



How to Engage (and Keep) Your Young Workers *Make Gen Y your ally*

by Elizabeth J. Agnew, MS

Many of the claims about Generation Y, the Millennials, are true. I can say that because I am one.

What is NOT true are the assumptions and reasoning *behind* the claims. These claims are made with envy and resentment, in effect an expression by older generations of the mournful loss of an old paradigm that is being exposed and expelled from the workplace by the Millennials.

This quote from Margaret Wheatley reflects the new paradigm that Millennials are demanding from the workplace.

“As we let go of the machine model of organizations, and workers as replaceable cogs in the machinery of production, we begin to see ourselves in much richer dimensions, to appreciate our wholeness, and, hopefully, to design organizations that honor and make use of the great gift of who we humans are.”

You can engage (and thus keep) your young workers by considering, and then living into, a new way of viewing the workplace.

Claim: Boomers are going have to start focusing more on coaching rather than bossing.

True. Bossing has never really worked in most work environments (save for war zones and emergency response situations), and now we, as a society, are waking up to that fact. Once adults have grown up and learned to become the authority of their own lives, they don't want to be told what to do. This has always been true. It simply doesn't work well to work that way. Coaching is a process that allows a manager to extract the passions and opinions from someone in order to plug them into the job description. Gen Y is demanding to be plugged in to their passion.

Claim: Millennials are lazy.

False. They're willing to work very hard at something that is close to their hearts. They find what they love and pour themselves into it. What *is* true is that they're not willing to work for something that means nothing to them.

Claim: The workplace has become a psychological battlefield and the Millennials have the upper hand.

True about the battlefield, false about the upper hand. In fact, the workplace always been a psychological "battlefield". The Millennials might seem to have the upper hand because they are willing to acknowledge this. They want to make it explicit because they want to live fully at work.

Claim: Millennials see boomers as old, redundant, untrustworthy and incoherent.

False. Young people want mentors – wise advisors who will take them under their wing and share their wisdom. This misconception arises because the respect of Millennials is earned and not automatic; finding mentors who will honor and respect them allows them to reciprocate that honor and respect.

Claim: You now have a generation coming into the workplace that has grown up with the expectation that they will automatically win.

True. And you will win too. Gen Y believes in playing a win/win game. They are able to see a world in which nobody loses. The world is ready for this.

It makes sense that older generations are frustrated by Millennials. They're changing things. What is happening at work – the thing causing this cultural clash between the generations – is that young people are demanding that individuals be honored, demanding that all people are heard, and demanding that we all play a win/win game.

The way we're working is changing, and as painful as the generation gap may feel, you can engage your young workers so that their differences are an asset. Here are four simple guidelines for how to engage your young workers to earn their trust, loyalty, and make your business better in the process.

1. Ask them what they think.

This one is tricky, because you have to mean it. Ask your young workers what they think about the decisions you have made that affect them. "What do you think about this project plan, new version of the roles and responsibilities, or the revised timeline?" Even though opening up for discussion a decision you've worked hard to make can seem scary, more input cannot hurt.

More importantly, you're sending the message that their input matters, making them feel heard. When you show such loyalty, it's easily reciprocated. The worst thing you can do to your young workers is assume they have nothing to offer on these topics.

2. Be transparent.

This actually goes for any of your workers, but the young ones especially are sensitive to what's going on. When you, as the leader, share your thought process with your workers, you display openness and willingness to be human, flexible, and vulnerable. This will go a long way in earning the trust and respect of your young workers.

3. Acknowledge their impact.

It's widely known that young people want to make a difference. It's typically interpreted by senior staff to mean that young workers are on a power trip and want to be CEO their second week on the job. Really, they just want to have an impact. Make it clear to your workers how their day-to-day efforts actually affect the company's mission.

4. See them as who you know they can become.

Millennials want mentors who will see their potential. Not just as who they are now: green, eager, naïve, passionate, but for who they will become.

Millennials are not at fault for the change that's happening in the way we work – they're just its messengers. Young workers are riding in on the wave of a whole world that is waking up. They yearn to interact truthfully, respect mutually, and experience life fully – at the office. And honestly, who – of any age – doesn't? It's time.



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Liz works with individuals and organizations in technical fields needing tailored leadership development that speaks their language. Liz has logged hundreds of hours coaching individuals from companies such as Jet Propulsion Laboratories, Google, HP, SETI, Lockheed Martin, VNUS and Sun Microsystems. Her background includes experience in adult education, team facilitation, and public speaking. She offers complimentary coaching consultations – call or email today to schedule yours.

Many of the “claims” at the top of this article were taken from this 2007 60 Minutes report:
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/11/08/60minutes/main3475200.shtml>