attractive to staff members of all generations. Blending assertive actions with polite humility is one indicator that you are the correct person in the managerial role.

The next skill is one we hear about all the time: listening. Truly listening with an open mind builds a bond with team members and opens the Millennial Manager up to new ideas and opportunities that can grow the business.

The same conversational skills that make a salesperson great apply when having a chat with a team member. Keep it less formal, one on one, and always be prepared to answer the question “Why?”

Develop a thick skin. If you are a Millennial Manager, you may remember what it was like sitting with “friends” at break or lunch discussing the newest showroom policy or a decision made by management. The topic of manager-staff relationships either receives accolades about it or depicts a hostile environment. New managers must grasp that they are now the prime topic of conversation and probably won’t be invited to join in.

As a person who has been managing stores and leading people since I was 28, I will share the most important phrase I was ever taught: “Who cares?” If the conversation is only some venting, just forget about it. Focus your energy and attention on the hot-button issues brought to your attention. The small problems that eat your time will have little impact compared to the ones that save a sale or build a client for life.

GROOMING MILLENNIAL MANAGERS

In working with Millennials I have found that management styles that were popular through 2005 are viewed as an archaic top-down approach to control and contrary to growing a team dynamic. This is the total opposite of the results showrooms wish to see today.

Instead, this Millennial group of workers,

managers, or owners all want inspirational mentors who will help them navigate the new ocean they travel. If you are a Boomer business owner and are reading this, you are just one of the mentors the Millennial Manager needs. Taking the initiative to put other mentors in your team’s path will provide untold benefits. None of us is a complete package, and the closer we get to 2020, the more critical the need is for collaboration among all types of associates.

WHAT MILLENNIAL MANAGERS WANT

One of the questions I asked the Millennial Managers I interviewed for this article was, “From your point of view, what is the lighting industry missing?”

The answers shared a similar tone, expressing concerns that there are not enough young people coming into the industry while there is an increasing exodus of experience leaving before the torch passes. They have concerns about product quality and access to good vendor information. These concerns are no different than those faced by any generation before them, but the difference is the speed that business has accelerated to.

MILLENNIAL MANAGER TAKEAWAY

Here are some important skills for new and existing Millennial Managers to incorporate.

- » **Build** your team. Praise in public and make corrections in private.
- » **Use data** – not feelings – to make important decisions.
- » **Learn** the subtle art of giving, taking, and using feedback. This is where the gold nuggets hide.
- » **Commit** to lifelong learning and curiosity – and then teach what you learn to others.
- » **When communicating**, try a face-to-face conversation or phone call before an email or text.
- » **Focus** on the important, and forget the petty.

The skills of the Millennial Manager, as with all generations before them, will evolve. The youngest Millennials are in their mid-20s and will have a twist on what the elders of their group are doing today. One thing is certain: Nothing will be stagnant. The way we go to market, the way our clients shop, and the way we manage and build our companies will continue to change.

As always, happy selling! ❖

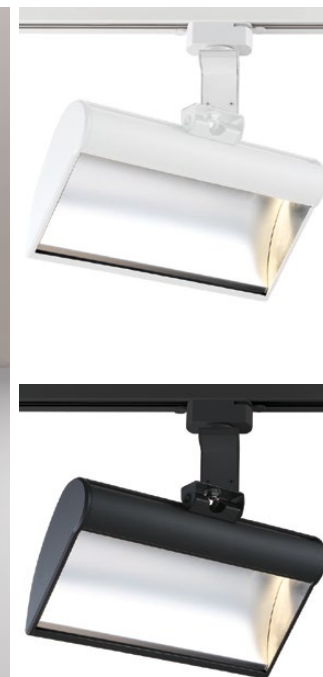


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