

Putting Your Best Foot Forward:

The New Millennial Generation & Leadership

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Last November I was honored to present “Zap The Generational Gap” at the NSRA 2016 Annual Leadership Conference. The presentation addressed the challenges independent shoe store owners face when it comes to finding, hiring and training the new Millennium Generation – the 80 million people born between 1981 and 2002.

Before I began, Lenny Comeras of Easton Shoes in Columbus, Ohio told me, “It is a war out there. It is a challenge to find qualified people to hire. Companies like Nordstrom’s have the ‘pick of the litter’ when it comes to employees.” And he is correct: Finding quality employees can be a challenge.

Combine the shrinking labor market with retiring Baby Boomers, and today’s store owners are left feeling like their hands are tied. However, the influx of the Millennial Generation to the labor market represents an opportunity for store owners to discover young talent looking for a different type of leadership than can be found in conventional jobs.

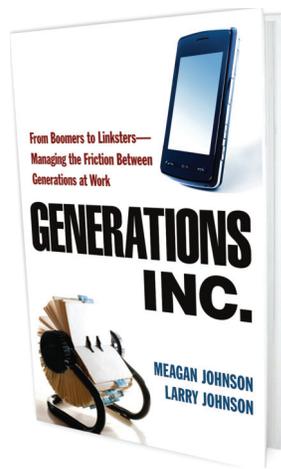
Defining “Leader”

What is the Millennial Generation looking for in a leader? Millennials don’t judge a leader in the traditional sense.

I am a Gen Xer, part of the group of people born between 1965 and 1980. When I first entered the corporate world, my leaders practiced a top-down approach. Their style was, to say the least, autocratic. They didn’t appreciate having their expertise questioned; they weren’t interested in any new, alternative ideas; and they definitely had zero interest in life outside of work.

Today, Millennials describe a good

leader as: *approachable, authentic and a team player*. According to The Millennial Leadership Study, Deloitte’s fourth annual Millennial Survey, “[G]reater than



65% of the Millennial Generation feels a good leader’s focus should be on interpersonal skills, strategic thinking and inspirational qualities versus financial results.” Moving forward, successful multi-generational leaders will be a hybrid: a coach, a mentor and a leader, all rolled into one.

Leading Millennials

So, what can you do today to lead the Millennial Generation?

The immediate answer is: Give them an opportunity to participate as soon as possible. And I do mean ASAP.

Baby Boomers brought teamwork and consensus-building into the family and encouraged their Millennial children to participate. In 2002, when the 20-somethings and early 30-somethings of today were in their early to late teens, they

influenced \$300 to \$400 billion of family spending. They influenced more than 80% of family apparel purchases and more than 50% of family car choices – and this was often before they could drive. So they’re comfortable having a say in decisions and how things are done.

As store owners, you must wear many hats. One minute you’re negotiating your lease and the next you’re a personnel manager, a buyer, the money person or a stocker. As adept as you may be at moving from one role to the next, it is important that you share the process with your Millennial protégés.

Jeff Greenberg of Lloyd’s Shoes in Carmel, California recently brought his daughter Tess into the business. Jeff told me it was paramount to her success to not only allow her to participate in the varied roles at the store, but to take ownership too.

As he put it, “The challenge is letting go of what you have done for many years, passing the responsibilities on to someone else and trusting their judgment. Someone younger may have a different work style or work ethic, but that does not mean his or her approach is wrong. Interestingly, I learned immediately she is much better at certain tasks than I am – discipline, for example. I am a softie when it comes to the employees requesting certain days off. Tess is more consistent, and even-handed.”

Know and Respect Them

As a leader, the more involved you get the Millennial Generation in projects, discussions or meetings, the better. Do not let your perception of the Millennials’ “greenness” keep you from

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allowing them to engage early on.

The Millennial generation has two significant suggestions for employers who want their best efforts and loyalty. The first is: **“Recognize my existence.”** The second is: **“Treat us like leaders, too.”**

The first suggestion applies less to task-fulfillment and more to life in general. According to LinkedIn, more than 55% of Millennials feel that having buddies at work increases happiness and 50% believe it improves motivation. Encourage those friendships. As a leader, it is not your job to be everyone's BFF (that's "Best Friend Forever," if you aren't into slang). As leaders of the Millennials, however, it will behoove us to demonstrate some interest in the lives of our young compatriots.

The second suggestion is also less about task-fulfillment, more about expectations. Millennials perceive themselves as leaders, and want their careers to include leadership roles. According to training company Virtuali, more than 70% of the Millennials already regard themselves as leaders, even if their job title does not reflect a leadership position.

Social media has given Millennials the voice and the ability to frequently take the initiative, lead change and get big results. Via social media, Millennials can fund a start-up, popularize a new shoe style or find a bone marrow match for a sick friend.

As leaders themselves, Millennials want to help others and make an impact. According to The Millennial Leadership Study, close to 50% of the Millennial Generation describe leadership as “empowering others to succeed” and greater than 60% want to imbue people with a “sense of purpose and excitement.”

How do you help Millennials further develop and nourish the leadership skills they already possess?

1. Give them a variety of opportunities within the organization. For example, Colorado Police Chief John Camper rotates his detectives and officers into different departments or positions. Some rotations are every few years; some rotations are as short as a few months.

2. Tell them about your past mistakes. Transparency is a vitally important trait to the Millennial Generation. (For more information, go to <http://meaganjohnson.com/failed-to-be-transparent>) Deloitte's global study found that the Millennial Generation feels “openness” is one of the top traits they look for in a leader.

Typical, Yet Rewarding

A shoe professional spends most of the day on her feet. She is running back and forth from the customer to the backroom, often several times, while balancing boxes. She is answering calls, tracking down missing orders and trying not to acciden-

What Retailers Say

When Meagan Johnson speaks to audiences, she takes time to ask their impressions. Regarding hiring Millennials, here's what retailers at two recent presentations told her:

“Social media has created more aware customers and employees. If they are using social media, something like Pinterest, I do not need to tell them booties are fashionable; they already know.

“[And] there have to be rewards to the job other than the paycheck. We want people to have fun. When I hear laughter on the floor, I know a good day is happening. If you can't have fun in a shoe store, you shouldn't be in the business.”

— Jeanette Riechers,
Owner, Cornblooms, Madison, Wisconsin

“My boss told me about a situation where she had made a mistake. I really value the fact my boss will share with me on a case-by-case basis her past successes and failures. Those discussions are more helpful, insightful and inspiring than any online-course.”

— Malika Coleman (Millennial),
Employee, Navy Federal Credit Union

tally sell a pair of mismatched shoes. She is educating customers, describing and explaining characteristics and features of shoes, and the materials from which they are made. She is dealing with people who are not always polite and gracious. Sometimes, she is not feeling at her best, because of lack of sleep, personal or family issues, or some other reason. Certainly, selling shoes can be challenging; equally certainly, it's not always easy. However, the shoe retailing industry can be fun. Many independent shoe store owners have left the industry only to return, because whatever they chose to try outside of the industry was “not as much fun.” Millennials want to know you find your business rewarding.

No matter where we fall on the generational time line, we all have a responsibility to be conscientious and fun leaders. The beauty of the Millennial Generation is its members want to learn from past stumbles, they tell us who they are and they truly want to help lead us all to a changed future. ■

Meagan Johnson is a generational expert and speaker, and co-author of the best-selling book, Generations Inc.: From Boomers to Linksters, Managing the Friction between Generations at Work. Also known as the Generational Humorist, Johnson has entertained and educated audiences around the globe. For more information, visit www.MeaganJohnson.com, call 1-800-759-4933 or email Meagan@MeaganJohnson.com.