

# Developing the Next Generation of Leaders: How to Engage Millennials in the Workplace

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by David Burkus

Millennials have been perceived by their coworkers as blunt, self-entitled and naïve (Tulgan, 2009). Tulgan goes on to say that other colleagues have lauded Millennials' optimism, self-confidence and willing embrace of technology. The Millennials, also called Mosaics, Echo Boomers, and Generation Y, are those born between roughly 1980-2000 (Oppel, 2007; Tulgan, 2009). Despite having only recently entered the workforce, Millennials are already making their arrival known (Tulgan, 2009). Tulgan believes that Millennials will become the most educated generation in history, learning from an increased exposure to diverse experiences, viewpoints and cultures. These Millennials are ready and willing to begin changing the world, but first, leaders need to change the way they lead (Tulgan, 2009). Millennials' attitudes toward work are unlike any previous generation's, a hardship magnified by the fact that four generations (Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X & Millennials) are now tasked with working together (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2000). In order to retain and grow top Millennial talent, leaders will need to adapt their leadership style to accommodate Millennials. Understanding Millennials will help the leader to engage them as followers and eventually develop them as leaders. This article presents six ways to engage Millennials as followers and retain them long enough to grow them into assets in any organization.

## **Provide Growth Opportunities**

Tulgan (2009) states that Millennials do not define success by climbing the corporate ladder, and as a result, they are not satisfied by repetitive tasks under the guise of "paying dues" with the promise of promotion. Tulgan asserts that Millennials are looking for more immediate rewards, but not necessarily cash. Millennials want to work on projects that provide learning and growth opportunities right away (Baldonado & Spangenburg, 2009). Millennials, who witnessed their boomer and older Generation X parents endure the first wave of major layoffs, have grasped the idea that lifetime employment is mostly a myth (Tulgan, 2009). Instead of a corporate ladder, Tulgan claims

Millennials envision a tapestry. As a result, Tulgan concludes that Millennials aren't concerned with what role they fulfill by moving through the organization, rather, they focus on what role the company will play in their life story. In order to effectively engage Millennials, Tulgan argues that leaders will need to demonstrate how work on a given project demonstrates a chance for Millennials to learn something new and interesting, or at the very least provides a useful set of "resume points" for them to cite when vying for future assignments or positions. Professional services firm KPMG allows young professionals to take advantage of the "Tax Trek" program, a three-month international assignment that allows workers to have experiences that add skills and growth while still young in the organization (Alsop, 2008). Alsop contends that Millennials are responding favorably to programs like the Tax Trek program at KPMG.

### **Create Meaningful Experiences**

Millennials are looking for opportunities to do something substantial and exciting (Oppel, 2007). Their career choices are driven by this desire and, as a result, they are looking for opportunities to play an important role in meaningful work that helps others or makes a difference (Tulgan, 2009). Tulgan goes on to simplify claiming that Millennials want to be paid volunteers and, instead of joining a company, they want to join a crusade. Millennials will join an organization not because they have to, but because they want to (Alsop, 2008). A large portion of Millennials will return home after finishing college in order to be more selective about their career choices. Many employers are surprised when Millennials join an organization stating desires to stay and move up, and are then gone within a year (Tulgan, 2009). However, Tulgan explains, Millennials' prompt exit from an organization is a result of not having meaningful experiences. Tulgan affirms that leaders who want to retain talented Millennials must demonstrate how working in the organization helps to make an impact, even after recruiting them for entry-level positions, including not just how the organization itself is impacting the world, but how the Millennial's job is a part of that impact. The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) developed a program that allows incoming consultants to work for a nonprofit organization for up to 10 weeks (Alsop, 2008). In addition, Alsop states, BCG offers junior consultants the chance to coach undergraduate and MBA students on projects for nonprofit groups. Programs such as these allow Millennials to see how the skills they develop and the work they do helps to change the world (Alsop, 2008).

### **Establish Mentoring Relationships**

Erickson (2008) has discovered interesting relationship building between Millennials and Baby Boomers. Erickson claims that when faced with a challenge outside their expertise, Millennials act like heat-seeking missiles, unwaveringly targeting the person with the most relevant experience. Often, Erickson explains, this is a Boomer, someone with years of needed experience but separated by several levels in the hierarchy. Erickson continues to state that Boomers love being sought after for their knowledge and are more inclined to help because they often have Millennial-aged children themselves. However, as Erickson concludes, this can create tension with Generation X middle managers, who occupy the middle hierarchies that Millennials hurdle over. Leaders can ease this tension by encouraging mentoring relationship between Boomers and Millennials (Tulgan, 2009). Tulgan suggests that leaders establish clear boundaries, communicating to Millennials that a new mentor is not a new boss. Tulgan adds that Millennials' direct managers should be kept informed on and involved in the relationship. If possible, allow Millennials and Boomers to seek each other out and share knowledge with each other (Alsop, 2008). Booz Allen, a technology and strategy consulting firm, set up an internal social networking website that boasts enrollment by over one-third of the organization (Hewlett, Sherbin & Sumberg, 2009). Hewlett et al. state how many Millennials have encouraged and instructed Boomers how to utilize the website, and Boomers responded by using it as a tool to share knowledge and business contacts with their younger colleagues.

### **Respect Their Contribution**

Millennials were raised in a very child-centric era (Tulgan, 2009). Tulgan goes on to explain that their words, actions and emotions were given a large amount of respect by doting, Boomer parents. As children and adolescents, their opinions were perceived as valid and contributed to discussions with parental figures (Alsop, 2008). Upon entering a new organization, these Millennials assume their opinions are just as valid to their peers and superiors (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2000). Zemke et al. believe that this creates friction because long-term members of the organization are, for valid reasons, unwilling to immediately embrace new hires as equals. Upon entering into a summer internship at a major food conglomerate, one Millennial announced she had invented a new cereal and wanted to pitch it to senior executives, complete with a prototype (Tulgan, 2009). Tulgan cites this instance to stress that leaders need to give Millennial followers the gift of context, helping them understand where they fit in the organization relative to older employees and how short tenure can be a source of frustration with older employees. At the same time, Tulgan counters, leaders need to respect that Millennials are making a contribution to the well-being of the organization and demonstrate to Millennials how even doing the "grunt work" helps the bottom line. Many

organizations, such as management consulting firm Oliver Wyman, have chosen to avoid the trouble with tenure by shifting toward meritocracy. (Alsop, 2008). Alsop explains how consultants can move more rapidly to partner, often in as little as six years, determined by the work they do, not time or advanced degrees. Millennials are responding favorably to meritocracy such as this because they believe that in a sink or swim environment, they will swim (Downing, 2006).

### **Give Copious Feedback**

Millennials crave knowledge and guidance from confident and talented leaders and colleagues (Erickson, 2008). Millennials represent the most over supervised generation in history, having experienced a highly structured, child-centric nurturing (Tulgan, 2009). As children, Tulgan explains, Millennials were involved in a plethora of before and after school activities, being told that proficiency in these areas, as well as school, were a must to be admitted into a good college and land an enjoyable career. Tulgan concludes that as a result, Millennials are used to receiving feedback on exactly how they are performing, where their strengths lie and where they need to improve. In the workplace, they crave this same feedback, especially if it is positive. Tulgan contends that leaders who want to acquire and retain the most talented Millennials will have to adjust how and how often they deliver feedback. The Millennials' need for constant feedback suggests that annual performance evaluations are insufficient (Alsop, 2008). Alsop continues to suggest that, while a formal evaluation process may only occur once a year, more frequent, informal feedback sessions should occur once a quarter, month, or even after the completion of any major project. Alsop cites business research organization The Conference Board, who recently decided to provide employees with two written evaluations per year. In addition, the company strongly encourages managers to deliver informal feedback at least monthly. Alsop explains how this frequent feedback will help Millennials to remain engaged in their job and discourage them from looking to other organizations to fill this need.

### **Separate Presence from Activity**

A recent study published in the *Harvard Business Review*, showed that the vast majority (87%) of Millennials say that having a flexible work schedule is important (Hewlett, Sherbin & Sumberg, 2009). Hewlett et al. found that a similar percentage also cites the importance of work/life balance. Millennials believe that having the freedom to choose when and where they work is very powerful (Tulgan, 2009). Most Millennials do not want to give up the office environment entirely, instead preferring to have a workspace at the office but have the option of working from home one day a

week (Hewlett, Sherbin & Sumberg, 2009). The temptation by older generations is to view Millennials as slackers because they are not in the office from 8 until 5 is really a misunderstanding (Tulgan, 2009). Tulgan contests that many Millennials believe they put in extra effort when working from remote locations. Tulgan suggests that leaders will need to change how they perceive “work time” in order to engage Millennials. Specifically, Tulgan believes, leaders will need to cease equating “presence” with “activity” as Millennials will seek to get a significant portion of work done from remote locations. Tulgan continues to say that leaders will need to allow Millennials the flexibility to set their own schedules, but it is not unreasonable to ask where they will be working from and to ensure that the quality of their performance is not declining when Millennials are offsite. Electronics retailer Best Buy has developed a program in their home office called Results-Only Work Environment, or ROWE (Alsop, 2008). Alsop explains how ROWE allows employees to set their own work hours and decide whether to stay at home or go into the office, as long as the job gets done on time. Alsop states that flexible work programs such as ROWE stand the best chance of complementing Millennials already blended lifestyle.

Many researchers believe that the impact of Millennials will be far greater than that of the Baby Boomer generation (Tulgan, 2009). Despite misunderstandings about their work ethic and poor manners, Millennials represent an extremely talented and well-educated generation of workers ready to develop into the next generation of leaders (Erickson, 2008). In order to get them there, current leaders must adapt the way they engage Millennial followers (Tulgan, 2009). By providing Millennials with meaningful and growing experiences, respecting their contribution, utilizing mentoring, giving feedback and staying flexible, leaders can retain Millennials as followers who will develop into future leaders.

### About the Author

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