



## Mentoring the Next Generation for Innovation in Today's Organization

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In order to succeed, organizations must innovate.<sup>1</sup> Innovators create in the context of interactions and relationships. Valuing every member of the organization and mentoring each one as a leader in an environment of leaders empowers innovators.

Organizational cultures valuing people, along with their creativity and passions, will be innovation leaders. The next generation of innovators, the Millennials, find meaning in value creation.<sup>2</sup> Thriving organizations of the future will value "Millennovators" - Millennial innovators.

Millennovators arrive in today's organizations with passion and creativity. These passions can cause creative friction. Mentoring relationships enculturate, guide, direct, and motivate millennial creativity. This paper seeks to better understand millennial innovators; explore mentoring as a means of converting creative friction into productive innovation; and proffer an inclusive mentoring model designed to strengthen relationships, build trust, and change perceptions.

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The old-timers tell us we have always done it this way, so leave well enough alone. The middle managers want to work from their beach house. Baby Boomer department heads are feeling the pressure to innovate despite absentee Gen Xers and Traditionalist traditions. Now the new Millennial hires are stopping by the CEO's office to share a few ideas about how to move the company forward. This scenario is being played out in multi-generational organizations across America.

Today's business mantra is "Innovate or die." Corporate leaders are feeling the pressure, yet find themselves caught between differing philosophies of work and change. Older workers sense the values this company was built on have eroded, while newcomers wonder if they are valued as members of the community.

Contemporary organizations are in pursuit of the next innovation while balancing diverse generational perspectives. One means of investing in future innovation is to build relationships with future innovators. This paper seeks to better understand Millennial innovators; explore mentoring as a means of converting creative friction into productive innovation; and proffer an inclusive mentoring model designed to strengthen relationships, build trust, and change perceptions.

### **Innovation is the Future**

In order to succeed, today's organization must innovate.<sup>3</sup> Innovation and creativity are equated with competitive advantage. "Efficiency and innovation must be of equal and complementary importance if an organization ultimately is to survive and thrive."<sup>4</sup> An increasing body of literature is committed to increasing creativity in the workplace. While "thinking outside the box" may sound cliché, "the idea of suspending what "has been" in order to explore what "could be" will always be prescient."<sup>5</sup>

New technologies, a global marketplace, and boundaryless organizations lay the foundation for innovation in products, services, and the work environment. Innovating for the future is about more than inventing the next widget first. It is focused on the people in the process.

### **Innovation Cultures Value People**

"Values are antecedent to action and the fuel that powers innovators."<sup>6</sup> Organizational cultures can nurture or stifle innovation. In the 1980s, British Airways underwent a culture makeover, sending nearly all of its 37,000 workforce members through its "Putting People First" training program. The change effort emphasized instilling a new culture – one that valued people, which in turn "permitted major process innovations" redefining "passenger expectations about service quality."<sup>7</sup> The result was a more innovative environment. Valuing people is essential for innovation.

People must be innovated to innovate.<sup>8</sup> Goulet, Jefferson and Szwed define leadership as "a process that involves the interactions and relationships between the leader and others. This view of leadership enables anyone to develop as a leader."<sup>9</sup> Leaders recognize creativity and value innovation. Innovators create in the context of interactions and relationships.

Organizational cultures valuing people, along with their creativity and passions will be innovation leaders. The next generation of innovators, the Millennials, find meaning in value creation.<sup>10</sup> Thriving organizations of the future will value "Millennovators" - Millennial innovators.

### **Millennials are the Innovators of the Future**

To plan for the future, we need to understand what tomorrow's leaders look like today. "Millennials" is the title given to the estimated 80 to 95 million future workers and leaders, born between approximately 1980 and 2000.<sup>11</sup> These Millennials will dominate the workforce for the next forty years.<sup>12</sup>

Millennials want to innovate. In an innovation preparedness survey, “Ninety-two percent of Traditionalists, Boomers, and Xers” ranked Millennials high “for their ability to create and innovate.”<sup>13</sup> However, the older generations did not rank themselves as well in innovation. This poses a challenge.

Innovation guru, Gary Hamel, generated a list of human capabilities he believes contribute to competitive success. He measured the contribution of each of the capabilities to what he calls value creation:<sup>14</sup>

Passion 35%

Creativity 25%

Initiative 20%

Intellect 15%

Diligence 5%

Obedience 0%

Millennials earn high scores in passion and creativity, but rank poorly in obedience. They need more experienced leaders to assist them in pursuing creativity within an organization's framework, and organizations that value people and innovation will support them.

Millennials are natural innovators. They most want “the opportunity to do meaningful work and have a high quality of life.”<sup>15</sup> This is in contrast with older generations who tend to want job security, benefits, rank, or prestige. Ninety-two percent of younger workers value flextime and 96% of Millennials say they need creative time in their work day.<sup>16</sup> “Eighty-two percent [of Millennials surveyed] cite flexible working arrangements as a factor that influences their commitment and motivation, compared to fifty-eight to sixty-nine percent for the other employee age groups.”<sup>17</sup>

How will Millennoventors create for the future of our organizations? What values will guide them? What and who will inspire them? Will they innovate to optimize the mission of the corporations in which they are employed? Millennial innovations are supported and guided by strengthening relationships with Millennoventors. But Millennoventors arrive with their own ideas about creating and about the creative environment.

### **Creative Friction**

Gryskiewicz challenges “any organization that intends to compete in the years ahead must embrace the turbulence within which blow the winds of renewal.”<sup>18</sup> With “more than 32 million Millennials in the workforce”<sup>19</sup> there is a lot of “creative friction” requiring “leaders to develop styles that focus on identifying and effectively incorporating the polarized viewpoints of

employees.”<sup>20</sup> Millennovators may be the voice of the future, but they are viewed as aliens by many of their seniors.

Described in the literature as the most techno-savvy,<sup>21</sup> confident,<sup>22</sup> highly supervised,<sup>23</sup> globally connected,<sup>24</sup> and culturally diverse in history,<sup>25</sup> corporate leaders portray Millennials as ill-equipped, incompetent, ego-centric,<sup>26</sup> lacking in character,<sup>27</sup> change-driven,<sup>28</sup> job-hopping,<sup>29</sup> digital natives.<sup>30</sup> *Millennovators are unimpressed by the astonishing advancements of the digital era and have become the “first generation in human history who regards behaviors like tweeting and texting, along with websites like Facebook, YouTube, Google and Wikipedia” as everyday necessities.*<sup>31</sup> Wikipedia is itself evidence of what this generation values: shared information that is instantly available.<sup>32</sup>

Just as Millennials do not know how to process the high cost of disruption,<sup>33</sup> boomers are still learning “innovation is always disruptive to an organization”<sup>34</sup> and that innovation leaders embrace, endorse, and guide disruption. Recognizing the merits and deficits of Millennovators is a first step toward strengthening relationships that support innovation. Millennovators hold strong values, but they are often different from those of superiors.

While seeming to be attached to a host of communication devices, “the weakest skill area of today’s job applicant is communication.”<sup>35</sup> The communication patterns of Millennials cause “ruffled feathers as they are becoming a larger force within most organizations.”<sup>36</sup> Millennovators need guidance to communicate their ideas in ways their colleagues and managers will hear.

“The tension around talent versus tenure has been complicated by the steady upending of the pyramid at work.”<sup>37</sup> Millennials contribute to this workplace friction, as they don’t equate “experience” with being “qualified” for a job. They view experience as getting in the way of having a fresh perspective. Millennials generally believe a younger person who is “less locked into a certain way of doing things might be a better candidate.”<sup>38</sup> It is this paradigm that brings the Millennovator to challenge both the status quo and their more experienced superiors.

### **Mentoring Programs Convert Creative Friction into Productive Innovation**

Millennials are people—not patterns or projects. No new recruit or hire is going to wear each characteristic described in demographic typologies. Understanding patterns helps design programs for people. People need to be treated as individuals. This is true, however, of every member of the organization. Cultivating the potential of emerging leaders through meaningful relationships with seasoned leaders requires change from members of each generation.<sup>39</sup>

### **Mentoring Strengthens Relationships**

Innovation happens in the context of relationships. They are internal and external. These relationships are with superiors, subordinates, and colleagues. They are between organizations, customers, and suppliers. “The path to innovation success historically has been littered with the remains of firms that were enthusiastic about innovation and may even have had the right internal capabilities but did not have the leaders who could choose and execute a successful innovation strategy.”<sup>40</sup> Strengthening relationships increases the success of innovation strategy.

## **Mentoring Builds Trust**

Consider the four generations in today's organizations. Builders, the eldest, value respect. Boomers value productivity and face time. Gen Xers value the power pace. Millennials value connection and flexibility. This is an oversimplified description, but it does underscore a few of the intersections between Millennials and older generations highlighting where Millennoiators can look and feel out of the place in contemporary organizations. Consider the new millennial hire and the boomer boss. Boomers are often characterized by a lack of trust. Millennials want connection, which cannot be attained without trust. Mentoring builds trust.<sup>41</sup>

## **Mentoring Changes Perceptions**

Fifty percent of workers polled believe they could manage better than their boss, given the opportunity.<sup>42</sup> Intergenerational attitudes contribute to misunderstandings in the workplace. Retention is especially difficult since Millennials have different attitudes and expectations toward work than previous generations.<sup>43</sup> Reports that 66% of Millennials expect to change careers can impact the investment their superiors wish to make in them when 84% of Boomers expect to work at their current job for the rest of their lives.<sup>44</sup> Mentoring relationships help intergenerational colleagues recognize and address differing perceptions about the workplace and opportunities to innovate within it.

## **A Mentoring Model**

One-on-one mentoring has been identified by a growing number of organizational consultants as the most effective method for training soft skills.<sup>45</sup> Mentoring has been shown to foster teamwork, improve staff motivation, and increase employee competency levels.<sup>46</sup> Mentoring improves individual and organizational performance and results in higher employee retention.<sup>47</sup> Mentees achieve higher promotion rates.<sup>48</sup> In mentoring programs, potential is identified more readily.

One longitudinal field experiment examined how a "targeted mentorship program that unfolded over six months enhanced the development of protégés' leader efficacy and performance."<sup>49</sup> Targeted mentoring was compared to leadership education delivered in a group setting. Results demonstrated "targeted mentorship intervention increased protégés level of leader efficacy" to a great degree than those participating in group training programs.<sup>50</sup>

A commonly held perception of mentoring is summarized as "Formally or informally, a manager with experience, expertise and wisdom teaches, counsels and helps a less experienced or less knowledgeable person to develop professionally and personally."<sup>51</sup> This model proposes expanding a definition of mentoring beyond managerial expertise.

An organization that values people recognizes each person has something to offer. Millennials are not the only members of the workforce in need of mentoring. Every employee and manager

benefits from mentoring. This inclusive model recommends every member of the organization become involved in three mentoring relationships. While the model proposes to involve every organizational member in mentoring relationships, the focus here will be on benefits to the organization when Millennials are engaged in mentoring relationships. To cultivate Millennoventors will require organization-wide involvement.

### **Wise Guide**

Successful leaders recognize the benefits of seeking the counsel of a sage. Wilcher calls these sage counselors "wise guides."<sup>52</sup> He claims the next generation not only needs them, they are delaying adulthood for lack of them. There is much evidence to suggest Millennials are actively seeking wise guides.

Ninety-four percent of Millennials claim to respect older generations,<sup>53</sup> and believe more mature adults are interested in their success. Though socially connected, many Millennials are aware of their need for training in interpersonal skills and communication.<sup>54</sup> Forty-four percent of graduates are declaring college did not adequately prepare them for the working world.<sup>55</sup> The next generation of workers and innovators is seeking guidance. Involving Millennoventors in mentoring relationships is the easy part. The challenge is in training their wise guides to take mentoring from wise guides.

Soft skills dominate the list of essential competencies for today's workplace. These include: "interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge; skills and abilities such as ethics, personal organization and work habits; time management; teamwork and interpersonal communication; anger management; reasoning and problem solving; and managing one's learning."<sup>56</sup> Mentors help younger and less experienced workers develop such skills in their personal and professional lives. These older, wiser mentors are often called "Wise Guides."

Millennials show a strong need to connect their work to a higher purpose. Discussing the vision, mission, goals, and direction of the organization helps new hires or members see themselves in relation to the overall direction of the organization. Wise guides help Millennoventors see themselves as fitting into the organization, creating a sense of security for sharing creative ideas.

### **Side Guide**

"A sense of belonging is something humans need if they are to commit themselves to more than simple selfishness."<sup>57</sup> Millennials are interested in belonging. They become emotionally attached to both physical and virtual work communities.<sup>58</sup> Consider the Millennial generation's contribution to the virtual working environment. They will innovate into the future of "technology advances, social trends, individual choices, and flexible labor markets"<sup>59</sup> on behalf of communities in which they perceive they belong, Peer mentoring assists a sense of belonging.

Peer mentors, called "side guides," in this model, are an important part of the enculturation process. This happens naturally in mentoring environments. Allowing and coaching Millennials to learn, work, and grow in teams is a great way to prepare them to be part of a future leadership team. One way to integrate Millennials into leadership is to help them align themselves with peers, superiors, and subordinates. Mentoring programs can help engage and integrate

Millennials into organizational culture.<sup>60</sup> Peer mentors promote alignments. Successful millennial leaders are comfortable in team environments and are able to encourage and inspire team performance.

Peer mentoring builds loyalty, trust, teamwork, and collaboration—all necessary components for productive innovation. “Every individual must have a sense of self-value and must value every other team member for their contribution—these should become explicit and expressed as the team’s “core competencies.”<sup>61</sup> Within this culture, Millennoiators sense they belong and use their creative energies in collaboration with trusted colleagues.

### **Surprise Guide**

In one company’s survey, “the use of e-mail by seniors increased by 28% between 2009 and 2010. During that same period, e-mail usage decreased by 59% among teens.”<sup>62</sup> By the time older generations begin to get familiar with a technology, their younger co-workers have already moved on. Executives who apprentice under their technologically savvy subordinates more quickly come up to speed in using new technologies.<sup>63</sup>

Through “reverse mentoring”<sup>64</sup> programs, senior leaders create a workplace learning dynamic in which junior employees mentor experienced personnel. One of the first corporate reverse mentoring programs was implemented when GE Chairman Jack Welch ordered several hundred GE executives to apprentice under their technologically savvy subordinates in order to tutor them to quickly come up to speed in using the Internet.<sup>65</sup>

In this model, the reverse mentor is called the “surprise guide.” Full of surprises for both mentors and mentees, these mentoring relationships sharpen leadership skills while forging direct connections with senior leaders. In reverse mentoring programs, younger mentors feel appreciated and valued. They sharpen leadership skills while forging direct connections with senior leaders. Older mentees acquire new skills, access new information, and pick up fresh ideas that they don’t necessarily come across in their regular routine. The development of stronger working relationships encourages “great engagement on both sides” and often serves as a “jumpstart” for new projects, assisting with initiation and development of both “processes and products” that are beneficial to the entire organization.<sup>66</sup> In the process, senior leaders earn the right to speak into the personal and professional lives of Millennoiators.

### **Criteria for Successful Mentoring Relationships**

#### **Listen**

Innovators share a “common bond between all who think differently” which is “their willingness to do so.”<sup>67</sup> Engaging Millennoiators requires a willingness to think differently. Mentors who listen to their surprise guides signal to their juniors that they and their ideas are valued. This communicates a willingness to consider new ways to think about old issues.

#### **Reflect**

The success of mentoring programs increases with reflection and feedback loops.<sup>68</sup> In one study, feedback and trust in the mentor surfaced as “important moderators in contributing to the development of leader efficacy.”<sup>69</sup> While traditional training programs offer theory, mentoring is ripe for reflective practice. Mentors and mentees must be trained in providing reflection and feedback.

## **Include**

Incorporate mentoring into the organizational DNA. Leadership development should not be exclusively offered to high-level staff. Instead, it should be available to all throughout the organization.<sup>70</sup> This develops leaders who lead as Millennoiators.

## **Trust**

Millennials want to trust their superiors and co-workers, but they have been disappointed quite a lot.<sup>71</sup> Make trust a priority in your organizational culture. “Trust is the one thing that is common to every individual, relationship, team, family, organization, nation, economy, and civilization throughout the world; the one thing which, if removed, will destroy the most powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship, the strongest character, the deepest love.”<sup>72</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Amid messages of independence, freedom, and autonomy<sup>73</sup> Millennials enter organizations that feature teamwork, commitment, and respect for authority. The culture’s “litany of expressive individualism” is misleading for Millennials.<sup>74</sup> Successful organizations are learning to help the next generation of worker and innovator to make sense of organizational culture.

Thriving organizations recognize that every member leads and follows, directs and innovates, responds and creates in the context of relationships. It is possible that the single most important step organizational leaders can take is to ensure that their followers do not find it difficult or dangerous to innovate.<sup>75</sup> Involving every member of the organization in mentoring relationships may decrease danger and increase innovation. It will strengthen relationships, trust, and the creative environment.

The late Peter Drucker was interviewed after winning his seventh award for producing the best 2005 article in the *Harvard Business Review*. He challenged his listeners, “The best way to predict the future, is to create it.”<sup>76</sup> Millennoiators, with their mentors and mentees, are creating the future.

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## **About the Author**

Dr. Teresa Moon is a Baby Boomer who mentors Millennials. President and CEO of the Institute for Cultural Communicators, Teresa brings her practical experience, eighteen years of coaching Millennials and their mentors together with her research and writing to explore ways in which Millennoventors® create new solutions to age-old problems. She may be reached at [tmmoon@gmail.com](mailto:tmmoon@gmail.com)

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