

What Managers Can Do to Inspire Millennials

In 2014, we began to explore what it is that managers do to inspire Millennial workers. We began with an open-ended survey to explore what they would say without any guided prompts. We asked, “What does a manager do that inspires people to use their knowledge, experience, and internal motivation to the best of their abilities?” We asked them to provide us with two or three things leaders do to inspire people. Over several months, we collected these surveys from 92 young employees. A content analysis of the responses yielded an 18-item questionnaire using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at All Important” to “Vitality Important.” The items in that survey are included in Appendix 1.

Next, we collected responses to the 18-item questionnaire from 640 Millennials in the workplace. Our analysis showed that of these important items, five were most vital for managers to use to inspire Millennials. The five items found to be most vitally important in inspirational leaders are:

- Trust and empower employees
- Provide regular feedback to everyone—both positive and corrective feedback—when and where appropriate
- Make sure that goals AND expectations are clearly stated and then hold people accountable for achieving outcomes, while helping us when and where needed
- Be open to hearing my new ideas and my input
- Do not micromanage. Make the vision and goals clear and allow employees flexibility in how to achieve the goals

Overall, these results tell us that Millennials want to be treated like valued colleagues who are given clear definitions of expectations, regular feedback, and a receptive ear by managers about their ideas. They do not want to feel micromanaged, but rather to feel trusted and empowered. In short, they value clarity and accountability and the opportunity to contribute their ideas to the collective good. They embrace transparency from their managers and want the opportunity to contribute.

Next we take a closer look at these five items to provide a more in-depth understanding. We will share comments from respondents that elucidate the thinking behind the rating of each item.

TRUST AND EMPOWER EMPLOYEES

As one respondent put it, “When my manager trusts me, it makes me want to do an extremely good job so I do not let them down and so that trust increases.” Millennials like leaders who believe in them enough to trust them with significant responsibilities and to empower them to use their experience and knowledge. They believe they have something to contribute and they respond well to managers who acknowledge this belief. Millennials are a very well-educated generation, and as

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such they have a lot to offer companies in the twenty-first century, especially in areas that relate to the use of technology and to innovative thinking. An annual survey conducted at Deloitte (2015) of 7,800 Millennials in 29 countries finds Millennials want to contribute their ideas, and that fostering a culture of innovation keeps Millennials motivated and helps to drive company growth by generating game-changing innovations. The flip side of these findings is also true. As one respondent noted, “If I am not trusted to do my work, I will never complete it to my full potential, and I will feel that my work is unsatisfactory.” Millennials set a high bar for managers if they are to be inspired. One respondent succinctly noted, “Without trust there can be no empowerment, and without both trust and empowerment, there is no inspiration.”

PROVIDE REGULAR FEEDBACK TO EVERYONE

One respondent wrote, “Taking the time to give feedback for a job well done as well as constructive feedback on how to improve makes people feel valued by the manager and makes them want to grow and develop into a top-notch worker.” Another respondent noted simply, “I want to know what I can improve upon to be a better team member.” Millennials have a strong desire to continually improve in their work. Yes, they like positive feedback when it is deserved—for example, when they show advances in learning a new task or when they offer ideas that benefit the company. But they are not just about positive feedback. They want to know when they make mistakes or do things wrong—but they want the corrective feedback to respect them as a person who wants to grow and get better. Millennials want to contribute without fear of criticism, as this leads to a decline in motivation (Brack, 2012). There is a difference between criticism, which comes across as just negative, and corrective feedback, which comes across as explaining shortcomings and then showing an employee how to improve. Millennials want coaching that helps them grow and feel engaged. Managers may perceive it as arduous to attend to “needy” Millennials, but if they provide regular feedback, they will open up the possibility of Millennials achieving extraordinary results through productivity, creativity, and a vigorous work ethic.

SET CLEAR GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS, AND HOLD PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE FOR OUTCOMES

As one respondent put it, “People do not like surprises—make expectations clear up front.” Another one said, “When the manager explains goals, the employee can take ownership.” Millennials fundamentally want clarity of expectations. They feel it is unfair and ineffective not to define goals and expectations up front. They want to be held accountable but with no surprises. They feel they have capabilities to apply to their jobs, but those capabilities can work well for them and the organization only if they know what the goals are and what a good job looks like. Another respondent said, “There is nothing more frustrating than to not know what you are doing and how to do it. Such confusion leads to poor results, frustration, and employees looking for another job.” Millennials want to feel that their work is meaningful in a larger worldview, and clear expectations tied to clear goals and a vision make this

possible. They want to feel they can achieve goals in their own way, but at the same time, they want help when they are unclear on how to achieve the goals. So, set clear goals and hold them accountable, but offer help when it is needed. However, there is another important element about goals for Millennials. The goals they are working on need to connect with their values and to a clear sense that their work is giving back to society in general. Millennials think of success not just in terms of goal accomplishment and career advancement, but also in terms of contribution to society.

BE OPEN TO HEARING MY NEW IDEAS AND MY INPUT

As one respondent stated, “When managers listen to people’s ideas, energy levels can soar—employees feel really important and valued.” Millennials are eager for managers who will listen to them and their ideas. They appear to be very much in touch with the basic human need for people they work with to exercise active listening and validation. Conversely, another respondent stated, “I would feel very unmotivated if I felt my ideas were falling on deaf ears.” Millennials have been told throughout their lives that they are special and talented, and they want to prove their worth in the workplace, just like in school and on sports teams. Millennials want active, involved leadership, plus a feeling of collaborative teamwork and unstructured access to information. Implicit in this finding is that information and ideas flow in both directions—from manager to employee and from employee to manager, which supports the idea that Millennials want their ideas to be heard, not dismissed or undervalued. Millennials want to work with people who foster and are open to innovative thinking, and if you listen to the ideas of Millennials, you are likely to hear some cutting-edge things (Deloitte, 2015). Millennials want to be asked for their input, because they feel they have something to offer—and they do.

DO NOT MICROMANAGE—SET CLEAR GOALS AND ALLOW FLEXIBILITY IN HOW TO ACHIEVE THEM

One respondent noted, “Leaders need to trust their people to do their jobs but be there when needed to help—such as when an employee is new in a task.” Millennials do not respond well to feeling they are being micromanaged (who does?), but it is important not to leave them to flounder with little or no guidance. Managers have to remember that Millennials may lack workplace experience and thus seek guidance on how to succeed and grow in their jobs. Managers must find the right balance between guidance and too much managing if they are to inspire Millennials. One key point that came out of our research is that Millennials are drawn toward having the space for trial and error and subsequent small successes and failures. In this way they have freedom to learn but instruction to avoid huge failures. Another respondent added, “Micromanaging makes me feel insecure in my job and hesitant to use my skills—makes me unsure of myself.” Millennials prefer authority that is relaxed and polite and that treats them with respect. Further, Millennials want to make their work their own, to be allowed to do it their way, and to be treated as individuals who can contribute in new and unique ways. Millennials want coaching where they can contribute without fear of undue criticism (Brack, 2012). They do not

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Alan and Ashley want to thank the Millennials—more than 700 strong—who responded to our surveys and helped us understand what managers can do to inspire them to contribute their abundant talents.

like to be part of a rigid hierarchy. They prefer mentors or coaches to managers—people who show them how to get things done when they are learning, but leave them to get things done their own way when they are ready to contribute.

Overall, it is fair to say that these five things managers can do to inspire Millennial workers may not seem earth shattering; however, taken together they provide clear guidance for managers who may be challenged in leading Millennials.

Similarities across Generations— Millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers

Certainly Millennials have a different vantage point on the world and the workplace than previous generations, and they have new skills and perspectives that can be very useful today. In order to tap into those skills and the energy of Millennials, they need to feel a part of something that is bigger than they are and will have an impact in the world. They also want to feel that they are part of a collective effort in their work and that their ideas are heard and used. They need a clear sense of where the company is going and how they fit in, but they also want the chance to make an impact in flexible ways regarding how they do their job.

Interestingly, many of these ideas could also apply to Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. A survey of more than 3,000 workers found many similar values across generations (Deal, 2007). For example: (1) everyone wants respect, (2) leaders must be trustworthy, (3) everyone wants to learn, and (4) everyone likes feedback. Our thought is that what gets played up as big differences across the generations may actually relate more to one's age—that is, to the stage of one's life. For example, when the two authors of this paper (one a Baby Boomer and one a Gen Xer) think back to when we were in our twenties, many of the things said about Millennials could apply to us at that time in our lives, as well. The biggest difference is that we, unlike Millennials, did not grow up in a global and digital world where technology and social connection via technology are taken for granted—we had to learn these things later in life.

However, for us in our twenties, we too were very optimistic about our ability to contribute in the workplace but wanted to do it a little differently than our older managers. We wanted to be engaged with others and with our managers in accomplishing work-related goals. We wanted to feel we were working in a place where we could trust others around us, and we had a lot to learn about working in organizations, as the Millennials currently do. Two comments sum up this line of thought. One, while Baby Boomer and Gen X workers and managers have changed, the five things managers can do to inspire Millennials would likely also be effective in managing Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. And two, it will be very interesting to see how Millennials change in what they value and feel as they grow older.

It is important to note that there is another generation coming behind the Millennials. A *New York Times* article calls them Generation Z (born after 1995), and they are just starting to enter the workforce (Smith and Aaker, 2013). They have grown up in a digital world, but one shaped by events like the 9/11 attack on the United States and two economic meltdowns in the early 2000s. In fact, every generation has its share of challenging times that shape their thinking. The question is, how will managers need to adapt to Gen Z workers? Somewhat tongue in cheek, we wonder what the generation after Gen Z will be called, given that we are at the end of the alphabet—will we start over with Gen A?

Conclusion

We hope that this short article will help managers better understand Millennials and that readers can benefit from our findings—the five key things to do to inspire Millennials. Yes, inspire, not just manage, because organizations are operating in challenging times, and Millennials have a lot to offer to organizations that adopt techniques that will inspire them.

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The authors would like to dedicate the article to colleague John Carlos, the "Great Story Teller," who focused so much energy on finding ways for managers to inspire people.

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Appendix 1

INSPIRATIONAL LEADERS SURVEY

Below are the 18 items in our survey that Millennials responded to using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not important at all to 7 = Vitally important.

Inspirational leaders:

1. Verbalize and show appreciation for the efforts and results of employees.
2. Trust and empower employees.
3. Take the time to ask about employees' career aspirations and provide development opportunities.
4. Keep employees informed about changes that are coming and explain why the changes are necessary.
5. Are passionate about the work employees do.
6. Define a vision for employees' future and communicate it regularly and consistently.
7. Work right alongside employees when things are changing or when they have to learn a new task.
8. Provide regular feedback to everyone—both positive and corrective feedback—when and where appropriate.
9. Encourage and push employees to do their best at all times.
10. Are first and foremost good listeners when it comes to effective communications.
11. Win the respect of their employees because they are people who, deep down, respect other people.
12. Allow employees to make mistakes and then help them learn from the errors.
13. Have expertise in their field and are willing to share it with their employees.
14. Make sure that goals AND expectations are clearly stated and then hold people accountable for achieving outcomes while helping them when and where needed.
15. Are open to hearing employees' new ideas and input.
16. Are candid, sincere, and forthcoming with their employees.
17. Do not micromanage. They make the vision and goals clear and allow their employees flexibility in how to achieve the goals.
18. Use a variety of methods to keep in touch with their people—face-to-face contact, electronic means, etc.—and they understand that frequency of communications needs to vary depending on the recipient.