

## Law Firm Leadership: Managing Millennials

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By Mark Beese

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One of the most frequent questions I receive from law firm leaders today is "how should I manage this new generation?"

The Millennial Generation (born from 1981-2000) have been entering the workforce for more than a decade now. Baby Boomer and Generation X leaders are sometimes perplexed with this tech-savvy, multi-tasking and ambitious group of professionals.

### Who are the Millennials?

The Millennial Generation are said to be "trophy kids" raised by "helicopter parents." Their parents — often Generation Xers who grew up as "latchkey kids" with two working parents or a single working parent — tend to compensate for their lack of available parents by becoming very involved in their child's activities. Millennials are used to having a parent "helicopter" in to save the day, whether it is forgetting their lunch at school or, as I have heard, appearing alongside their child at their first job interview.

Afraid of communicating a negative self-image, parents of Millennials made sure that everyone is a winner in childhood competitions, so everyone gets a trophy in youth sports and activities. This is the "E" generation — a generation with high expectations of themselves and their workplace; a generation that feels entitled to a wide range of benefits from society and a generation that is highly enthusiastic about work and life.

For Millennials, work is not a place to go; rather it is a thing to do (and something that can be done anywhere, from home to Starbucks to the office). More than other generations, they will surf jobs to be open to new opportunities. In general, they have a distaste for menial work and red tape. While they crave feedback, they have difficulties with conflict and negative feedback. "Paying your dues" is something your grandfather did at work, and is not for them. One HR manager told me: "Some Millennials seem to want to fit their work around their personal life, and not the other way around."

Despite these negative stereotypes, Millennials have a lot to offer their employers. In school, they were subjected to years of group projects, resulting in better teamwork and collaboration skills than prior generations. They are highly networked, skilled at using social and virtual networks to accomplish goals. They are optimistic about the future. They want to save the world and focus their altruism through volunteerism, *pro bono* work and philanthropy.

Perhaps the most vexing characteristic of this generation to law firm leaders is their attitudes and behaviors at work. To some Baby Boomer and Gen X managers, Millennials have appeared unengaged with work, aloof and entitled. These issues often arise around the issue of work/life balance. Millennials are perceived by Baby Boomers (who are sometimes seen as workaholics) and Gen Xers (who felt like they had to work hard to compete with Boomers) managers as wanting too much life balance and not enough work.

## How to Manage Millennials

The goal in managing Millennials is to help them find the balance they seek while getting work done (and done well). Here are some tips on managing Millennials:

- 1. Be the leader.** Have a clear vision of the future for your team. Clearly communicate expectations to every team member. Give very specific direction, especially for new team members. Focus on encouraging positive behavior and attitudes. Don't forget your role as a mentor.
- 2. Give meaning to work.** Demonstrate how work makes a difference to clients, the firm and the community. Communicate the *why*, not just the *how*. Find ways for your team to give back, including group volunteer or *pro bono* projects.
- 3. Give feedback.** Develop a team culture where constructive feedback among all team members is the norm. Don't wait until the annual review to give feedback. Integrate feedback into your daily management routine.
- 4. Share power.** Respect their ideas and contribution. Find ways to give them a say in decisions and access to management without abdicating your role as leader. Focus on participatory leadership without making it a democracy.
- 5. Provide a clear path for advancement.** Provide options to advance in the department. Illustrate a career path. Promote from within as much as possible. Support learning opportunities, including LMA and industry conference participation. Open the doors for experiential and on-the-job training in other disciplines.
- 6. Reward and encourage.** Understand what motivates each individual team member and find ways to reward her or his effort and results with personalized rewards. Focus on performance-based incentives such as time off, sports or concert tickets, additional training or conference attendance. Reward performance publicly and with fairness. How you reward people should reflect the values of the team and firm.
- 7. Be flexible.** Understand that how the world works is changing and be open to flexible work arrangements. Focus on the quality and completion of projects, not location. Understanding that face-to-face time is important in many jobs, be clear with team members what is negotiable and what is not regarding work location.
- 8. Encourage team work.** Millennials will naturally want to work in small groups. Communicate that it is OK to work in groups, with certain parameters, such as deadlines, work quality and accountability. Be clear with the limits you set. Find a conference room or other shared space reserved for team work. Track contribution to team work and give feedback to both under contributors and over contributors.
- 9. Create community.** Millennials look to work as a social outlet. Find time and ways for team members to get to know each other on a personal level. Bring back the monthly team lunches, go bowling or skiing together, take the team to happy hour to celebrate a team success. Have fun.
- 10. Leverage their strengths.** Look to the Millennials on your team to tackle technology-oriented projects such as coaching lawyers on how to use LinkedIn or Twitter. Let them use their extensive network to build relationships with peers in client industry associations. Plug into their altruistic nature to lead firm volunteer and *pro bono* efforts.

For Millennials who want to succeed in a Boomer and X'er dominated work place, consider this advice:

**1. Learn the language of success.** Understand the "optics" of your behavior, including use of smartphones, how you dress, when you arrive and leave work. Showing old fashioned manners, listening carefully and being grateful will earn points with Boomers.

**2. Use your strengths.** Find ways to leverage technology to do your job more effectively and efficiently. Be a leader in your firm and the community.

**3. Build your network.** Tap into your network to make introductions to others for business development.

**4. Show initiative and autonomy.** Most jobs don't have a definitive checklist or path to get the "A." It is better to try and fail (and learn from your mistakes) than not to take any action at all. Communicate often and ask questions.

**5. Realize that constructive feedback is a gift.** Welcome feedback to improve your performance and career options. Don't take it personally.

Whenever a new generation enters the workplace, a shift occurs. How people get work done changes. The entrance of this generation will be no different. How law firm leaders manage these enthusiastic, optimistic and ambitious employees will determine whether their teams succeed.

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Mark Beese is President of Leadership for Lawyers, LLC. He helps lawyers and law firm leaders become more effective leaders and business developers through consultation, training and coaching. Mark may be reached at [mark@leadershipforlawyers.com](mailto:mark@leadershipforlawyers.com). Originally published in ALM's *Marketing the Law Firm Newsletter*, July 2012. [www.leadershipforlawyers.com](http://www.leadershipforlawyers.com).