

THE REAL KEYS TO Managing Millennials



Since the late 1990s, Rainmaker Thinking has been tracking the emerging young workforce. In recent years, we have focused on the second-wave millennials, born 1990–2000, now flooding into the workforce.

Here's what our research shows: Millennials are not a bunch of disloyal, delicate, lazy, greedy, disrespectful, inappropriate slackers with short attention spans, who only want to learn from computers, only want to communicate with hand-held devices, and won't take "no" for an answer. Millennials want leaders who take them seriously at work, not leaders who try to humour them; leaders who set them up for success in the real world, not leaders who pretend they are succeeding no matter what they do; strong, highly-engaged managers who establish clear structure and boundaries and provide regular guidance, direction, support and coaching. Millennials need clear expectations; they need to know that somebody is keeping score; and they need to understand the quid pro quo of work every step of the way.

Yes, millennials want more money, more flexibility, more training, more interesting projects, and more exposure to decision makers. Yes, they want more of everything. But they don't expect any of it on a silver platter. They just want to know, every step of the way, exactly what they need to do to earn it.

How do you prepare managers for the highly-engaged leadership and coaching necessary for such dynamic management relationships? These are the keys:

Teach them how to manage themselves

Millennials are often amazingly advanced in their knowledge and skills at a very young age, yet they often lack maturity when it comes to the basics of professionalism, critical thinking, and followership. So, to fill those gaps, teach them good old-fashioned:

- **professionalism:** the basics of rigorous self-evaluation, personal responsibility, good work habits, good attitude, and interpersonal skills.
- **critical thinking:** the basics of proactive (instead of reactive) learning, problem solving, and decision making.
- **followership:** the basics of appreciating context, being a good citizen, adopting a service mindset, and practising good teamwork.

Teach them how to be managed by you

Decide on your expectations and speak up. Set ground rules. Maybe, corporate policies are in place already, but often no concrete policies regulate important intangibles like attitude, tone of voice, and other subtleties of professionalism in the workplace.

You may need to figure out these ground rules on your own and say, "Whenever you are working with me, on any task, for any period of time, these are my ground rules," lay them out in no uncertain terms, and make it clear you can't work with someone who doesn't follow them. The better you spell out clear ground rules up front, the better things will go. Use catch-phrases if they come naturally. Then speak them. Write them down. And speak them some more. They will serve as an easy point of reference whenever you want to remind an employee, "We both know that this is one of my ground rules."

Establish a regular routine for one-on-one meetings

One of the most effective ways to help your young employees learn to be managed by you is to schedule regular discussions with each of them about their work. At first, err on the side of meeting more often with each person — every day, every other day, or once a week.

Like everything else, this dynamic process will change over time, and your approach will have to change with each young employee you meet with regularly. For each one, decide how often to meet, how much time to spend at each meeting, what format to use, and what topics to cover. Over time, you'll make adjustments. If things are not going well with a specific millennial, maybe you'll have to meet longer and more often, going over their to-do list twice a day with a fine-tooth comb. And if things are going really well with one, maybe you only need to meet twice a week, just long enough to check progress and troubleshoot any issues that come up with their current tasks, responsibilities, and projects. No matter how well things seem to be going, you still need to verify that they are indeed going as well as you think. If they are, make sure that the millennial knows just how many points they are scoring today.

Your one-on-ones are your primary method for keeping the lines of communication open. Keep your expectations on the table, and make sure you are showing them exactly how to meet and exceed your expectations. And keep asking, "What do you need from me?"

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Establish clear boundaries and structure

Whenever you have a new task, responsibility, or project for one of your very capable young employees, always start by spelling out expectations. Make absolutely sure they understand exactly what you expect them to do and how to do it. That’s the only way to get employees to adopt your organization’s best practices and turn them into standard operating procedures. As long as the assignment lasts, you should follow up regularly with one-on-one check-in conversations to review employees’ progress. In those conversations, you should ask, “What have you already done? What steps did you follow? What step are you going to do next?” Listen carefully to their answers. Make it a habit to wrap up these conversations by deciding on a specific place and time for your next meeting to follow up.

Help millennials keep score for themselves

You might think a generation raised on mantras like “we’re all winners” and “everyone gets a trophy” wouldn’t be particularly competitive. But that is not the case. While the self-esteem movement was chipping away at millennials’ competitiveness, the testing movement was building it back up. Still, testing breeds a different kind of competitiveness: competition against standards and benchmarks, against averages and means, and against one’s own past performance. When millennials know you are keeping track of their day-to-day performance, their measuring instinct is sparked and their competitive spirit ignited. Keeping close track of their work tells them that they are important and their work is important. The process motivates them to perform because they want to get credit, score points, earn more of whatever there is to earn.

Negotiate rewards in small increments

When that millennial knocks on your office door and asks if you have a minute to discuss their special need or want, realize that this might just be the key to driving this employee’s performance to a whole new level, or at least the key to getting more work out of them better and faster for the short term. The best approach is to negotiate these special rewards in very small increments. You want to be able to say, “I’ll do that for you tomorrow, if you do X for me today.” Work a particularly undesirable shift? Work longer hours? Work with a difficult team? Do some heavy lifting? Work in some out-of-the-way location? Clean up some unpleasant mess? Then deliver the reward in question as soon as you possibly can. Immediate rewards are much more effective with millennials because they provide a greater sense of control and a higher level of reinforcement. Millennials are likely to remember the precise details and context of the performance and are, therefore, more likely to make the connection the next time the desired performance is called for. Plus, they won’t spend time wondering if their performance has been noted and appreciated,

and they will therefore be less likely to lose the momentum generated by their short-term success.

Conclusion

Does this approach mean that, when it comes to millennials, everything must be open to negotiation? No! You should be rock solid on your basic standards and requirements. What is not negotiable? What is essential? What is not acceptable?

That’s your starting point. From there, take control of the ongoing negotiation and drive millennials’ engagement, performance, and retention by helping them earn those special rewards they want so much, one day at a time. In the process, you’ll get so much more, and better, and faster work out of them, one day at a time.

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