Millennial Leaders: Myths and Reality

What’s the generational make-up in today’s workforce?

As of last year, Millennials became the largest group in the labor force, with 53.5 million compared to 52.7 million Gen Xers and 44.6 million Boomers (PewResearchCenter, 2015). And, Millennials aren’t necessarily the “young kids” at work, as many currently hold managerial and Executive leadership roles. Millennials are the most racially diverse generation, technology is fully integrated in their lives, and they have invested in their education more than any other generation (The Council of Economic Advisors, 2014).

Other characteristics and trends of this generational group have been identified, but numerous misnomers float around on the Web, in the media, in company practices, and in employees’ stereotypes about each other. What are the genuine differences of Millennial leaders and what are misconceptions that have side-tracked best practices in leader selection, training, and development?

MYTHS

MYTH: Millennials have BAD WORK ATTITUDES.

Actually, despite the bad reputation that Millennials get regarding their attitudes in the workplace, there is little scientific evidence to support this. Millennials are as satisfied with work, consider it as central to their lives, and engage in a similar amount of altruistic behaviors as other generations (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010).

MYTH: Millennials have POOR WORK ETHIC.

It’s easy for each generation to judge and criticize the next. “Those young kids – they don’t even know what hard work is.” In reality, Millennials are not deteriorating in terms of work ethic, as many sources suggest. There simply isn’t the scientific data to support this (Deal et al., 2010). All people, regardless of generation, are working more hours today than they have in the past. Furthermore, job values are essentially the same across generations. Research shows that Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers EQUALLY VALUE hard work, the centrality of work in their lives, morality/ethics, efficiently using time self-reliance, delay of gratification, and intrinsic job features. Differences between the generations are so small that they aren’t meaningful (Real, Mitnick, & Maloney, 2010).

MYTH: Millennials want more MEANING in their work.

Millennials do want meaning in their work but emphasizing this as a difference between generations simply isn’t true. Lots of scientific evidence shows that not only Millennials want meaningfulness in their work; all employees, of every generation, value and search for meaning, challenge, and development in work (Twenge, 2010).
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**MYTH:** Millennials want more **DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES** than other generations.

*People* have differences in personality. This isn’t a generational phenomenon, but something that varies much more widely across all people. To explore the role of leader personality across generations, we at Pinsight compared the personality profiles of over 300 managers, mid-level, and Executive-level leaders globally. Personality is important because it lends to one’s natural leadership tendencies and motivation to enact specific leadership skills (Bartram, 2005). Leaders were compared on these specific personality traits, each of which are related to important leadership skills:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resilient</td>
<td>Resilient leaders persist to overcome obstacles, remain positive and confident. They are predictable and manage emotions well.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organized</td>
<td>Organized leaders plan well, follow rules, and deliver on time. They enjoy creating structures and processes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curious</td>
<td>Curious leaders are strong strategists and visionaries who promote innovation and change. They enjoy solving complex problems and strategizing different business scenarios.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>Ambitious leaders make determined decisions and set stretch goals that they generally achieve. They are competitive and motivated by status.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>Outgoing leaders are charismatic, build rapport quickly and communicate well. They enjoy teamwork and networking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Caring leaders value cooperation and getting along with their teams. They intuitively understand others’ needs and readily provide support.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Agility</td>
<td>Learning Agility refers to a person’s desire to learn, as well as their ability to learn and apply the new information/skill to novel situations. Naturally, learning agility is significantly related to a leader’s ability to perform and develop (Conner, 2012).</td>
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As it turns out, among Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers who work in managerial roles, there are no significant or meaningful differences in their personality traits. This means that Millennial managers are just as organized, ambitious, resilient, outgoing, caring, and curious as their Gen X and Boomer manager colleagues. The same is true among mid-level leaders – Millennials show similar patterns in personality as both Gen X leaders and Boomers, as seen in the Figure below. Based on personality, Millennials are at no advantage or disadvantage to be successful in leading, motivating, and influencing others at work. Based on our data (and others’ findings as well, e.g., Deal et al., 2010; Real et al., 2010), this holds true even for Executive-level leaders; there are no significant differences in personality among the generations.
Mid-Level Leader Personality Across Generations

Personal differences and differences in the context of the workplace are far more influential than pure generational differences (Deal et al., 2010). For example, leader differences are more accurately attributed to experience, level, or age than generation. Reading too much into a small difference is a waste of time, money, and energy that could be better spent elsewhere.

What does all this mean? Millennials are not inherently deficient and in fact, they are just as likely as Gen Xers and Boomers to have innate personal tendencies that make them effective leaders.

So what do we know about Millennial leaders?

TRUTHS

TRUTH: Millennials are familiar and comfortable with TECHNOLOGY.

Technology is such an ingrained part of Millennials' lives that they have been called 'digital natives' (PewResearchCenter, 2016). Different from other generations, Millennials have grown up with technology rather adapting to it. They consistently show high participation online and in social media. They have greater cell phone usage than any other generation. Also more than any other generation, Millennials feel that technology makes life easier as opposed to more complicated. If organizations want to attract, recruit, and develop Millennials, technology solutions are useful and important.
TRUTH: VALUES are especially important to Millennials.

Up to 56% of Millennials have ruled out ever working for a company because of the company’s values (Deloitte, 2016). About half have refused a specific project or task at work because it conflicts with personal values. Above impact on clients, personal goals, meeting organizational targets, minimizing risk, or impact on colleagues, personal values were rated the largest influence on decision-making at work. Satisfied values: Millennials and organizations agree that efficiency, long-term success, continuous improvement, and quality products are important. Unsatisfied values: Millennials also see providing good income, being a great place to work, improving employee skills, making a difference in others’ lives, and generating good jobs as important purposes of organizations but that aren’t currently being met by organizations.

Millennials strongly value and pursue education. Of all Millennials who are of college age or older, 1/3 have a 4-year college degree or higher, which is more than any other generation (PewResearchCenter, 2016).

Millennials value equality in men and women. The gender gap is closing and is perceived as more equal than ever before. Millennials (men and women) are seeing greater equity in pay than other generations and as of 2012, 15% of women worked managerial roles, compared with 17% of men (PewResearchCenter, 2016). Among Millennials, 61% of women and 70% of men say they would like to be boss or a top manager someday.

What are the most important values a business should follow if it is to have long-term success? (Deloitte, 2016)

- Good product and adaptability: 7%
- Profit-focused values: 2%
- Employee satisfaction, loyalty, fair treatment: 26%
- Ethics, trust, integrity, honesty: 25%
- Customer care: 19%
- Quality and reliability: 13%
- Environmental impact and social responsibility: 8%
TRUTH: Millennials have the same POTENTIAL FOR LEADERSHIP as Gen Xers and Boomers.

Based on accumulated evidence, our data from hundreds of simulation-based assessments shows that Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers demonstrate similar levels of manager, mid-level, and Executive-level leadership skills (0 = no skill shown, 1 = large skill deficiency, 2 = skill proficiency, 3 = skill strength). The differences among the generations are so slight that they are not meaningful. Generation does not influence one’s potential for leadership effectiveness, as depicted in the figures below.
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Manager Leadership Skills Across Generations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boomer</th>
<th>Gen Xers</th>
<th>Millennial</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage Risk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Strategic Priorities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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How to Engage Millennial Leaders?

**Fit**
- Identify and hire Millennials who have values shared by the organization.
- Select and train leaders to achieve organizational strategies.

**Support Career and Personal Aspirations**
- Offer mentoring.
- 63% of Millennials say their leadership skills are not adequately being developed (Deloitte, 2016)
- More than two-thirds (68.5%) of Millennials expect to be promoted within the first 18 months in their first job (Ng et al., 2010).

**Focus on individual Needs**
- Create a sense of purpose, variety of experiences, professional development, and recognition (Deloitte, 2016).
- Important factors for employment decisions: opportunities for advancement, good people to work with, good people to report to, good training and development opportunities (Ng et al., 2010).
- Employees are more loyal when they receive training, feel supported in their aspirations to pursue leader roles, when they aren’t overlooked for leadership positions, and when skills are being developed (Deloitte, 2016).
References


