Developing Millennial Leaders

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Introduction

The millennial generation is not just about to enter the workforce. They are already there. In fact, the oldest millennial is already 37, yet employers and HR and talent management professionals continue to act like the entirety of this generation is still living in their parents’ basements. And while it is true that many of them are recent college graduates still green behind the ears when it comes to their careers, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that millennials hold about 20 percent of all management jobs, up from just 3 percent in 2005 (Brown, 2016). And as baby boomers retire, the number of millennials needed to assume leadership roles will rise exponentially—but employers are struggling to accelerate their leadership development programs to properly prepare millennials to seamlessly assume leadership positions. See: Accelerating Leadership Development.

This white paper:

- Provides insight about who millennials are and what they value.
- Debunks some commonly held myths about this generation.
- Discusses millennials’ work preferences with a focus on leadership development and how HR and talent management professionals can use that information to retain them and prepare them for leadership roles.
- Discusses what “leadership” means to millennials.
- Offers steps on how to design leadership development programs suited to this generation.

Who Are the Millennial Generation?

The millennial generation has been highly scrutinized by researchers from an array of fields who have anxiously waited to see how this historically unique generation will behave in the workplace. There is no shortage of written work that highlights why millennials are technical natives, continuous learners, and excellent team players and collaborators. They are also the most ethnically diverse generation and are the most highly educated. See: Maximizing Millennials in the Workplace. There is also no shortage of written work that highlights how millennials may disrupt the workplace. See: Managing the Multigenerational Workplace.

All of this research in the quest to discover how this generation as a whole will behave has led to the notion that all millennials share the same values and will likely behave in the same way in the workplace. This is simply not the case. Just like not all baby boomers will retire at age 65, not all millennials will be good team players. In fact, as millennials age, notable differences among them are emerging. One common thought about millennials is that they are serial job hoppers, yet there is evidence that millennials who have been in the workforce for a couple of years begin to form more conventional attitudes about work than millennials of the same age who are still in college (The
Economist staff, 2015). A Boston College/KPMG survey burst the millennials-as-job-hoppers myth; 60 percent of millennials said they wanted to stay and advance their careers in their current organizations (Vozza, 2015).

It is important that employers shy away from lumping all millennials together in terms of what they value and how well, and for how long, they will perform for their organizations.

**Millennial Myths**

There are several myths associated with millennials which HR and talent management professionals need to be aware of:

**Myth 1: Millennials are excellent collaborators.** Conventional thinking suggests that millennials’ tightly scripted childhoods, which included lots of team sports, have made them excellent collaborators, and as a by-product, they lack a competitive streak. Millennials may have excellent collaboration skills, but this does not mean they aren’t competitive. In a millennial survey conducted by The Corporate Executive Board (CEB), nearly 60 percent of responding millennials said they were competitive, as compared to 50 percent of baby boomers. Nearly 60 percent of millennials also said they compared their job performance with their peers, as compared to 48 percent of the other generations responding; additionally, 37 percent of millennials stated that they did not trust their peers’ input at work compared with 26 percent of other generations (The Economist staff, 2015).

**Myth 2: Millennials are not interested in a long-term career with an organization.** The CEB survey found that millennials are not anti-careerist. One-third of the millennials responding to the survey said that they placed future career opportunities in the top five reasons for choosing a job, as compared to 21 percent of the other generations (The Economist staff, 2015).

**Myth 3: Millennials think corporate social responsibility is really, really a big deal.** It appears, based on the CEB survey, that corporate social responsibility is a bigger deal for baby boomers—41 percent of whom said was important to them—than millennials, 35 percent of whom said it was important to them (The Economist staff, 2015).

**Myth 4: Millennials don’t like to be told what to do.** In a Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) survey, researchers Jennifer Deal and Alec Levenson found that 41 percent of millennials agreed that “employees should do what their managers tell them to, even when they can’t see the reason for it.” Only 30 percent of baby boomers and 30 percent of Generation X agreed with that statement (The Economist staff, 2015).

**Myth 5: Millennials prefer digital media when it comes to communicating.** That same CCL survey found that this statement simply isn’t the case; more than 90 percent of
millennials in the survey said that they wanted to receive their performance evaluations and discuss their career plans in face-to-face meetings (The Economist staff, 2015). This does not mean that millennials are starting to reject digital media, however. It just means that they understand when it should, and should not, be used.

In a 2016 article for Forbes, writer Caroline Beaton offered up other millennial myths employers should keep in mind:

**Myth 6: Millennials cannot live without their parents.** The statistic that says that 36 percent of millennials still live with their parents is true, but that’s because they are going to college, and living in a college dorm is considered living at home according to the U.S. Census.

**Myth 7: Millennials are unemployed.** Millennials who are in college are considered unemployed, and this skews the millennial unemployment rate of nearly 13 percent. When college students between the ages of 18 and 24 are factored out, the millennial unemployment rate is about the same as other generations.

**Myth 8: Millennials are lazy.** An Ernst & Young survey found that 47 percent of millennials in management positions have worked additional hours over the past five years, as compared to 38 percent for Generation X and 28 percent for baby boomers. The Boston College/KPMG survey found that 80 percent of millennials surveyed said that they gave a great deal of effort beyond what was expected of them in the workplace (Vozza, 2015).

**Myth 9: All millennials want to work from home.** While this may be true for many millennials who want flexibility in their jobs, not all millennials want to work from home. A study by Ranstad & Future Workplace found that 42 percent of millennials preferred working in a corporate office.

These myths—that millennials are lazy, disloyal, and inclined to buck authority, to name a few—illustrate the dangers of overgeneralization. Just like other generations, millennial preferences should be considered on a spectrum rather than in black and white.

**Millennials and the Workplace**

Why should employers take the time to assess and to understand millennials and their work preferences? Jeanne Meister, an author, founding partner of the consulting firm Future Workplace, and a Forbes contributor, says that it is important that employers learn to think like millennials for several reasons. First, not only are they current and future employees and bosses, but they are also its customers, and having a better understanding of millennials’ views is simply good for business. Second, they are the largest generation in the workplace, and their preferences will impact programs and policies, including, but not limited to, time off and vacation time. And finally,
Developing Millennial Leaders

To help prepare millennials for leadership roles, General Electric (GE) runs programs in two of its divisions—GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy and GE Transportation—designed to retain technical knowledge and capabilities. To do this, GE has established knowledge-sharing partnerships between key employees and their colleagues in the same department, a move which has deepened bench strength. They also pursue personal action plans based on individual learning goals to help millennials succeed when they assume leadership positions.

Source: Green, 2016.

Knowing what millennials want in the workplace can help HR and talent management professionals design HR policies and practices aimed at attracting, retaining, and developing this generation in their organization. And there is no shortage of studies dedicated to learning what millennials are looking for when it comes to work. In general, millennials want employers who offer them:

- Work and life integration;
- Learning and development opportunities that will prepare them for leadership roles.

Work and Life Integration

In Deloitte’s 2017 survey on millennials, two-thirds of millennials said that they wanted freelance flexibility with the stability of a full-time job (Deloitte staff, n.d.). Other studies have found that millennials would choose flexibility over money (Kelly, 2016). Millennials want flexibility about where, when, and how their work gets done because this is what they have experienced their entire lives. Work, or school, and personal lives have always co-existed for this generation. They have been raised with technology and are used to Google, texting, chatting, messaging, and checking email whenever and wherever they want.

Offering workplace flexibility may be alluring to more than just the millennial generation. JP Morgan Chase found that 95 percent of employees working in formal or informal flexible work environments said that they were motivated to exceed expectation as compared to 80 percent of employees who did not work in flexible-friendly work environments. Bristol-Myers Squibb found that when they asked employees about how important flexibility was in terms of their intention to stay, 71 percent said that it was very important (Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College staff, n.d.).

Women, in particular, seek flexibility. At Bristol-Myers Squibb, 78 percent of women said workplace flexibility was very important in regard to their intent to stay compared to 65 percent of men. As women rise through the ranks, the importance of flexibility also rises; 84 percent of women in
management positions at Bristol-Myers Squibb said that flexibility helped keep them at the organization (Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College staff, n.d.).

Flexibility is not the only retention tool employers can use to lure and to keep millennials. In fact, offering and developing robust learning opportunities are also key to attracting and retaining millennials.

**Learning and Development Opportunities That Will Prepare Them for Leadership Roles**

Millennials have never known a world without instant access to the World Wide Web that can give them answers to their burning questions. Why is the sky blue? Millennials didn’t need to wait until dinner time to remember to ask their parents and to, hopefully, get the right answers. They just googled it. Want to learn how to make a fan out of a soda bottle? Look up a tutorial on YouTube. This ability to instantly access answers to their questions have made this a generation of continuous learners who expect ongoing and robust learning and development from their employers throughout their careers.

HR and talent management professionals who fail to deliver on this millennial expectation of continuous learning may well put their organizations in jeopardy. The 2017 Deloitte survey on millennials found that 71 percent of millennials who are likely to leave their organizations are dissatisfied with how their employers are helping them develop leadership skills. Sixty percent of millennials responding to that survey also said they wanted training to develop leadership skills (Jenkins, 2017).

Training and development can come in many forms for millennials. In a Virtuali/WorkplaceTrends survey, 68 percent of millennials said that they wanted training and development in the form of online classes and e-learning, and 53 percent said that they wanted access to mentoring programs. Another 42 percent stated that they wanted to be developed through shadowing programs (Brousell, 2015). Millennials also want to be developed through access to stretch assignments, external experiences and experiential programs (Deloitte staff, 2017).
Training and development efforts designed with millennials in mind should be heavy on leadership skill development because not only will employers find an increasing need to fill leadership positions as baby boomers retire, but they will also find that millennials, by and large, are seeking those positions. In the Virtuali/WorkplaceTrends survey, ninety-one percent of millennials, more than half of whom were women, said they aspire to attain leadership positions (Morgan, 2015). A 2015 Hartford survey found that 69 percent of millennial respondents said that they wanted to be in leadership positions in their organizations within the next five years (Schwartz, 2017).

Unfortunately, many millennials believe their employers are not stepping up to the plate when it comes to leadership development. Sixty-three percent of millennials responding to the 2016 Deloitte millennial survey said that their leadership skills were not being fully developed (Deloitte staff, 2016). Their perceptions may be true. A Brandon Hall Group study found that employers are not specifically targeting millennials in their leadership development programs; only 20 percent of employers said that it was critical to develop a millennial leadership segment over the next 24 months; and only 7 percent of employers said that they offered millennials coaching, mentoring or shadowing (Higginbottom, 2016). This is strategically shortsighted and can leave organizations with a lack of a deep leadership pipeline.

But what kinds of leaders and what types of leadership development are millennials looking for? It should come as no surprise that this generation views leadership, and as an extension, leadership development, a bit differently than previous ones.

**Millennials and Leadership**

Millennials views on what a good leader looks like differ significantly from previous generations. When Virtuali and WorkplaceTrends asked that question, 63 percent of responding millennials said they wanted to be transformational leaders, individuals who challenge and inspire employees with a sense of purpose and excitement (WorkplaceTrends staff, 2015). To millennials, leadership is about empowering others to succeed (Morgan, 2015). They also want organizations to be much less hierarchical than they were for previous generations (Brousell, 2015).

All of this is at odds with how previous generations have viewed leadership. Baby boomers, for example, were groomed in workplaces that embraced more autocratic, top-down leadership styles, where a leader’s main task was to maintain strict control over policies and procedures (Brousell, 2015). In a survey conducted by The Conference Board, millennials said that the most valued quality for good leaders to have is excellent interpersonal skills so they can be an inspiring coach and a compelling communicator. Another key skill leaders should have, from a millennial’s perspective, is the ability to involve others in decision making rather than imposing decisions on others. Contrary to this, current CEOs ranked interpersonal skills lower. They ranked critical thinking and business management skills as higher priorities (Murray, 2017).
Critical thinking and business management skills will certainly continue to be important leadership skills, but as Deloitte staff noted in its 2017 global human capital trends study (2017), leadership skills are changing as quickly as the nature of work, and existing top-down management models are not working. Today’s leaders must be innovative, move at high speeds, use a team-centered approach, and know how to keep people engaged and connected. Millennials are looking to hone those skills and are expecting their employers to help develop them (Deloitte staff, 2017).

Steps to Develop Millennial Leaders

The rapidly changing workplace and millennial expectations are changing how employers should focus on millennial leadership development. Organizations must rethink their existing leadership models and adapt them to include the concepts of innovation, growth, inclusion, teamwork and collaboration (Deloitte staff, 2017). HR and talent management professionals need to keep an eye toward potential millennial leaders and consider the following steps when updating their development models:

Step 1: Identify High-Potential Millennial Talent.

What study after study shows, millennials who believe their employers are doing a good job of offering them leadership training and development opportunities say they intend to stay at their jobs longer than millennials who believe their employers are not offering them leadership training and development opportunities. Yet according to The Brandon Hall study, employers are not specifically targeting millennials in their development efforts. To better retain and develop an organization’s millennial talent pipeline, HR and talent management professionals should identify high-potential millennial employees and fast track them for specialized leadership development based on a personalized strategic development plan for each millennial identified as a high potential individual (DeRosa, 2015).

See: Identifying High-Potential Talent in the Workplace.

With an average employee age of 27 years, car rental company Enterprise Rent-a-Car’s workforce is 60 to 70 percent millennial. The company only promotes from within, so to prepare millennials for job growth, Enterprise makes sure they learn the business from the bottom up, from accounting to fleet management. All employees receive the same training and opportunities for promotion, but everyone receives their own unique development plan. The company also offers a wide range of training designed to appeal to all types of learning styles. In addition, to better appeal to millennial learning preferences, classroom sessions have been redesigned to be more active.

Step 2: Tailor Normal Learning and Development Experiences to Millennial Learning Styles, Delivery Preferences, and Content Expectations.

When it comes to formal training and development experiences millennials want flexibility. HR and talent management professionals should examine their existing training and development experiences and update them to be shorter, online, and available at any time to appeal to millennials’ need for flexibility (Jenkins, 2017). Some formal learning and development can even be adapted to be delivered just in time in the form of apps and other social media delivery methods. For more information about the growing number of options in learning and development delivery, see: Got Game? The Use of Gaming in Learning and Development.

Traditional learning and development models should also be examined to see if they are delivering on the skills needed for effective leadership in today’s—and tomorrow’s—workplaces. For this generation, formal learning and development should focus on soft skills to allow for the development of more transformational leadership skills. These soft skills could include communication, relationship building, business etiquette, and how to inspire and influence others (Brousell, 2015 and Kelly, 2016).

Step 3: Don’t Limit Leadership Skill Development to Formal Learning and Development Experiences Alone.

Leadership skills can be learned outside of formal learning and development experiences. Millennials crave face-to-face feedback about their job performance. Formal coaching, mentoring and job shadowing programs can fill that need and add to millennials’ leadership skill repertoires (Kelly, 2016 and DeRosa, 2015). Job rotations can improve millennials’ knowledge of their organizations and their industries, and monthly meetings between millennials and their HR coaches to discuss career goals can help keep them committed to the organization (DeRosa, 2015). Some employers have taken a tour-of-duty approach, assigning millennials to jobs in two-year stints to help them learn about their organizations and to develop leadership skills (Loew, 2015).

Step 4: Promote Millennials into Leadership Roles at a Much Faster Rate than Previous Generations.

Millennials not only want to assume leadership positions in their organizations, they have made it clear that they will go elsewhere if they are not given the opportunity within five years, according to the 2015 Harford survey. It may not be possible for employers to promote millennials to the next available leadership position, particularly if they are not yet ready to assume the responsibility, but it is possible to offer them leadership roles that will retain them and prepare them for leadership.
positions at the same time. Leadership roles millennials can take on include becoming a leader on teams and team-based projects. Reverse mentorships in which millennials serve as mentors to more senior employees, job rotations, and tours of duty can all be considered roles that can allow millennials to learn the leadership skills they will need to successfully assume leadership positions in their organizations (Deloitte staff, 2017).

**Conclusion**

Contrary to popular belief, millennials are not a lazy, unemployed generation uninterested in corporate careers. They are, in fact, hard-working, competitive and aspire to attain leadership positions in their organizations, but their terms are different. HR and talent management professionals must be willing to revamp their learning and development models to meet the expectations of this fastest growing generation in the workplace. Those HR and talent management professionals who make leadership development of this generation a strategic priority will reap the benefits through higher retention and satisfaction rates. Additionally, this approach will develop a strong leadership pipeline that will ensure greater success for their organizations.
About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning to ensure that all individuals gain relevant new skills that they can easily implement within their own organizations. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. We are dedicated to following-up with our clients and individual participants to ensure that their learning experiences have been meaningful and impactful. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind, and we are focused on successfully meeting our clients' business and academic expectations. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Big data analytics
- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined
- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

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Sources


Sources (continued)


