



## Millennials: Multi-Generational Leaders Staying Connected

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The aging of the workforce and the concurrent advent of the Millennials represent a major demographic and sociological phenomenon that can have dominant implications for organizations, as a whole. In the wake of mass scale cutbacks and economic upheaval, this is creating a greater urgency for organizational leaders to focus more attention on keeping multi-generational leaders actively engaged. Thus, as we enter the new millennium and face the entrance of another generation of leaders into the workforce, managers are encouraged to solve as well as close the gap to these generational differences that appear to exist among workers. This paper revisits the issue of generational differences and the causes of those differences. The purpose of this article is to propose reverse mentoring as a social exchange tool, which will leverage the expertise of all generations.

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### What is a Millennial?

Sometimes referred to as “Generation Y,” Millennials are the latest generation to enter the workforce. This generation is somewhat of a novelty when compared to previous generations, who sometimes do not seem to know how to react to these young people. To those older than them, Millennials are described as narcissistic, entitled, shallow, and selfish (Stein, 2013). *But is this an accurate description?*

Born between 1980 and 2000, Millennials consist of more than 80 million people—they are, in fact, the largest age grouping in American history (Stein, 2013). Millennials are the product of their world, impacted at a young age by the events of 9/11, dot-com busts, corporate scandals, market crashes, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq...and the list goes on (Armour, 2005). Their parents, seeing these events take place, reacted in turn by pampering, protecting, and nurturing their children—perhaps to the extreme, where they are now growing up to be both high-

performance and high-maintenance (Armour, 2005). Is it any surprise, then, Millennials have difficulties trusting the world around them, and would rather focus on creating their own lives?

However, it is not as bleak as it seems. Millennials grew up during the emergence of the *Digital Age*, with technological advancements not seen by previous generations. They're smart, savvy, earnest, and optimistic young adults who crave new experiences rather than material items, having seen what happens when value is placed in "things" (Stein, 2013). Millennials value a balance between work and life, being more interested in jobs which accommodate their families rather than putting priority on a career (Armour, 2005). They're financially smart, having witnessed financial pitfalls in the economy (Armour, 2005). They're adaptable and flexible, a side-effect of seeing how quickly the world can change overnight (Armour, 2005).

The way Millennials interact and communicate with other generations and those in the world around them, then, diverges from those of previous generations, especially within the workplace. In terms of career expectations, they want close relationships with their colleagues and constant feedback from their supervisors (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). They actually prefer working in teams rather than going solo, for two reasons: (1) they perceive group work to be more "fun," and (2) they want to avoid risk (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). They expect open, honest communication within the workplace, to the point where they will reject any organizational policy that information is communicated on a "need-to-know" basis (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Millennials are untraditional and unafraid of challenging the status quo, and they value environments that foster creativity and independent thinking (Armour, 2005). They work hard, but they also play hard. To be able to bring the "play" aspect into a "work" environment is ideal for Millennials. However, Millennials are now placed in a position to focus on social engagement and commitment with previous and future generations.

### **Importance of Social Exchange in a Multi-Generational Workforce**

As much as Millennials want to be understood by these multi-faceted generations, they must also learn how to understand and communicate with other generations as well. The social exchange gap must be bridged by all generations. The basic tenet underlying social exchange theory is social relationships are emerged, maintained, or terminated with each other on the basis of the perceived ratio of benefits to costs (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1974). In addition, the social exchange theory is an evolving conceptual framework which can be utilized to explain individual development within the generational context. The framework consists of several hypotheses such as:

1. Individuals enter into relationships in which they can maximize the benefits to minimize costs.
2. Exchanges between individuals have to be fair and balanced so that they mutually give and receive what is needed.
3. Resources individuals present to one another can be material goods and services or an exchange of social value.
4. Whatever costs are incurred by the individual is subjective because different individuals place different values on resources, even those resources defined by a measurable system, such as currency.

As one can see, Millennials are in a paradoxical situation where they must begin thinking about how they will interact with generations as they enter into the workforce. In an ever-changing, ever global world, Millennials need to understand how to communicate with those around them in order to break down barriers and be the force of positive organizational change. They have the capability; they simply need the understanding of other generations and learn how to use their generational tools.

### **Generation X: Declared their Independence**

The 51 million members of Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980, grew up in a world dissimilar to previous and current generations. Generation X saw their parents get laid off and face job insecurity. Divorce and working moms created “latchkey” kids out of many in this generation. In addition, this generation entered the workplace in the early ‘80s, when the economy was in a downturn. They faced an era of emerging technology, political uproar, and institutional incompetence. Crises like Watergate, Three Mile Island, Bhopal, the Iranian hostage, Iran-Contra, and the Clinton-Lewinsky debacles mark the emergence of this generation. Indeed, the American dream had changed for this generation. Unlike any other generation, for the first time in history, Generation X was told they would not be able to replicate the lifestyles or careers of previous generations. Suddenly their futures looked grim and crowded as competition for jobs was constricted.

Surprisingly, despite these factors, Generation X redefined the American Dream. The events Generation X encountered led to independence, resilience and adaptability (Wey & Sutton, 2002). Generation X, learned independence early in life and turned it into a valuable hallmark as they progressed in the working world. Generation X committed to work, to the team they work with, and the boss they work for. This generation expects immediate and ongoing feedback, working in multicultural settings, and they desire a fun workplace with a pragmatic approach to getting things done (Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008). Generation X does not employ a career ladder but a career lattice where they can move laterally, stop and start, and where fluidity exists.

### **Millennials: Relating to Generation X**

Millennials and Generation X were raised with very different technologies and lifestyles. Generational differences of Generation X and Millennials influence their values and perceptions. How does this affect attracting and retaining a co-existent working relationship? Will understanding these contrasting perceptions be important? Well, according to Murphy (2007), “different perspectives on issues like work ethic, leadership, and authority can cause conflict, frustration, and misunderstanding if not managed well” (p. 18). In a recent “World of Work Survey” (2008), several generations noted little or no interaction with the other. This is not conducive to a cooperative environment where working with and learning from one another can be vital. Understanding what appeals to Generation X is critical in order for Millennials to build a viable and strong working environment with these individuals. Customizing a work environment for these dissimilar generations will require knowledge of their particular attitudes and inclinations (Nicholas, 2011). Understanding these different perceptions will enable

improved communications for both parties, enhance the quality of the organization, and globally change the marketplace.

### **Generation Z: Declaring a Futuristic World**

Generation Z is unlike any other generation we have ever seen. This generation is the first generation where they simply do not remember a world before computers, Wi-Fi, and high-speed internet access (McAlpine, 2013). Where Millennials have a vague recollection of life before the internet, social media, and smart phones, Generation Z has no such memory (Williams, 2010). They are the first to be fully integrated into the Digital Age, and as they have grown up, have evolved into “electronic multitaskers” (Geck, 2006). Born between 1995 and 2009, these young people are quickly becoming more worldly and savvy than the generations before them in terms of marketing, social networking and advertising (Williams, 2010). Because of this, they value speed over accuracy and have shorter attention spans (Williams, 2010). They will, essentially, shape the trends in consumer behavior, as well as our future careers (Williams, 2010).

### **Millennials: Relating with Generation Z**

How do Millennials interact with Generation Z? Connecting with them and learning to lead them. This is a task Millennials must understand; they will have to undertake sometime in the not-too-distant future. It is in this we as Millennials need to step outside of ourselves, stop being the “narcissists” the previous generations perceive us to be, and start focusing on how we are going to train up and mentor this next generation as they enter the workforce. We are, after all, the closest connection they have in the generational gap. We share the common bonds of seeking individuality, creating our own identity, and adapting to the ever-changing world around us. Not only this, they are not just a generation that we will need to mentor and direct, but they are also a generation from which we will need to learn.

As Generation Z has never had the experience of being “unplugged” from the world around them, Millennials will need to teach them the basics of how to get along with others on the job without the use of technology, as well as provide opportunities for real-world “hands-on” experience (Montana & Petit, 2008). We can appeal to them by acting as “parental figures,” as much of Generation Z has grown up close to their parents in controlled environments, due to increased media attention of crime and terrorism (McAlpine, 2013). Millennials will also have the task of teaching Generation Z not just how to get a job done efficiently, but how to examine every possible outcome. Where other generations, Millennials included, have had experience with a variety of research techniques and are thus able to make mental comparisons intuitively, Generation Z lacks formal training in comparing advantages, disadvantages, strengths, and weaknesses of sources and outcomes, often believing—naïvely so—the first viable answer they find to a solution is the correct answer (Geck, 2006).

Millennials will also have to learn from Generation Z in a variety of ways. Specifically, Generation Z is expected to be thriftier about their money, having grown up witnessing greater parental unemployment than prior generations (McAlpine, 2013). They are expected to be responsible spenders, considerate of financial decisions (McAlpine, 2013). They will be concerned about finding jobs, the economic climate, and entering into higher education

(McAlpine, 2013). This wariness and financial responsibility is something Millennials can learn to apply on-the-job, given the economic climate of the time. These youths, as they enter the workforce, will likely have new ideas in terms of finances, saving money, and social responsibility that Millennials are probably not even aware of yet. Their ideas will most likely not only be fiscally responsible, but how they implement their ideas and plans will be resourceful, efficient and very much in-tune with the world around them. They are the first truly global generation, and their insight into how the world works will be invaluable as time progresses.

**Characteristics by Generation**

	<b>Generation X</b>	<b>Millennials</b>	<b>Generation Z</b>
<b>Core Values</b>	Skepticism Fun Informality	Realism Confidence Extreme Fun Social	Speed over accuracy Global savvy
<b>Family</b>	Latch-key kids	Merged families	Controlled environments
<b>Education</b>	A way to get there	An incredible expense	<i>How</i> to get there?
<b>Communication Media</b>	Cell phones Call me only at work	Internet Picture phones E-mail	Anything and everything Never unplugged Electronic multitaskers
<b>Dealing with Money</b>	Cautious Conservative Save, save, save	Earn to spend	Fiscally responsible Financially wary

*Chart Adapted From: FDU Magazine Online, Winter/Spring 2005 (Hammill, 2005)*

***Tools: Reverse Mentoring and Creating a Multi-Generational Environment***

In today’s volatile, perplexing, and complex systematic global environment, organizational

leaders have to focus on building successful work relationships. Interacting with individuals' in a positive way is imperative in achieving organizational goals for growth. There are basic competencies critical to closing the gap between multi-generational relationships and organizational success. Based on the research of Generations X thru Z and how they interact with each other, there are two critical tools organizations can apply to launch themselves into future success: (1) reverse mentoring, and (2) creating a multi-generational environment which stimulates and challenges.

## Reverse Mentoring

Often times, mentoring is portrayed of someone with a lot of experience teaching and developing a younger novice (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, R, 2012). However, in recent years, mentoring has taken on many different forms. One of the newest forms is *reverse mentoring*. In reverse mentoring a well-seasoned employee is also mentored by the junior employee. The traditional mentoring (one-way street) becomes a two-way relationship where all employees of all ages can learn from one another.

Earlier research reveals reverse mentoring has gained widespread popularity in organizational settings (Carter, 2004; Greengard, 2002; Leh, 2005). Various organizations implementing reverse mentoring are: General Motors, Unilever, Deloitte & Touche, Procter & Gamble, and the Wharton School of Business at University of Pennsylvania. These organizations have developed a sensitization to multi-generational work issues. They have worked hard to develop and implement a workplace full of diversity, in order to increase the levels of engagement from all generations.

Reverse mentoring is most appropriate and powerful in situations where two individuals each have knowledge and skills the other needs to contribute to organizational performance. Reverse mentoring is not just choosing two people of different ages in engaging them in dialogue. Listed below are a few guidelines to get organizations started in the process:

1. **Strategically Pair.** Identify individuals with the knowledge and skills their counterparts need.
2. **Encourage Growth.** Meet with the employees to convey the organization's goals for bringing them together, emphasize how much you believe each person can learn from the other, and set expectations.
3. **Coach along the way.** Train each participant in mentoring or coaching as needed.
4. **Set Clear Goals.** Have each pair agree on what they want to accomplish and how/when to measure the results.
5. **Develop Consistency.** Have them meet on a regular schedule and communicate in between meetings by phone or online.

## Creating a Multi-Generational Environment

Millennials need to know they are a valuable asset on a team. They are more interested in jobs which are stimulating, exciting, and rewarding, than jobs that are not (Holm, 2012). They also need to receive feedback, coaching, and know how they are progressing in order to feel like they are valuable and know how they are contributing—but this needs to be done in such a way as they do not think they are being micromanaged (Holm, 2012).

Creating a multi-generational environment, then, is important in retaining Millennials as employees and developing them as leaders. In a multi-generational environment, the generations are mixed together, creating an interactive atmosphere, where Millennials can learn from older generations and how to work with them, as well as be groomed to lead someday. Millennials are more collaborative than not, and listening to their ideas and making modifications (if needed) gives them a vested interest in their work and gives them the perception that they have a leadership role (Holm, 2012).

Millennials are also untraditional—if there are new things that organizational leaders wish to try within the company, but have not necessarily worked in the past, that does not mean it will not work with Millennials (Holm, 2012). Millennials are resourceful, and if things do not work, they are not afraid of trying again (Holm, 2012). Encouraging this, then, helps to develop their critical thinking and leadership skills. This also helps them understand their insight is valuable, and they are wanted on a team (Holm, 2012). When Millennials know they are wanted on a team, they are more likely to want to be on a team, and will thus become partners in developing a team-friendly atmosphere—even with generational gaps (Holm, 2012). This gives older generations the ability to interact with and learn more about Millennials, while exposing Millennials to other generations in an environment where they will grow and learn from their predecessors. When this happens, Millennials will begin to develop into leaders, able to take what they have learned and apply it as they interact with generations coming after them. Here we offer a few steps for creating a multigenerational work environment:

1. ***Strive to be Subject matter experts.*** Keep up with the latest developments in the field.
2. ***Embrace Diversity.*** Most organizations continually work to increase diversity in their workplace. Generations now working are comfortable with value diversity more than any age group to come before them. Their perspective can help in organizational efforts at enhancing diversity and inclusion.
3. ***Risk taking.*** Risk-taking can free up old habits and drive workplace innovation.
4. ***Keep a Global Perspective.*** Younger workers' have a geographic perspective. Young adults learn about global social issues such as world hunger, genocide in Darfur or endangered “Think global, act local” is second nature.

## Conclusion

In today's highly competitive market, organizations that effectively manage their generational diversity will enjoy a competitive edge. Organizational leaders should be required to gain an

understanding about what motivates and drives today's multigenerational workforce to work together with passion. As the workforce continues to age and younger generations keep on joining the workforce, further empirical research on the propositions offered in this article about the work outcomes of the multigenerational workforce will lead to better congruence and synergy between them.

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### **About the Authors**

Dr. Karen Bolser is the CEO of The Bolser Group, LLC, which was established in May of 2011. She established the firm with the purpose of providing organizations and companies with excellent leadership and management development. Dr. Bolser's message is "delivering leadership truths that transform the world." She has written numerous academic articles, co-authored several books, and has presented seminars, and training sessions for corporate America.

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