

Retaining, Cultivating, and Investing:





Strategies for Leading Millennial Managers

By Tara D. Carter; and W. Donald Walker, III

In recent years, millennials have begun to make their mark in the workplace. Born between 1982 and 2002, millennials are the first generation to have grown up with technology and the Internet, with its immediate access to current events. They are often characterized as ambitious, confident, educated, collaborative, motivated and independent.¹ These qualities, coupled with access to technology and information, makes millennials more openly opinionated, particularly at work.

Despite the constraints of the OPM GS pay scale, certain strategies can be used to engage, retain and invest in the millennial workforce, especially as they enter the middle-management and senior leadership stages of their careers.



Millennials' willingness to share views and personal information can be misread. In the words of author and presenter Simon Sinek, "Millennials aren't the entitled, unfocused and narcissistic bunch the generations before them make them out to be. In fact, they are a generation seeking purpose. When asked what motivates them in the workplace, millennials respond with an authentic desire to make an impact within their organizations."²

In light of this generation gap, it is critically important for organizations to adapt to the changing workplace to ensure long-term success. By making necessary adjustments, organizations will find that their millennial middle managers will be more engaged and better prepared to propel their companies into the future.

Millennials want meaningful work

Millennials' desire for meaningful work that affords career progression seems perfectly suited to positions in government financial management. However, between the lucrative compensation packages in the private sector and the luster of the gig economy, retaining top talent is more difficult than ever. Despite the constraints of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) General Schedule (GS) pay scale, certain strategies can be used to engage, retain and invest in the millennial

workforce, especially as they enter the middle-management and senior leadership stages of their careers.

Employers must learn to engage with millennials in new ways. Good examples are embracing social media as a tool for recruitment and offering teleworking and flexible scheduling policies that qualified candidates now demand. Millennial employees also require an enriching work environment that allows them to suggest and implement innovative ideas to improve effectiveness and efficiency.

Research indicates millennials want a more integrated work-life balance. Gone are the days of sacrificing one's personal life and

endeavors to get a promotion. Millennials seek environments that value their outside-of-work experiences and provide flexibility for a healthy lifestyle. It is important to note that millennials value the integration of technology and do not mind working outside of normal work hours, if they feel their work contributes to their larger purpose.

For an organization to continue to thrive, it must acknowledge millennials' ideology and allow employees from that age group to become active contributors among senior leaders.

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Within an organization, look at the number of leadership teams with members under the age of 35. Who among them is ready for the challenge of leading to offer a fresh perspective? Reflecting on these dynamics and taking steps to engage millennials at the senior leadership level will bring about new policies and culture that attracts and retains top millennial talent. Consequently, the organization becomes an innovator in talent management and creates sustainable succession plans. In such an environment, budding young professionals sense a mutual investment, encouraging them toward long-term commitment.

Clear path to career advancement

As recruiters, we interact directly with a wide range of professionals, including college seniors, entry-level employees, and seasoned professionals considering a change in culture, growth opportunities, and salaries. Regardless of their career level, employees want to feel they are accomplishing more than just busywork, a feeling that becomes ever more apparent as employees grow within an organization. Employees want to know they are an essential part of a successful team and, at the same time, that their work will help propel them into the next level of their careers. Although employees from prior generations tended to be committed to one organization throughout their entire careers, the current talent pool is constantly questioning: *Where am I going next? What skills can I use to get there? What new skills can I procure in my next position?*

To demonstrate millennials' drive and determination to reach middle management, consider the strategy of a former colleague who knew very early on that her dream job was director at a top hospital. Allison researched articles by people who worked in that role and requested informational interviews. Eventually, she stumbled upon a position description that provided her with the insight she needed. Allison was able to pinpoint which comprehensive

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skills her dream job required and then use that information to guide her career search and learning objectives. Because her dream job would require supervising teams and ensuring profitability based on metrics, Allison, when interviewing for positions, asked about supervisory or profitability responsibilities. She cared about her goals and ensured that each step she took brought her closer to them.

Allison's dedication to understanding the skills and experience required to land her dream job is integral to the commitment she showed in her position. Millennials crave the opportunity to advance and want to see a clear path to getting there. They understand that advancement is not guaranteed, but it is vital to them to know that the opportunity is there. In Allison's case, the company gained a dedicated employee who believed that fulfilling her responsibilities would directly prepare her for her next opportunity.

An organization's commitment to understanding the thought processes of people like Allison is critical when engaging employees at all levels. Moreover, when distributing the workload, it is imperative that management share equally with all employees about each task and how it will support the organization's goals and growth. This transparency helps employees commit to the success of their organization and believe they are useful, and it helps middle-management millennials dare to float innovative ideas.

Imagine that Allison inquired about the rationale behind her responsibilities and management told her that was above her pay grade or, even worse, discouraged her from asking questions at all. More than likely, she would become dejected and unwilling to present solutions that could potentially navigate the organization through larger issues. On the other hand, if Allison were treated like a thought leader, she would be encouraged to think critically about challenges facing the organization

and develop a sense of ownership in the organization's success. When curiosity and questioning is discouraged, discontent in the workplace follows. Excluding employees from collaborative conversations limits a talented employee's growth and negatively affects an organization's capability to retain, engage and strengthen the team.

Talent stays for talented leaders

Recruiters, when interviewing candidates, frequently are asked for the "inside scoop" on supervisors. Candidates want to know what supervisors are like, how they manage their teams, and if they teach as they lead. For many candidates, the decision to work for a company is based on the belief that the supervisor can make them stronger and more well-rounded professionals. Likewise, employees' decisions to leave companies are often based on their relationships with supervisors.

Millennials like to challenge hierarchical structures and want personal relationships with their bosses.³ For employee retention, then, it is important to understand that the formality of an organizational chart

and the "boss-employee" relationship holds less value for this generation. Millennials want more personal relationships, built on trust, to allow for an open flow of communication and candid feedback, which, in turn, makes a direct impact on overall performance and investment.

Plenty of stories recount employees' transitions to other jobs because of bad relationships with supervisors. Such events usually start with a disparaging remark about the way a supervisor treats employees. Perhaps the supervisor is a micromanager or unsupportive of promotion goals. Millennials seek leaders who continually provide feedback that enables them to make on-the-spot adjustments. They also want freedom to ask appropriate questions about ways to modify their behavior. As they learn to navigate the workplace on multiple levels, including interaction with senior leadership, they seek mentors who will assist in their growth process. This development relies not only on the trust and vulnerability of the employee, but also on the skill of the leader who makes mentorship a priority.

The relationship between an effective supervisor and a talented employee is cultivated from first

contact — and fostering this relationship is critical. Employers need to be aware that recruiters encourage candidates to glean information from their supervisors about growth and mentorship. Supervisors must respond to these questions. In the ongoing war to acquire and retain talent, employers must think beyond immediate needs and consider ways to provide benefits to talented employees

Recognize non-verbal cues

Traditional ways to engage employees are insufficient for millennials. For them, workplace satisfaction includes their perceptions — how in tune they are with their supervisors; how they regard their environment; and how they understand their pathway to success. This non-verbal messaging must be acknowledged and met with recognition that goes beyond verbal praise. The talented individuals whom companies seek grew up with an expectation of performance. Millennials were often treated as "special," usually considered as independent individuals rather than as a group. Recognition was frequent and immediate, which has affected their overall view of work.

While millennial employees have been formed by the affirmations and non-verbal cues received during their youth, they now want to know how they can rise to the top. They pay attention when someone who was on a large project receives a promotion or employees who travel for their positions receive public accolades. These non-verbal cues, messages not directed to the talented employee but observed, afford specific examples of success at work, which this generation desires. Millennials want to know their employer cares about their career progression and that if they work hard, the next promotion, incentive or award could be theirs.

James, for example, is a new employee eager to start and willing to take direction. At first, he showed up early for work and left late as he tried to figure out the balance of his new career while still showing the world he appreciated that the company

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had taken a chance on him. James had a lot to prove and wanted his supervisors to know they had made a good choice. After a few months, the coming-in-early-and-leaving-late mentality began to shift. Now, he is right on time in the morning and the first to leave at five. His level of excitement is beginning to wane and his questions about other positions within the company are fading just as quickly. Generally, there is nothing wrong with his performance; he hits targets and exceeds metrics daily, but his overall level of excitement and enthusiasm for the position has changed.

After a long chat with James, his supervisor learns that he remains excited about the job but that his duties simply are not challenging enough. He feels he has more to contribute, but shies from asking for more responsibilities because he “hasn’t been here long enough.” He is afraid of being shut down and concerned the company may not value his contribution until he masters all of the tasks he was hired to perform. In the same conversation, the supervisor gets an inkling James is thinking of leaving the position,

guised as “moving away to be closer to his family.” The supervisor knows James’ performance has garnered positive attention for his short-term planning and decides to change his own strategy: he informs James that a much bigger plan for him within the company is taking shape. Instead of ignoring non-verbal cues, the manager discerns that he must be more verbally clear. By clueing in James on the general plan for his growth and assigning him some new projects, with the expectation he continue to perform in his current role as well, the astute supervisor encourages James to feel the investment again. As a result, James’ excitement immediately resurfaces.

Conclusion

Millennials will not shy away from hard work. Culturally, they merely want to know that a return on their investment exists. The onus lies with employers to deliver on promises. If supervisors keep employees motivated by becoming more aware of non-verbal cues, they will win in recruitment and retention more times than not. But it requires taking note

of moods and speaking with peers about who is stepping up and who is not, who is attending after-work events, who wants to do more, and who is offering feedback — all signs of comfort and engagement. For those who are not participating, supervisors must develop individual engagement strategies to get them “back in the saddle.” The payoff will be in big dividends for the supervisor and the organization. ■

Endnotes

1. *16 Positive Qualities of Millennials*, April 2017, www.theodysseyonline.com/positive-qualities-millennials [LaBoeuf]
2. *Management Has Evolved: The Rise of Millennial Managers*, March 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/managing-millennials-how-data-can-make-you-a-better_us_58dacab6e4b07f61a2bb8957 [Tso]
3. *10 Millennial Personality Traits That HR Managers Can't Ignore*, September 2014, www.mindtickle.com/blog/10-millennial-personality-traits-hr-managers-cant-ignore/ [Ganapathy]



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