

The Millennials – Can They Be Managed?

By Jerry Wilt



"My sister is twelve years older than I am, and yet I swear we had different parents when we were growing up. She and I see things so differently. She needs structure in her work; I have to have flexibility and freedom to be creative. I look for frequent challenges in my work and frequent bonuses in my paycheck. She doesn't expect praises or raises, she'd rather have security. I love her, but I hope we never have to work together."

Actually, these two sisters really did have different parents, who raised one child BI (before internet) and the other AI. The newest generation of workers (Newsweek calls them the Millennials) brings interesting expectations to the job. These expectations aren't right or wrong, but they are different.

But is this next generation of young workers really so different from previous generations? Well... yes they are. They were raised by doting parents who told them they were special. So did Mr. Rogers, who repeatedly told them he liked them, "just the way you are." They played on soccer or t-ball teams where there were no losers, only winners. They were laden with trophies and medals just for participating. They saw company-loyal parents put out of work in downsizings, so they're more interested in their own personal career gains, instead of the employer's. They were raised on TV, MTV, and in a culture of immediacy, so they like entertainment but don't stay in one place very long.

What's more, their parents, raised in the sixties and seventies, became used to questioning the status quo and authority. This is a laudable propensity when practiced with respect and mindfulness, but in some ways they taught their children, today's workforce, to second-guess the boss's directives and motives.

And now? The millennial employee will tell you what time their yoga class begins and expect their day's work to be organized around it. They have climbed Mount Everest and been down to Machu Picchu, but they've never punched a time-clock. They have no idea what it's like to actually be in an office at nine o'clock with people handing them work to be finished by noon. Faced with new employees who want to roll into work with their iPods and flip flops around noon, but still be promoted by Friday, managers are realizing that the era of the buttoned-down employee who is just happy to have a job is dead.

Now that we've surfaced the bad news, let's look at what really irritates today's managers. These Millennials are talented and energetic beyond belief. They are tech-savvy, creative, discerning and efficient, with an eye to issue resolution rather than problem-solving. They're sociable, optimistic, talented, well-educated, collaborative, open-minded, influential, and achievement-oriented. In short, once they're properly motivated, this is a generation that is enthusiastic and ready to contribute. If this were a generation of slackers, then small businesses, retail outlets, and restaurants would be out of business. The challenge is that this generation is different, and we must learn how to make those differences work for us. Here are some ideas:

Hire the right people

Every generation is wary of the generation that follows it. There is always fear, apprehension, and misunderstanding. By understanding the next generation we can hire the right employees and manage them effectively. Get better at hiring them. Read books or attend seminars on recruiting, interviewing, and hiring.

Don't baby young workers

Young workers want the care and concern yet don't want to be babied. They want you to guide them, but they also want to be seen as independent self-starters. Don't baby them, but don't be a drill sergeant either. Mentor them. Coach them. And learn from them too. They can teach you some things.

Manage their expectations

It's critical to write out your expected responsibilities and policies. Try using written agreements and contracts. This generation is used to doing this with their parents and teachers. Communicate the critical behaviors you want to see displayed on the job. When you lay out clear expectations and goals, they can't come back and say "it's not my job."

Being able to change is tough. The employers that make changes in their management style for today's young workers will be the ones with less turnover, fewer hiring setbacks, and more profit for their business. These changes must be made because this is the workforce of tomorrow. And remember, your generation precipitated seismic changes in the world. Now it's your turn to accept the new ways.