Millennials Taking the Driver's Seat

How America's Workplace is being Re-shaped by Gen Y

It is understandable that employers these days may be fumbling around trying to find the magic key that will unlock their Millennial, aka Gen Y, team members' sense of workplace satisfaction. Because most of today's business leaders are of a certain age it isn't easy for them to pinpoint the specific nuances that distinguish the desires of Gen Y—those born in the years 1983-2000—from their generation.

To engage a millennial, a boomer-aged employer should first take a trip down memory lane and tap into the years when their own kids were in school. Remember all those Star-of-the Week presentations, where the kids—for years on end—stood up in front of the class with their posters covered in pictures and graphics that depicted their favorite things in the world? Remember the huge push for self-esteem building and how all the kids got awards? Recall the desks grouped in fours, not just in kindergarten but typically configured in teams throughout their school years? Remember the heavy emphasis on social justice and environmental concerns that heavily weighted the curricula—even (especially) in college? If you were paying attention to those education trends while your children were in school you will have the advantage now to re-shape the work environment along similar lines. Gen Y has become at home in that team-based, cause-focused, praise-centered world, so trying to fit them into a workplace that is consistent with a boomer-influenced environment will not gel with them.

This age group is not willing to accept an old school top-down approach to being managed any more than it wants to feel trapped in a 9-5 schedule with zero flexibility. Because Millennials have grown up with the concept of virtual everything, they see no

reason why work itself must be defined by a desk inside a corporate cubicle. Conforming to the 20th century workplace model is not an option for the Millennials. They see things in a constant state of flux and fluidity—and thrive on that. As painful as it is for America to change things up after decades of predictable workplace structures, it must be done if management hopes to engage the younger employees. This age group will not thrive (or stay) in a staid, fixed work environment.

The Millennial Menu

If asked, Gen Y will gladly offer up a menu of desired offerings, in their view, for the dream workplace. Whether a Millennial will chose to patronize or ever return to this "restaurant" will be dependent on the following entrees:

- **There must be a connection between company and cause.** Because they have been saturated for most of their lives with concerns for the environment, it is imperative that the company they consider working for has a clearly defined mission statement that includes a declaration of social consciousness.

- **There should be a collaborative work style in place**, at least half of the time. Again, this generation was raised working in groups and is most comfortable doing so. Teamwork also fosters relationships, which feeds into another unique aspect of millennial work satisfaction—developing friendships while also growing their professional network.

- **Clearly defined milestones where they can experience praise** for accomplishments is something that will keep the younger employees engaged. Recognition for meeting goals and knowing they are moving towards advancement within the corporate structure is important to Millennials.

- **A creative work environment** dovetails with, again, their school experience. This generation regularly worked on assignments that required them to present knowledge in creative ways—acting it out on a stage, creating dioramas, building tangible proof that demonstrated their understanding of an assigned topic, instead of the traditional learning method of memorizing facts and regurgitating them on an exam.

- **Advanced technology** in the workplace is a significant attraction to the younger recruit, and for obvious reasons. They have been immersed in technology their entire lives, so seeing cutting age systems and machines utilized in a workplace shows them that the company is on the cutting edge of its field.

- **The culture of the workplace should be energized** by the integration of employee social events into the work calendar. Extracurricular activities, such as

a company softball team, an occasional non-work lunch outing, or a bowling night—activities that will strengthen bonds with coworkers and keep boredom at bay will fulfill the Gen Y need to mix business with pleasure.

Successful Generational Cross-pollination

As has always been the case, to create a thriving work environment requires that the old guard make way for the young whippersnappers to come on board. Fostering acceptance between different generations requires effort of the behalf of all employees. Boomers may be resistant to the notion of a 20 something acquiring a management position, especially finding themselves answering to someone they feel is too wet behind the ears. The Millennial may strut around with an arrogance that he or she hasn't earned yet, which older employees will find off-putting. Boomers, on the other hand, entrenched in upper management positions, may have a patronizing and condescending attitude towards the young worker.

In order to manifest a work environment that promotes acceptance between age groups, a company should have a strategy in place, starting with Human Resources. The HR department can develop a seminar or webinar that introduces employees to the benefits of working with multiple generations. It can address the main stumbling points (i.e., the prior paragraph) in either a serious or comedic tone, and then emphasize the gifts that each generation brings to the table and how they can benefit each other. Once such a training module is set up and administered to all employees, the essence of the message needs to be made intrinsic to the workplace culture in order to take root.

Within the various departments, carefully facilitated brainstorming sessions, meetings, and projects can continue to foster the multi-generational teamwork model through respectful dialogue that emphasizes acknowledging each other's contributions, even if they come from wildly differing perspectives. If such a culture is encouraged and promoted through management, job satisfaction will increase no matter what age the team member.

While the entrance of Millennials into the workplace has stoked some ire among the older workers, with some modifications any business can create a work environment that is not only amenable to all, but encourages real *engagement* by all.