

Quick! How do I deal with a multigenerational workforce?

Elizabeth Martin Savino

Do you sometimes feel like you are on a carousel that is set to warp speed? Do you question your decision-making ability because of the speed at which you are required to react? Are you juggling so much information in your head that you forget what task you are working on as you are working on it? E-mail, phone (both cell and office), instant messages and social media accounts are constantly interrupting and demanding your attention.

Life has become so chaotic and fast-paced that we have even truncated our language by using a myriad of acronyms, emojis and text messages. Google Maps has even devised a function that finds you the shortest distance between two points – because, heaven knows, two minutes may make a difference! We all feel that we have to find the best, shortest and the most efficient way to our destination point – both literally and figuratively. We have become a nation of “short cutters”. And to make decision-making simpler, we tend to make generalizations so that we can get to the endpoint faster.

Nowhere is this more evident than when we speak about the characteristics of our different employment cohorts. From “the Greatest Generation” to the Millennials, we clump these employees into behavior types:

Millennials need instant gratifications, GenXers are skeptical, Baby Boomers are optimistic and those from the Greatest Generation, also known as Traditionalists, are loyal. We make broad statements like these to make management easier.

Well guess what? It is all nonsense. Show me a millennial who needs instant gratification, and I will show you ten who are working in third-world countries where positive outcomes are measured in decades. Show me a loyal Traditionalist, and I will show you ten more who question authority and job hop.

Managing increasingly diverse employees is no simple feat. When trying to find a management style that works with the diverse preferences of your workforce, it is natural to encounter some bumps in the road. Here are a few best practices to keep in mind to help you maintain harmony and to keep your team working productively:

Get to know the individual

Making generalizations about people never works. If you want to get the most out of your employees, you need to look at them as individuals, not as “types”. Get to know them and figure out what motivates them, what inspires them and what you can do to help them grow. In turn, let them satisfy their curiosity about you, their manager,

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and allow them to get to know you. (Hmmm this is starting to take time right?)

Avoid generalizations . . . but

Remember, Millennials all grew up with technology. They *expect* that your company will use up-to-date (if not up-to-the-minute) technology for communication and that there will be an IT-support group to assist with tech issues. They have also grown up in a world where information can be acquired at “warp speed”. So, while you may think they are impatient, they may wonder what is taking you so long to respond. Luckily, many of them are also living at home[1] with their parents – so they are clearly aware of the “shortcomings” of an older generation by virtue of their own living arrangements.

Encourage diversity and reward individuals accordingly

Once you figure out the individual, the next step is to create teams where each member is valued for their ideas. Diverse groups (of all types of backgrounds – including age) generate the most creative ideas. The real key to managing a multi-generational, diverse team is to make sure that they feel safe in sharing, that they have a sense of belonging[2] and that they are confident that they will not feel embarrassed in front of the team. If you are creating an environment like that, then you are managing your team well.

If you remember that a team is made of unique individuals, you will

quickly realize that what might motivate one person, may be a real turnoff for someone else. This might cause some confusion amongst team members when a millennial is rewarded with a free gym membership for a month and a baby boomer is allowed to work a reduced schedule. This brings me to my next helpful hint [. . .].

Communicate!

Every member of your team needs to know what is happening. Uncertainty in the workplace is the surest way to create fear. So, you need to make sure you are in constant communication with them. While you may feel pretty clever assuming that you can text your Millennials[3] and be done with it, please go back to my introduction. Figure out what works best for the individual.

And, encourage communication among your team members. Make sure you provide opportunities for them to talk about their lives and goals with each other. We have a team meeting each month when one person brings in breakfast for everyone else. The meeting does not start until everyone has a heaping plate, the compliments are given and non-work news is shared. The meal, the chatting and the relaxed atmosphere adds to the sense of “family” and belonging.

The choice is yours. If you prefer to take shortcuts and you like the wind whipping through your hair as you balance yourself on that carousel, by all means, continue to make assumptions about your workforce. I

would like to suggest, however, that you step off that merry-go-round and take a good look at the individuals on your team. Talk to them, listen to what they have to say and make sure that they are working in an environment where they can thrive and are rewarded in ways that are meaningful to them as individuals. It may take a little time, but it is time worth taking. Everyone on your team, including you, will benefit!

Notes

1. In 2014, for the first time in more than 130 years, adults ages 18 to 34 were slightly more likely to be living in their parents' home than they were to be living with a spouse or partner in their own household. Source: Pew Research Center tabulations.
2. “Diversity Efforts fall short unless employees feel that they belong.” Pat Wadors – Harvard Business Review, August 10, 2016.
3. Sending and receiving text messages is the most prevalent form of communication for Americans younger than 50. More than two-thirds of 18- to 29-year-olds say they sent and received text messages “a lot” the previous day, as did nearly half of Americans between 30 and 49. Source: The New Era of communication among Americans – by Frank Newport, Gallup.com November 10, 2014.

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