

Teach Millennials Work Smarts Using These 5 Keys

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Lonnie works as an analyst at a financial services firm. He graduated with a finance degree and a 3.35 GPA. But in spite of his training, Lonnie feels like he's in over his head. It dawned on him a few days after starting that the recommendations he makes are the real deal. The firm could lose big money if someone follows his judgment and it doesn't pan out. That really unnerved him. So he's made a practice of checking in with his boss on anything he's unsure of. But this week his boss took him aside and said, "You've got to think on your own. If I have to review every decision you make, I might as well do the work myself."

In the past several years, I've heard countless employers complain that the Millennial generation struggles with making decisions. While this perception is may be unfair, the constant "checking in" they are known for contributes to this belief. One source of this behavior is the difference between what I call "book smarts" and "work smarts." For most college graduates, the road to a full-time professional job has consisted of 16 years of formal schooling. They've learned to study, take notes, write papers, take texts and work on small group projects. The ones with the highest grades got this down to a science. But decisions on the job are far different than those in the classroom.

One of the elements missing for many Millennials has been the experience of working in the marketplace. Those in past generations found themselves working one or more jobs while in high school and college. These positions ranged from delivering newspapers and waiting tables, to mowing lawns and working in factories. While these jobs weren't glamorous, they provided two things, spending money and experience in what it takes to navigate the work world. Sadly, many of these jobs have disappeared due to technology or assumed by older individuals trying to support a family on these traditionally part-time or seasonal positions.

The result is a generation of college students largely lacking in work smarts. I've had more than one manager lament that many new professionals don't know what work "looks like." When they enter the marketplace, they possess the academic skills but not the experience in discernment and problem solving required to thrive in the uncertainty of everyday business. So what can you do to help these emerging professionals adapt? Here are the five keys for doing so:

#1. Help them understand the context. Ask most Millennials to explain their employer's business model and they'll be at a loss for words. If you teach someone the big picture, they will naturally look for ways to solve the problems around them. Explain the larger

context from the first day on the job. When young contributors see how their work affects the whole, they will begin to troubleshoot and solve problems on their own.

#2. Share your experiences. The experience of trial and error marries book smarts to work. Every well-placed example helps emerging professionals understand and accept that all decisions are based on judgment and calculated risk. When they understand that you've been willing to fail in order to succeed, they will be emboldened to do the same.

#3. Compel them to make judgments and decisions. The potential consequences of a business decision can be intimidating. But at some point, a decision has made. Provide a strategy for making these choices. Help Millennials consider the options and possible outcomes. Have a heart-to-heart talk with them. Whatever you do, compel them to act.

#4. Process what goes right and wrong. Millennials lead the pack when it comes to impatience. There is great value, however, in taking time to consider the outcomes of decisions made. Make it an expectation that decisions of substance be discussed. What went right? What could have gone better? What's going well? What can be improved? What specific steps can be taken? What does success look like?

#5. Celebrate the good outcomes and commiserate about the bad. It is human nature to remember more of the failures than the successes. Take time to consider both with your people. Failure inhibits the urge to take future action. Success sometimes emboldens carelessness. An effective decision maker maintains a balance between the two. This comes through discussion, reflection and experience. Little will build the confidence of Millennials more than knowing that you're in their corner when making decisions, regardless of the outcomes.

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