Engaging the New Workforce

"I'm worried that we're not effectively engaging the younger generation in our reliability improvement initiatives. For the most part they seem interested. How should we be working with these younger, newer employees?"

This question is becoming more and more common in today's older industrial facilities. As the 30-plus year veteran employees move on, they're being replaced with a younger generation of people who have completely different perspectives on work, on life, on everything. The ways we employed, trained, and engaged previous generations of employees will not necessarily work with the Millennials. Now is the time to retool our approaches to employee engagement, empowerment, and involvement. Here are some insights for engaging the younger generation in the workplace.

The Generational Divide

Think about the differences in your family: your grandparents, parents, yourself, and your children. Each generation is different. They each experienced different technologies, socioeconomic conditions, educational approaches, politics, and ways of getting around. Let's briefly look at four generations and the events that formed their lives.

The Silent Generation: Born before 1945: strong family and community ties, WWII and Pearl Harbor, post-WWII economic boom, manned space flight

Baby Boomers: Born between 1946 and 1964: Cold War, Civil Rights movement, Vietnam War, political assassinations, feminist movement

Gen X: Born between 1965 and 1977: Disintegrating families, unemployment, personal computers, the Internet, Space Shuttle explosion, end of the Cold War, Berlin Wall destruction, Gulf Wars

Millennials: Born between 1977 and 2000: 9–11 terrorist attacks, Oklahoma City bombing, school shootings, global warming, increasing divorce rates, smarter phones, everybody gets a trophy

The Formative Years

These major generational events combine with situations in a person's formative years to influence their behaviors, beliefs, expectations, and interests. During the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Dr. Morris Massey described three major life-shaping periods that influence our values and behaviors:[1]

The Imprint Period: Up to 7 years of age: We absorb everything, accepting much of it as true, especially coming from our parents. The sense of right and wrong, good and bad is learned here.

The Modeling Period: Between 8 and 13 years of age: We copy people, often our parents, and other people who impress us: community leaders and teachers, for example. We try different things to see we feel about them.

The Socialization Period: Between 13 and 21 years of age: We tend to look for ways to depart from our earlier programming and are significantly influenced by our peer groups. Media (including social media) messages, especially those that seem compatible with the values of our peer groups, have a major influence.

The challenge we have in today's workplace is how to effectively engage (and value) the inherent generational differences among employees.

The Millennial Generation
Get ready. The Millennials will make up 75% of the workforce by 2025, preceded by unprecedented departures of seasoned skilled workers. However, they often lack the skills, knowledge, and experiences employers are looking for as replacements for their departing skilled employees.

While more people may make up the labor pool it's the skills shortages (skills gaps) that will prevent them for securing employment. **Over the next decade, nearly 3.5 million manufacturing jobs will likely need to be filled. Because of the skills gap, two million of those jobs are expected to remain unfilled.**[2]

Knowledge transfer and reliable training processes are rapidly becoming a more-than-compelling need in many business sectors. However, the traditional training model is mostly inefficient, ineffective, and inconsistent with how Millennials learn. But the task is much more than merely training them; it's engaging them.

In her insightful books, Christine Hassler helps us understand how to work with and benefit from the Millennial generation.[3] Here are a few of her insights:

Born between 1977 and 2000, the Millennials are typically over-parented, self-expressive, optimistic, globally oriented, and wanting to make a difference. They tend to be multitaskers, entrepreneurial thinkers, valuing freedom and flexibility, but they believe organizations rarely make use of their skills.

Leveraging the Millennial employees offer innovative opportunities. What do the Millennial employees want?

- Diverse opportunities based on individuality and creativity
- Fair compensation for work that has a purpose
- A great place to work: fun and ethical
- A sense of belonging and social engagement
- Flexibility

Attracting the new generation of employees can be enhanced by employers who:

- Invest in technology and social media
- Have a story to tell (a brand)
- Use Millennial employees in their recruiting
- Embrace social and environmentally conscious practices

- Reinvent the workplace environment
- Address how their goals can be achieved at work

Hiring Millennials may require that employers fundamentally overhaul their practices:

- Recruit, hire and train for skills mastery
- Look for leaders, out of the box thinkers, and optimists
- Deploy creative application and interview processes
- Upgrade the employee orientation, onboarding programs
- Include Millennials in the interview and selection processes

Retaining the newly hired Millennial employees can be improved by employers make efforts to:

- Make the first day unforgettable
- Offer feedback, flexibility, and transparency
- Create a fun workplace with a sense of purpose

Managing these new employees must be accomplished in ways that leverage their expectations:

- Provide frequent feedback
- Provide clear expectations with accountabilities
- Coach rather than direct (see the "Situational Leadership" model)
- Challenge and empower them
- Inspire them. Be a strategic and aspirational thinker
- Add the human element
- Be open and transparent
- Show respect for all people at all levels
- Get to know employees on a personal level
- Conduct weekly check-in
- Provide interpersonal training and personal development
- Technology platforms for feedback sharing

Developing new leaders from the ranks of Millennials must go beyond the traditional "leadership development programs." Developing leaders should begin very early in their employment through:

- Cross-functional expertise and rotational learning
- Apprenticeship models with assigned mentors
- Involvement with "high-ranking" executives
- Intrapreneurship (workplace innovation)
- Ongoing training and personal development
- Formal knowledge transfer processes
- Connection to the bigger "WHY" (beyond the "what" and "how")

Empowerment is Situational
We have leadership and management challenges because each generation in the workplace is different. Now, it is important to understand how to lead and empower the Millennials. This is where the proven principles of situational leadership can come into play.[4]

Adapting our leadership styles to fit an individual employees' needs will be one of the most important methods for engaging the Millennials. There are four sequential leadership styles in the situational leadership model: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating.

These four leadership styles are also aligned with four sequential stages of individual employee development: low competence/high commitment, some competence/low commitment, higher competence/variable commitment, and high competence/high commitment.

Empowering and engaging employees, especially the Millennials, must build on what motivates them. And how we lead them to be productive members of our organization is a huge part of motivating them. Employing situational leadership principles will be one of the most important factors in empowering and engaging Millennials in our workplace.

References
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[3] Christine Hassler, "Bridging the Generational Divide Attracting, Engaging, and Managing a Multi-Generational Workforce" (keynote), www.genyexpert.com
[4] Situational Leadership, www.KenBlanchard.com