

Article

Getting Millennials to Engage



By Robert W. Wendover

First, an apology. There will be those in their twenties who will rail against what you are about to read. They will complain that I am over-generalizing, jumping to conclusions or have a personal bias against young workers. None of this is true.

I applaud the hardworking young stars emerging in today's workplace. But I have heard countless stories about young employees who seem to lack the desire to contribute more than the minimum, show up on time, if at all, and take the initiative to think through the normal challenges of daily life. "What's happened to the work ethic?" most of these storytellers ask.

The Millennials, or Generation Y as they are sometimes called, are the largest generation in US history, some 81 million strong. Over the coming years, they will change the way work is done. They are technologically savvy. They want to multi-task on the job and off. They also seek a never-ending stream of distractions and stimulation due to the environment in which they have come of age. All this makes for a very interesting recipe when mixed with those who have toiled in the workforce for the past many years.

We could stop here and examine the root causes of this conundrum, but that wouldn't provide a solution. So let's get to the point. Millennials need to understand the answers to five questions when they come to work:

- Why am I doing what I am doing?
- What am I supposed to do, specifically?
- How do I perform the job effectively?
- How am I supposed to act on the job?
- What standards and expectations am I expected to meet?

If you provide the answers to these five questions, you and they will get along just fine. Allow me to explain:

Why am I doing what I am doing? – Imagine coming to work on the first day of a new job and being told what to do, but not why. What kind of investment would you feel for doing a good job? Incredibly, most young front-line workers have little idea of how their effort contributes to the overall mission. Those in previous generations received messages such as “You should be thankful to have the job.” Parents hammered the tenants of work ethic into them as children and employers enforced expectations without fear of crossing legal boundaries. These generations simply did the work assigned and didn’t feel it appropriate to question why? But this isn’t an article about employees’ rights.

If you want to get your young workers invested, take the time to show them how what they do contributes to the overall success of the organization. Provide tours. Share some numbers. Graphically illustrate the impact of their hard work. A furniture retailer in California, for instance, periodically gathers everyone together in the warehouse. He then proceeds to show them how each department contributes to the customer relationship by distributing the cash from the “sale” to each individual department. From the buyers who select the inventory to the drivers who deliver the furniture, everyone gets a lesson in how the puzzle fits together and why the revenue from a \$3000 dining room set isn’t pocketed by the owner. Does everyone get it? No, but it’s a great way to engage young employees.

What am I supposed to do, specifically? – Critical thinking, without the aid of menu driven devices, does not appear to be a strong suit for many of these young people. Give them the opportunity to dance their fingers across a keyboard and they will do it better than anyone over 40. But when it comes to so-called common sense decisions, be more specific in your direction. Rather than simply saying, “clean up the stockroom,” list for them exactly what steps they should complete. If you ask them to prepare a business letter, provide the specific format that should be followed. If you are delegating a project, use the following four step process: 1) Be crystal clear in describing the project. 2) Help them brainstorm an approach. 3) Set specific bench-marks to be completed. 4) Refuse to allow them to re-delegate it back on your shoulders by professing inability.

These deficits in “common sense” are not due to laziness. They are simply a function of their environment. If you had come of age in world of computer menus where all decisions seemed to be based on a series of choices, would you be any better adept at

the nuances of problem solving?

Many emerging workers need to be challenged to develop their critical thinking skills. At the same time, they need to be encouraged and nurtured to take risks, even little ones in the workplace. Resist the urge to do their job for them for them in the name of efficiency. They may lack the confidence to do something not specifically outlined in the job for fear of making a mistake. Have a little patience. Coach them. Encourage them and at the same time set clear expectations. Don't just assume that they're loafing if you see them "standing around."

How do I perform the job effectively? – A friend of mine manages a clothing store. The other day, one of her best young employees said, "When I came to work here, I never figured you were going to make me work the whole time." The hard reality is that my friend, along with countless other managers, has assumed the responsibility for teaching these young workers what work looks like. Millennials have come of age in a society that depicts work as fun, that stresses convenience, and fails to provide adequate modeling of how work, in general, is done. Think about the examples they see depicted on sitcoms, in the newspapers, or in other sorts of media. On one end they see the characters in *The Office* or *Scrubs* doing nothing but chat on the job. On the other, they read or watch stories about those their age who have made instant millions writing software or selling something over the internet. "Why," they ask themselves, "should I have to toil in this backwater when that guy is driving a Lamborghini?"

The solution? Model the behaviors you'd like to see. Let them see that if you're on the job, you're always looking for the next task to be done. Break tasks into smaller bites and keep a list of them handy for assignment when Millennial workers have completed what they're doing. Develop a standing list of ongoing tasks for which everyone is responsible when other projects have been completed. Given the opportunity, ask them how they feel about the job and what they can do to get ahead. Help them understand that most successful people they will meet have put in long hours, hand work and considerable sacrifice, something the media usually fails to mention.

Simply lamenting the fact that Millennials don't have the same work ethic won't accomplish the tasks at hand. Publicly praise those who take initiative and correct the behavior of those who do not. After all, the American workplace is a meritocracy. Sooner or later, those who do not perform will either conform or leave the organization. Obviously, this is easier said than done. But if you don't model what you want up front, it's all that harder to enforce expectations later on.

How am I supposed to act on the job? – This generation multi-channels and multi-tasks 24/7/365. Today’s teenagers are used to surfing the web, texting their friends, and eating lunch, all while actively participating in class. Then they come to work for you and are expected to perform the same set of tasks over and over and over without benefit of music and the other entertainment to which they have grown accustomed. Is it any wonder that some fail to assimilate to the workplace?

There is simply no way you and your job can compete with the rest of their lives. So don’t even try. Get past your idea of how work should be done and allow them some freedom to work the way they are used to.

Sure, you need to outline the specific tasks that need to be accomplished. But rethink the parameters that you have in your head about the right and wrong ways to get a job done. Simply because you used to do it a certain way should not mean that they need to do it that exact same way. Just because you can’t concentrate with music on in the background, doesn’t mean they can’t. If they can meet your parameters and text message their friends at the same time, why not let them? If you find they can’t, you can always reset the expectations.

Delegate more than one project at a time and let them bounce back and forth between assignments. They’re used to multi-tasking rather than working sequentially. All of this requires a bit of trial and error, but the result will be engaged, productive young workers.

What standards and expectations am I supposed to meet? – Most veteran managers, myself included, have been spoiled by hiring and supervising two generations that share many of the same beliefs about work ethic. It was easy to say, “do this” and assume that the person would perform the assignment with the same intensity as ourselves.

Unfortunately, many Millennials have not been socialized the same way. Be clear. Be consistent. But at the same time, lighten up. I used to frequent a McDonald’s that would get “slammed” every morning at breakfast time. In spite of this, this staff of Millennials appeared to be having a delightful time. They would tease each other, joke around, and involve the customers in their antics. “Why is this restaurant so different,” I wondered. Then I watched the manager, a woman in her forties. The food came out on time. No one waited more than an appropriate time and they had fun. She teased them. They teased her. But if things slowed down or mistakes were made, she would be the first to firmly take charge and correct offending behavior. Would her young charges protest? Sometimes, but they all got right back in line immediately. She was successful at both

setting expectations and encouraging the kind of environment that results in teamwork and performance.

It's been said that people live up, or down, to the expectations set for them. What are you and your managers modeling to the Millennial generation that will clearly communicate your work values and expectations?

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