

Managing the Millennials

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Image courtesy Microsoft Corporation.

Sociologists have for years studied the generational cycles that characterize human social behavior patterns. In the United States this pattern of observation is new and unique because the U.S. remains one of the few countries in the world that still views time as a linear progression of events rather than as a cyclical continuum. The Mayan *Pictun* (8,000 years), the Hebrew *Yom* (1,000 years), the lunar ecliptically-aligned Babylonian *Yuga* (12,000 years) and the

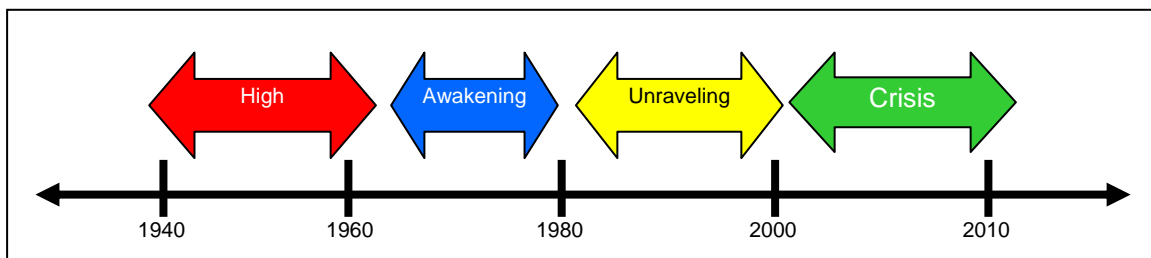
Buddhist *Kalpa* (4,320,000,000 years) are examples of recognized temporal periods

that regularly repeat (although how the Buddhists know that their Kalpa repeats its four billion-year cycle is beyond me).

The Generational Link

Behavioral sociologists have recently begun to study this phenomenon of repetition through their studies of human generations. Generations are defined as collections of people born over a single period of time who share a common place in history and a collective persona. Each generation lasts approximately two decades, after which it fades into the background as the next generation comes into its own.

There is discussion about whether generations guide societal direction or society guides the development of generations. Suffice it to say that the two influence each other. In fact, societies as a general rule pass through four behavioral phases. These phases are driven by a number of forces including changes in societal values, political power shifts, balances in social makeup and economic upturns or downturns.



The phases blend one into the next like the seasons of life, with each season lasting about 20 years. The first of these, by convention, is a social high, a time of growth and optimism during which business institutions grow stronger and the individual grows weaker as individuals place more trust in the infrastructure elements of society – banks, health care institutions, large

corporations. During this period a new civic structure takes root and flourishes as the strength of the previous “regime” declines. Most recently this took place during the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy presidencies in the U.S. During their tenure the country became powerful and confident, but also became highly conformist. At the same time a spiritual emptiness gripped the U.S., prompting follow-on generations to seek greater meaning in their lives.

The second recognized phase is a period of unrest that bubbles just below the surface, characterized by a serious probing of social mores. This period becomes loud and passionate, and, prompted by the aforementioned spiritual emptiness, sees repeated attacks on the existing social order as new values arise and begin to take effect. Most recently this phenomenon was seen during the Carter and Reagan presidencies, a time that saw such manifestations as the sometimes violent unrest of the 1960s all the way through the Reagan tax revolt. A certain “moral courage” came into play as the values of the past were openly rejected and a sense of personal liberation and a glimmering of individual power emerged.

The third social phase is characterized by distinct pessimism and a sense that things are “coming apart at the seams.” During this period individuals become much stronger and more influential elements of the social fabric, institutions weaken as they decline in the public trust, and the values of the inbound “regime” take root and push out the remaining incumbent values. The quest for meaning peaks during this period and a sense of moral restlessness grips the country. The controversial presidencies of the elder George Bush, of Bill Clinton and the beginnings of the younger George Bush fall into this category.

The final phase is a period of crisis and social emergency, a time of strong social upheaval that continues as the new social infrastructure takes effect. This is a time of secular unrest in the country; George Bush Junior is in the middle of this phase at the time of this writing as the country picks up the pieces from the devastation of 9/11 and the ensuing Iraq war.

It must be noted that these generational phases are not a U.S.-only phenomenon: they occur throughout the world, within all social strata, and while they vary somewhat from region to region, the basic characteristics are identical. In fact, sociologists have charted these trends as far back as the middle of the 15th century, and my own research has turned up remarkable parallels among societal groups in such diverse markets as Singapore, South Africa, Romania and Kansas.

And Today?

Today we find ourselves at the end of an inner-driven, introspective era. The narcissistic Baby Boomers, with their emphasis on accountability, wealth accumulation, ethical absolutism, and community values, left their mark on succeeding generations. Following the Boomers were the Gen-Xers, an alienated group of kids who felt abandoned by their dual-income parents (these are the so-called latchkey kids) and who make no excuses for the fact that they go after what they want, as hard as they can, because in their minds the world never gave them very much – they grew up in a bizarre modern version of a Dickens novel.

And now come the Millennials, sometimes erroneously called the Gen-Yers (wrong because ‘Y’ implies that they are an extension of the Gen-Xers – and they are decidedly *not*). They enter the fray with the belief that they are charged with cleaning up the mess left behind by the two preceding generations.

So What?

This is all very interesting, but what does it have to do with business? In fact, a lot, and it behooves corporate leaders to pay very close attention.

Over the decades the four generation types have repeated, each uncannily similar to same type that preceded it 80 years (or so) before. Sociologists have named them; between 1901 and 1924, for example, children were born that became the GI or Civic generation; Tom Brokaw calls them the “Greatest Generation.” From 1925 to 1942, the adaptive Silent Generation was born, followed by the idealistic Baby Boomers, born between 1943 and 1960. Finally, the cynical Gen-Xers arrived between 1961 and 1981. Those are the four cycles, and now they repeat with the arrival of the heroic Millennials, born between 1982 and 2004 (or so). The uncanny thing about them is that they are behaviorally identical to the Greatest Generation, with strong feelings about civic order, traditional values, family centrism, and dependence on reconstituted, trustworthy institutions.

A Tale of Three Generations

Each of these most recent generational groupings has definable characteristics that follow them throughout their lives. The Baby Boomers are ideological to a fault, highly judgmental, focused unwaveringly on values, and inordinately narcissistic. They have a love-hate relationship with authority of all kinds (think 1960s, Berkeley, Kent State, the Blue Meanies of Chicago). They are perfectionists by nature and somewhat spiritual, and are quite community oriented. They are also fairly optimistic and involved in life, concerning themselves with youth (their own as much as that of their children), health and wellness, and work. Work, in fact, is a dominant force in their lives; they often sacrifice far too much for the good of their employer as they seek meaning through wealth accumulation.

The Generation Xers are strikingly different from their Baby Boomer predecessors. They are skeptical and somewhat cynical, extraordinarily self-reliant, action-oriented and highly self-accountable. They are largely unimpressed with authority - a puzzlement to law enforcement officers - and have difficulty making long-term commitments, yet paradoxically they are family-oriented, diversity aware, risk-friendly, and focused on achieving results. They are also balanced in terms of managing their work and personal lives and extremely technically adept.

The Millennials, in turn, are as different from the Gen-Xers as the Gen-Xers are from the Boomers. Millennials are confident, highly team-oriented, and remarkably, refreshingly conventional. Unlike the Gen-Xers, it's OK to be smart, and *also* unlike the Gen-Xers, the Millennials actually *like* their parents. They tend to be strong achievers if they are properly motivated (more on that later), optimistic about all things, sociable, highly moral, and street smart. Finally, and interestingly, they are *absolutely oblivious* to authority. They are so morals-driven, so self-policing, that they just don't understand the need for outside authority in their lives. This, too, is a puzzlement to law enforcement, as much because of their obligation to enforce laws that the Millennials don't understand the need for as their need to understand the behavior and drivers of Millennial employees coming into law enforcement.

It's interesting to note that the Millennials are the first generation in the 54-year history of television that are watching *substantially* less of it than any previous generation, choosing to get their entertainment content elsewhere. This is a serious, vexing concern for television advertisers. Millennials are also the first generation born into a world that has *always* had the Internet/Web, and has *always* had cellular telephony. As a result their technology loyalties are quite different from those of preceding generations: more and more of them, for example, are choosing to use their mobile phone as their primary mode of communication, eschewing the perceived safe

harbor of 911 service and “carrier-class” voice quality in favor of the freedom of mobility and on-demand connectivity. Needless to say, this poses a substantial challenge for incumbent telephone companies that have invested untold billions of dollars into their in-place, wireline networks and now watch as their costs remain the same while revenues decline.

Millennials at Work

Role	Values	2004	2024
Corporate Leadership	Establishing Values	Baby Boomers	Generation-X
Corporate Energy	Applying Values	Generation-X	Millennials
Corporate Enthusiasm	Testing Values	Millennials	Millennials
Entry-Level	Learning Values	Millennials	???

Corporate employees tend to fall into four tiered roles as shown in the table, above. The lowest tier is the entry-level position during which employees learn the values that will establish professional behavior patterns throughout their careers. In most corporations today this role is held by the older Millennials that are just now graduating from college and entering the workforce. Today’s Dell Computer commercials that focus on a group of enthusiastic interns “learning the ropes” illustrate this tier well.

At the second tier we find the stratum of employees who generate corporate enthusiasm. These are the employees who are often found working at trade shows and marketing events, displaying their tireless enthusiasm as they test the values that they learned early in their entry-level training. They too are typically Millennials today.

At tier three we find the slightly older Gen-Xers who are now in the lower levels of middle management and who are applying the corporate values that now shape them in their careers and personal lives. They are professional role models for the up-and-coming younger employees and are often supervisors. They are tirelessly energetic, often working at all hours in data centers, manufacturing plants and call centers.

Finally, at the uppermost tier, we find the corporate leaders. With their professional longevity they are now charged with creating the values that guide the corporation. Today they are for the most part Baby Boomers. The last shadows of the Silent Generation are retired, and the Gen-Xers have not yet penetrated this tier.

Now shift gears and look at how the profile changes in 20 years – one generation beyond where we are today. The Baby Boomers are retired and the Gen-Xers have moved into the upper tier of the corporation. The Millennials are now in the lower and middle tiers of the management ranks, which means that they will be hiring and firing employees, making purchase decisions, establishing sales and marketing strategies, and preparing to run their companies. If you are a Gen-Xer or a Baby Boomer, your employees are or soon will include large numbers of Millennials, which means that you need to know how to manage and motivate them, how to sell to them, and how to compete with them.

Managing the Millennials

To effectively interact with or manage Millennials it is critical to understand what drives them and what shapes the values of their generation. So here’s what we know about them. First, they are heavily influenced by technology. On average, Millennials spend more than \$100 a week on technology-oriented products and strongly influence more than 80% of all spending in their

household. Their preferred mode of communication is Instant Messenger or SMS, followed by e-mail and their mobile phones. If they have to, they'll use a landline telephone. This generation assumes that technology is just there – it's a given. This includes access to computers and broadband connectivity. In fact, college campuses are finding that one of the most oft-asked questions by incoming freshmen is whether the dorms they will be living in have broadband. In some cases this can be a deal-breaker.

This group is also extraordinarily social. They like interactive activities and work well in small groups. Their learning preferences include teamwork and experiential activities, particularly if there is a technological element – particularly one that involves gaming technology. Their strengths include collaboration, multitasking (witness the typical teenager sitting in front of a computer with four or five IM sessions going, MP3 music playing, e-mail responses in various stages of completion, while talking on the cell phone – and doing homework – well. They are goal-oriented and can remain strikingly positive in the face of difficulty or adversity.

Interestingly, this group is typically racially and ethnically diverse, a fact that they are completely oblivious to – there is hope for this world. Statistically, they also often have at least one immigrant parent.

All of these characteristics should lead the reader to understand that this is a distinctly different group of people than those found in the typical corporation today. They are a rich source of corporate capability and energy, and as long as they are motivated properly they will prove to be a formidable component of the workforce. The question, of course, is how to do that. Read on.

Motivating the Millennials

So what is the best way to motivate Millennials in the workplace? First, pay attention to the characteristics listed earlier and to the degree possible structure the workplace around them. Recognize Millennials' high level of required social interaction. Use experiential learning and team assignments wherever and whenever possible. Give them freedom with regard to where, when and how they do their jobs. Put work in a nice place, like their homes, and encourage telecommuting. As morally-driven as this generation is, an employer will not be disappointed in the results. Note that the self-policing Millennials do not tolerate delays in themselves and others – they are often seen to be unrealistically impatient – and will therefore deliver on time.

Next, make the work they are assigned meaningful. Nothing will turn off a Millennial faster than work that has no perceived value. Remember, they are looking for meaning, so give it to them. At the same time, they like variety, so give Millennials a chance to learn continuously and reward their learning with diverse, ever-changing jobs.

Millennials look at work differently than generations that came before them; they're not necessarily looking for a *career* – they're looking for *meaningful work*. If the work is meaningful and challenging, they may well become long-term employees.

Finally, give them plenty of continuous feedback. When assigning work, state the desired outcome as clearly as you possibly can, then step out of the way and let them run with it. It *will* get done, and will most likely exceed expectations – *provided the work is meaningful and challenging*. This cannot be stated strongly enough.

There are also a number of perceptions that employers must be aware of when working with Millennials. First among them is the perception that there is no such thing as reality. The Internet has proven to this generation that it takes no effort whatsoever to seamlessly attach Pamela

Anderson's head to Sylvester Stallone's body, or to create a gaming experience that seems quite real but clearly isn't. And yes, they know the difference between killing people in a video game and the real thing. Remember – morals-driven. Ironically however, they also believe that content found on the Internet is public domain and therefore free – sorry, Metallica.

Conclusion

Because the Millennials are a functional repeat of the famously capable GI Generation, they are the ideal generation to inherit the chaos of the early years of the 21st century. They will rebuild and strengthen the institutions that stabilize the country, will create a longed-for sense of community and belonging, and will restore order and purpose, leading the country out of the secular crisis that plagues it today. Fear not: We're in good hands.

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