Lead or watch them leave:

Practical Strategies for Leading Millenials

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Leading the leaders of the future

Engaging, retaining, and subsequently leading the workforce born from 1980 to 1995, better known as Millennials or Generation Y, is one of today's greatest challenges for leaders. You've heard the stereotypes that Millennials are lazy, selfish and entitled. And many leaders not only question how this workforce will become the next generation of leaders, they question how they can be effectively led today.

While these concerns are alive and well, the more pressing fact is that Millennials have evolved from a small cohort (albeit of loud voices), to the largest portion of the workforce at 37%, with Generation X at 31% and the Baby Boomers at 30%[1]. Furthermore, Millennials have advanced from new grads in entry-level roles to first- and mid-level managers, becoming critical contributors and assets in the leadership pipeline[2].

Research continues to demonstrate that Millennials have job-hopping thoughts and behaviours[3]. This has branded them as disloyal and a perpetual retention risk. Millennials also seek flexibility in both the 'what' and 'how' of their work, challenging the conventional Monday to Friday, 9-to-5 thinking that has historically shaped organizations. Their desire for unconstrained flexibility paired with their need to control their own destiny has fueled their interest in entrepreneurship and contract work. One study, for example, found that 79% of Millennials are open to working for themselves[4].

As if there weren't enough challenges to keep leaders awake at night, Millennials have quietly become the backbone of organizations and are now critical to organizational success – a group that is smarter, faster, more vocal, and less loyal than any workforce the workplace has ever seen. Ineffectively leading Millennials now extends well beyond the issues of recruiting the best new graduates and then experiencing high turnover in entry-level roles. Organizations and leaders who fail to successfully lead Millennials today will struggle to attract, engage and retain their core workforce. And that will substantially impact their business.

While much of the expert and non-expert commentary furthers negative Millennial stereotypes, this study aimed to uncover pragmatic solutions that leaders can apply within their organizations and their teams to best lead, engage and retain Millennial talent.

Has worked in current role:

- LESS THAN 6 MONTHS (18%)
- 7-12 MONTHS (13%)
- 1-2 YEARS (29%)
- 2-3 YEARS (13%)
- 3+ YEARS (27%)
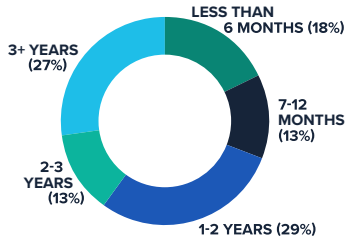
About this survey and the Millennials who responded

During a five-week period in fall 2016, more than 300 Millennials from across Canada responded to a web-based survey focusing on their experiences with their manager and workplaces. The survey targeted those currently working in Canada. The majority of respondents resided in Ontario (63%), followed by Alberta (13%) and British Columbia (13%). They represented all Millennial birth years from 1980 through 1995. Information was also collected on their education and how long they have worked in their current role.
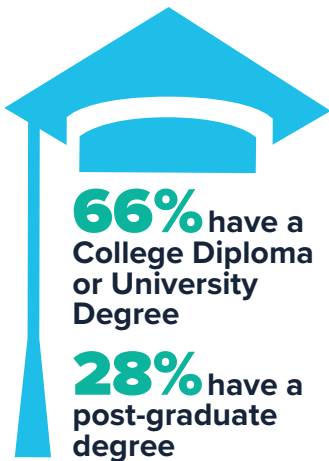
Millennials are well-educated and their work roles match their qualifications

Respondents were first asked how their jobs related to their education. On average, participants selected a score of 6.64 on a 1 to 10 scale, with 62% of participants selecting 7/10 or higher. The survey next asked how well their skills and experiences matched their current roles. Seventy-Six Percent (76%) selected 7/10 or higher, with an average of 7.56 on a scale from 1 to 10. These results indicate that a majority of Millennials see their education, skills and experiences as aligned with and contributing to their current job. This is likely linked to the highly educated nature of the respondents.

Is your job related to what you studied in school?

1
Not
Related

6.64

10
Directly
Related

How well-matched are your skills and experiences with your current role?

1
Not
Matched

7.56

10
Strongly
Matched

66% have a College Diploma or University Degree

28% have a post-graduate degree

Millennials don't meet with their managers about their learning and careers often enough

The following two questions investigated learning, growth and career support:

- How often are you having learning and/or career conversations with your Manager?
- Does the frequency of these conversations meet your expectations?

For frequency of conversations, the responses revealed an average of 4.67 out of 10, with one-third (33%) of respondents selecting 7/10 or higher. These results indicate that the frequency of learning and career conversations are occurring below the mid-point of the scale, which presumably is less than once a month.

While the specific frequency of these meetings may be difficult to pinpoint, the more telling question was about expectations. Respondents selected an average of 5.54 out of 10, with 45% selecting 7/10 or higher for the frequency of these conversations meeting expectations. Since the average is only slightly above the mid-point of the scale, the results indicate that Millennials crave more conversations with their managers about their learning and careers.

How often are you having learning and/or career conversations with your Manager?

1
Rarely
(Annually)

4.67

10
Often
(Weekly)

Does the frequency of these conversations meet your expectations?

1
Definitely
Not

5.54

10
Absolutely
Yes

Five major themes about leadership emerged from the survey

Given the adage of '*People join companies and leave managers*', the following open-ended questions sought to determine how leaders might change and adapt their leadership to more effectively lead millennials.

- In order to keep you from leaving, what's one thing your Manager:
    - Should do more of
    - Should do less of
    - Should do differently

- What's the one thing you wish your Manager better understood about you?

These questions generated a rich array of comments and feedback on Millennial wants, needs and overall experiences. There were five major themes about what Millennials expect of their leaders:

1. Understand me as a person, not as a stereotype

No one wants to think of themselves as a stereotype, and not all Millennials fit these typecasts. Respondents said they wanted their manager to get to know them as people – their wants, needs, interests, motivations, and so on. This means the traditional approach of maintaining a professional distance between manager and employee is ineffective. It also mirrors research indicating that Millennials seek a manager to mentor, coach and befriend them[5].

As expected, the topic of work-life balance and flexibility also emerged. Comments included "*I am a parent first*", or "*Work is not my life*", indicating that Millennials want leaders who understand and respect this notion.

Practical Leadership Strategies

Getting to know Millennials as individuals means taking a genuine interest. Leaders should consistently ask questions that help to build rapport with Millennials and provide insight into their motivations and interests. While this may be uncomfortable for some leaders, they should start new conversations with deeper, more probing questions such as '*What part of your job do you most enjoy most (and why)?*', while listening closely and reciprocating where appropriate.

Millennials are infamous for their 'live to work' (versus 'work to live') motto. Balance and flexibility are important to them. Leaders can foster trust and commitment by gaining an understanding of and respecting their personal interests and responsibilities. It's also important to remain as flexible as possible when personal and professional obligations collide.

Millennials seek leaders who not only understand, but who also believe in balance and flexibility for themselves. As such, leaders need to model positive behaviour, such as sending all non-urgent communication during working hours, using allotted vacation time to 'shut off' and attending to mid-day family obligations as necessary.

I AM A PERSON, NOT A STEREOTYPE.

CARE about me as a person: uncover who I am and how I'm truly doing.
"(Understand) Why I come to work and how this role fits into my bigger game plan."

Take a GENUINE INTEREST: Discover my key motivations and interests.
"Check in. Just check in with me in a meaningful way."

I am more than my work: Value FLEXIBILITY and WORK-LIFE BALANCE.
"My life priority is not my work, but my family."

2. Trust in my abilities

Survey respondents felt poised to make further contributions and wanted their leaders to trust them. They sought autonomy and decision-making responsibility. And they clearly expressed frustration with the lack of opportunity to do more under their manager's leadership. For instance, participants strongly and negatively reacted to the concept of micromanagement, with the words *Micromanage*, *Micromanager*, and *Micromanaging* listed more times than any other words such as *development or feedback*.

Interestingly, the next word most often cited by respondents was '*Listen*'. Again, this highlights that Millennials seek the confidence of their superiors and want more opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions.

Practical Leadership Strategies

As Millennials gain skills and experience, leaders should focus on delegating non-critical decision-making to them. This involves communicating clear expectations and parameters. It also requires an openness to new perspectives and ways of working. As one respondent commented: '*I can and will always get things done. The outcomes will be met, the path might not be what folks are used to.*'

Most importantly, empowering others is about trust and the belief that Millennials can handle their job responsibilities. Leaders should remember that this same calibre of trust and belief was once placed in them, enabling advancement to their current role and responsibilities. Empowerment is especially important when a Millennial is new to a role. It's a time when leaders should invest more time sharing information and expectations. Leaders should also understand the probable, yet temporary declines in operational efficiency and/or effectiveness as a person learns, grows and gains experience in a new situation or role.

Millennials are accustomed to being part of decision-making conversations, having grown up selecting their extracurricular activities and family meals at restaurants. They have also been raised to challenge authority and the status quo. While many leaders view this behaviour as threatening and disrespectful, leaders should welcome input, feedback and even disagreement, especially since it drives innovation and creative problem-solving.

Leaders should make it clear as to where the responsibility resides – meaning that it is often the leader's job to make and own the decision, while also recognizing that their decisions may not always be popular with Millennials. In addition, there will be situations where Millennials may be unqualified or unprepared. In this case, leaders should clearly explain their thoughts and decisions, while working to prepare the Millennial for the next opportunity.

18%

**referred
to being
"micromanaged"**

LET ME SHOW YOU I CAN DO THIS.
LISTEN to my ideas and **TRUST** in my abilities.
  "I am capable of more than what my manager believes me to be."

INVOLVE me in decision-making.
  "I can deliver in any complex situation. Put me in those situations."

BE OPEN to new perspectives.
  "Welcome my unique thoughts instead of telling me what to do."

3. Help me grow and develop my talents

Millennials have experienced a life filled with continuous improvement and apply this mindset to their work experiences. Respondents shared the desire for focused time with their manager, not for traditional (although important) interactions like the assignment of tasks and follow-up. Rather, they are looking for more coaching, mentorship and career discussions. The comments were clear that one-off/informal conversations held limited value. Rather, Millennials want regularly scheduled meetings with their managers to work on their skill development. At these meeting, managers should share information to help them learn and ensure that their career goals, aspirations and opportunities are discussed.

Millennials also want to grow in their careers through new experiences and more responsibility. As a respondent commented: '*Allow me to explore new things and broaden my horizons and my work will get better.*' Lastly, Millennials expect feedback. They want encouragement and suggestions for improvement to further their career growth and development.

Practical Leadership Strategies

Organizations should invest in leadership development programs, including leadership coaching, to grow the necessary skills to successfully navigate current and future challenges. However, when training opportunities, orientation and on-boarding programs are limited and informal, an employee's best opportunity for formal learning is one-on-one time with his or her manager. Furthermore, although Millennials are tech-savvy, they yearn for actual face-time (not to be confused with Apple's Facetime) with their managers as opportunities to advance their learning and growth. Frequent, dedicated meetings, paired with deeper, more meaningful conversations, are critical. Since leaders are busy, these conversations should be scheduled, protected, and formalized to demonstrate leadership commitment. As one respondent commented: '*Be available to answer questions without feeling rushed or interrupted.*'

Within these meetings and elsewhere, leaders should mentor and coach Millennials by sharing relevant experiences and asking thought-provoking questions instead of quickly assigning direction and offering immediate solutions. For growth experiences, more of the same work or covering for an under-performing team member is not the answer. Leaders must offer new and higher level tasks and experiences that stretch the Millennial's current skillset.

Millennials want feedback to improve their performance. A busy travel schedule or an outdated annual performance appraisal process is no excuse for delaying news and important conversations. For example, leaders should quickly forward client feedback as
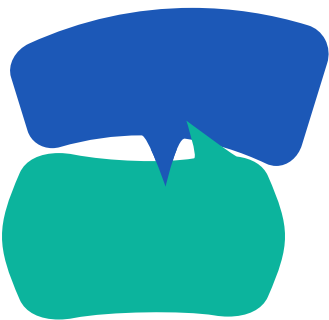
it's received or send a message before leaving a meeting informing their work had been mentioned. Leaders must have a real-time feedback mentality, leveraging and gaining comfort using different vehicles such as instant messaging and new, more efficient communication apps.

Equally important, leaders should highlight to Millennials that both positive and constructive feedback are part of the learning and growth process, always linking their comments with the importance of ongoing development.

I WANT TO LEARN AND DO MORE.

DEDICATE TIME for COACHING & MENTORSHIP: I learn through meaningful career conversations.
"Help me to advance in my career through mentorship."

Seek and offer CHALLENGING, QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES for growth.
"My commitment is directly influenced by my opportunities for learning/development."

Offer TIMELY FEEDBACK on my performance.
"I crave feedback and want to be successful."

4. Show me my work is appreciated. Encourage me.

Most people welcome recognition, but this survey underscored that Millennials look for positive feedback and appreciation about their achievements. What's more unique is that respondents also want to be recognized for their efforts, regardless of the outcome. This may be challenging for leaders to understand and accept, especially in results-driven environments.

Not surprisingly, participants especially want that recognition to come directly from their managers, who are most familiar with their work. A sample comment included 'I like to be recognized for the work I do'. Millennials want to be thanked for the work they complete, regardless if it is within or beyond the scope of their responsibilities.

Millennials are often viewed as the over-confident 'selfie' generation. Nevertheless, it's still important to balance criticism with compassion and encouragement. While Millennials want feedback on their performance, some still lack confidence and need support from their managers. As one respondent noted, 'Continue to reinforce that I am doing a good job, and believe in my abilities'.

Practical Leadership Strategies

Millennials grew up receiving accolades not only for their victories, but also for simply participating. And in a tech-based world that offers instant gratification, Millennials are used to immediate feedback and expect it from their leaders. Sometimes leaders downplay recognizing others, finding it easier to provide criticism or constructive feedback. Instead, leaders should focus on acknowledging strengths, contributions and outcomes, both in stand-alone messages and as lead-ins to more pointed performance feedback. Recognition does not have to be complex. Offering a genuine and timely thank you is a simple and powerful gesture.

However, it is important to understand how people prefer to be recognized. Showing appreciation is a strong motivator, especially when it's genuine. But, if appreciation is expressed ineffectively or not at all, it can be discouraging. As one respondent said: '*The more I am appreciated, the harder I work.*'

While Millennials are often stereotyped as exuding confidence, leaders should find opportunities to reassure them of their talents and contributions, both in conversation and through their actions. Like a good teacher, leaders need to evaluate individual potential and demonstrate confidence in the abilities of their Millennial employees. Communicating this confidence, following it up with support and the autonomy to work through issues, gives Millennials the encouragement they need to grow and achieve great results.

A THANK YOU GOES A LONG WAY.

RECOGNIZE and ENCOURAGE my efforts and achievements.
"Acknowledge my efforts to go above and beyond job expectations."

THANK ME for a job well done.
"A simple thank you from my manager goes a long way."

Balance COMPASSION with CRITICISM.
"Recognize achievements as much as opportunities."

5. Lead my team effectively
The final theme that emerged speaks to effective team leadership and positive team dynamics. The Millennials who responded to this survey specifically want their leaders to have a clear vision of where their team is going, what needs to be accomplished, and why their work is important or connected to the organization's larger strategy or cause.

However, Millennials also expect their leaders to communicate expectations about their individual roles and responsibilities as part of the overall plan to achieve the organization's vision. How work is organized and assigned, from both team and individual accountabilities, are also important.

In addition, respondents commented on the opportunity for team growth when leaders share their insights about the organization and its nuances. This could include clearly connecting the team's role in achieving the organization's vision and strategy. It could also include more informal knowledge about change strategies and culture.

Lastly, respondents seek and expect a collaborative and enjoyable environment that complements the work experience and that drives individual and team performance.

Practical Leadership Strategies
Since Millennials are used to access to information, leaders need to be as transparent as possible, taking the time to carefully explain all aspects of their work, from organizational vision and strategy to individual responsibilities. Some leaders have been managing people longer than Millennials have been in the workforce. As such, they have a great opportunity to share their knowledge and experiences of how to maneuver through organizational systems, processes and culture.

Millennials have high expectations for both their leader and work environment. Leaders must foster a positive atmosphere with productive working relationships, open communication and a sense of fun. This means carefully and intentionally investing in team dynamics, such as building trust through open communication and collaboration. It also means quickly identifying and resolving conflicts.

Balancing the need to achieve results, leaders should introduce moments of levity and socialization to keep the team both grounded and motivated. Good leaders embrace these opportunities, recognizing that fun and accomplishment not only co-exist, but contribute to each other.

I WANT GOOD LEADERSHIP.

Clarify the **VISION**, and share the **EXPECTATIONS**, **ACCOUNTABILITY** and **PLAN** to get us there.
"Provide more ownership and set clearer roles and responsibilities."

GROW & IMPROVE our team by **TEACHING** us about organizational subtleties.
"Take the time to actually explain the organization, processes, and day-to-day responsibilities."

Encourage **COLLABORATION & FUN** as part of achieving our goals.
"My job is not just a job. It's part of my life so it should be fun and engaging."

In Summary

Millennials are no longer entry-level new grads, but an integral part of the workforce. To effectively engage, retain and lead Millennials, leaders should:

- Start by getting to know their people. Actively take an interest in who they are, both professionally and personally.
- Demonstrate genuine care and respect by leveraging their interests and motivations.
- Involve and empower Millennials, while growing and developing their skills through focused and meaningful conversations and stretch opportunities.
- Acknowledge and encourage Millennials through feedback and recognition.
- Apply effective people leadership strategies, such as consistently communicating goals and expectations, monitoring and enabling individual and team performance, and integrating fun into a collegial atmosphere.

Above all, organizations and leaders must set aside popular and often negative rhetoric, instead choosing to believe in the full potential and capabilities of Millennials. Those who elect to lead and engage their Millennial workforce using the strategies listed above as an initial framework will be at a significant advantage in attracting and retaining the best talent to drive their business forward to success.

About Catylyst

Catylyst Leadership Development & Consulting partners with leaders to navigate the challenges of today, while preparing for the opportunities of tomorrow. Service offerings include Millennial Leadership, Leadership Development, and Executive and Leadership Coaching.

For more information on this report and Catylyst, visit www.catylystld.com/headspace or email info@catylystld.com.

Endnotes

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2. Jennifer Deal and Alec Levenson. *What Millennials Want From Work: How To Maximize Engagement In Today's Workforce.* (2016) McGraw-Hill.
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