

THE MERGING OF GEN X AND MILLENNIAL CULTURES IN THE WORKPLACE

There are actually four generations represented in today's workplace: Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, who have taken over many senior leadership roles, Millennials, whose younger members will be the next generation of managers, and Gen Z, who is just entering.

Having said that, Gen X and Millennials are the two biggest generations in the workplace right now. What can they teach each other to capitalize on their collective strengths?

A common misconception is that Millennials want it all—the power, the title, the high salary—right now. They frequently take opportunity after opportunity and move from company to company, hoping to shortcut this process. Perhaps this misconception stems from the fact that they are anxious about the future—they have more debt and a higher cost of living than their parents did at the same age. They are also looking for a more satisfying position: If they are going to get paid less, shouldn't they at least be happy in the job?

Perhaps job hopping *will* bring a higher return in the short run—but what that doesn't bring in the long-run is credibility.

Credibility comes from two things:

1. Repeatedly taking on progressively harder assignments or projects and creating a track record of success over time
2. Using emotional intelligence when dealing with people.

Why is Gen X in a unique position to help guide younger Millennials in gaining credibility?

While Boomers are still in the workforce, and are in a good position to mentor, they are also much older than Millennials and have a harder time understanding their world view. Boomers did not, for most of their work life, use computers. They did not communicate or make decisions as rapidly as today. They had a career ladder to climb, and climb it they did. They also tended to stay at organizations much longer.

This is not the case with Millennials, who communicate almost effortlessly with multiple people using multiple outlets, have not found any career ladder to climb, and have a much higher risk tolerance than Boomers. They tend to give their loyalty to organizations that nurture their growth and career advancement, rather than those that just offer them a job.

So, while Boomers would likely be a great resource, it would be a more difficult chasm to cross for both groups.

In contrast, Gen X did come into the workforce with desktop computers. They found a ladder with missing rungs and have had to adapt constantly over the last 20 years—many times moving laterally to find more meaningful work. They value communication and even social media almost as much as Millennials do. They also highly value individual achievement and can understand Millennials' desire for personal and professional growth opportunities. And 62 percent of Gen Xers want to be mentors, which is more than any other generation. They are at the age and have the experience level that puts them in demand, so this would be a great opportunity for both groups.

What Is the Culture That Gen X Can Share?

Gen X brings a culture of quality, work ethic, and reciprocal relationships, in which the organization and the employee work together to achieve a common goal. Through mentoring, Gen X can help Millennials learn crucial people skills—such as empathy, adaptability, group dynamics, employee motivation, communication styles, and relationship building—as well as management and leadership styles. They can therefore increase the odds that younger Millennials will be successful in a future management or leadership role.

Gen X can also share systems thinking. Organizations are interconnected systems full of objectives and targets that sometimes conflict. Any decision one department makes generally will have consequences for many other departments—and this should be taken into account before making unilateral changes. Gen Xers can show new Millennial managers that organizational goals will not be easily solved by pursuing motivations that served them in the past as individual contributors. As a leader, you have to consider what is best for the team.

This isn't to say that Millennials aren't collaborative—just the opposite. They are used to working in teams and coming up with innovative ideas. However, when a manager is presented with departmental goals that must align with organizational goals, it is easy to forget that those decisions will affect other departments. Most organizational structures do not make teams out of managers, nor do managers meet to discuss how decisions will affect other departments. This is a facet of management that requires influence, relationships, and emotional intelligence to navigate—something that a Gen Xer who has been doing this for several years can share with a new Millennial manager.

What Is the Culture That Millennials Can Share?

Millennials are technological natives with a passion for learning. They have fresh ideas that come from collaboration, and are less proprietary with those ideas. They are authentic—and authenticity breeds trust. They also care about the environment and other people, which is one of the best ways to build a successful business.

Built into this culture is a higher tolerance for risk that allows them to try new things with fewer reservations. In addition, they are not afraid to fail. In fact, this generation understands innately that to fail is a prerequisite for success. They will give it their all, and if they are not successful, they will keep trying until they get it right. Lastly, with a clear direction and deadline, Millennials will turn in a very astute and thorough assignment in no time flat.

This culture is just what Gen Xers need at this stage of their career—a renewed passion to learn and grow, take more risk, collaborate and be authentic, and see success as more than just a personal phenomenon. Gen Xers should take a page from the Millennial handbook and learn something new, get a certification, take on a new project, and even try a new career, industry, or company.

How Can These Two Groups Share a Culture?

It is up to Gen Xers to realize the path we are all going down together, and to bring these two groups together to learn from each other. It needs to be a reciprocal relationship—a mutual culture sharing, if you will.

There are many things that Gen Xers and Millennials share already. For instance, Gen Xers like to make quick, decisive decisions. And Millennials love when their manager lets them run with a project. Both groups have also adopted technology—Gen Xers out of practicality, if not love, and Millennials as just the natural order of things. This makes it possible for these two groups to share a good connection to drive the success of the organization. They also highly prize individual contribution to the organization, are ambitious and adaptive, and put a high priority on work-life balance.

So, what can each bring to the other?

A Gen Xer can:

1. Find and mentor a promising Millennial, and really impart the knowledge, judgment, and understanding they've gained.
2. Delegate and let them run with new projects. Teach them to collaborate, but not confer for hours when a decision must be made. The next generation of leaders needs to be more autonomous and look less to others for guidance.
3. Begin to take the opportunity immediately to learn something new, especially related to technology.
4. Begin to take more risk in decisions to gain new work experiences.
5. Listen to Millennials and implement some of their new (possibly risky) ideas or ways of doing things.

Millennials can:

1. Teach a Gen Xer some new technology and ways of working.

2. Encourage a Gen Xer to try new ways to approach problems by making suggestions in meetings. However, they should be prepared to back up suggestions with solid reasons or data, which will help them to gain credibility as well.
3. Spend time with a Gen Xer and observe how they navigate the organization's political climate, how they work with and influence other managers or leaders, how they communicate up and down, and so on.
4. Take on a critical project. This will show everyone concerned that they are interested in helping the organization and, if they complete the project successfully, will position them as a person who gets things done. That is reputation gold.
5. Spend some time learning about emotional intelligence. Learn from a Gen Xer, or study about it and practice it in the workplace. This topic cannot be overrated. People drive the success (or failure) of every organization, and this is one of the key skills of every true leader.

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