



My Generation

LAST NOVEMBER *60 Minutes* aired a segment titled, “The Millennials Are Coming.” Morely Safer reported on the influx of young people into the workforce, and how perplexed employers feel about this new generation. When describing this group, the experts on the segment threw out phrases such as selfish, doted upon, incorrigible and narcissistic. As someone who is considered a Millennial, this confused me. I’m not like that. Am I the exception to the rule? Maybe. But, when I look at my large circle of friends and acquaintances, I see many exceptions staring back at me.

Depending on whom you ask, the years in which generational members were born differ slightly. Millennials (or Generation Y, again, depending on whom you ask) were born anywhere between 1977 and 1995. For our purposes of examining the workplace, think 22- to 28-year-olds—those recent grads and newer additions to the workforce.

What doesn’t differ among all researchers, writers and psychologists is the consensus they come to for why Millennials are the way we are. Growing up in a world where we could do no wrong, we learned to dream big and felt our opinions mattered. Our parents rarely told us no. We received trophies and ribbons, not for winning, but for just participating in the science fair or on the baseball diamond. These experiences morphed us into employees who demand more money, require flexible schedules, ask “Why?” a lot, value friends and family over our jobs, and expect to move up the ladder quicker than our parents did. When we’re told for 20 years we can have whatever we want, this reaction to our new careers only makes sense.

“The early baby boomers [b. 1946-1953]—with their ’60s sensibility and navel-gazing—left their mark on just about every institution they passed through,” writes *Fortune* magazine’s Gen Y writer-reporter-blogger Nadira Hira in an article titled, “Attracting the Twentysomething Worker,” published this past year. “Now come their children, to confound them. The kids—self-absorbed, gregarious, multitasking, loud, optimistic, pierced—are exactly what the boomers raised them to be, and now they’re being themselves all over the business world.”

So, how should boomer employers relate to Millennials? It’s important to figure out because we’re entering the workforce in mass numbers as subordinates, or in some cases, as managers. (According to RainmakerThinking, an organization that conducts ongoing research of the changing workplace, as of 2006, two experienced workers were leaving the workplace for every inexperienced one that arrived.) Also, it’s significant because of our attitude for wanting it all; if we don’t get along with our boss or co-workers, we’ll go someplace where we will.

Give us responsibility: We thrive on it. I disagree with anyone who says we’re lazy. However, if we’re treated like interns, not trusted with important tasks or not included on big decisions, we get discouraged. We come to you with a whole slew of new ideas and a willingness to work. Use that.

We learn by doing: Our college projects were done in groups, so we work well in teams. Don’t stick us in a cube with manuals to read. Remember this for training sessions and meetings, too. “A generation raised on not just television but cable, they will perk up during a presentation with video clips and moving graphics,” writes Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled and More Miserable than Ever*. “One-on-one training session should be Socratic and task-oriented—don’t just show them something, but have them do it themselves.”

We adapt to diversity: We grew up exposed to a mix of races, cultures, orientations and religions, so many of us lack any preconceived notions. This outlook may be beneficial when your company needs to work with someone outside your primary demographic.

Care about our ideas: Because we’re used to having our opinions valued by our teachers and our parents, condescending or passive aggressive employers turn us off. We want to be treated with respect and learn from you and we want you to care about our development as your employee.

Provide feedback: Everyone likes to hear they’re doing a good job. We’re no different. However, if we do something wrong, don’t be overly critical. Explain the mistake and help us get started in the right direction. Just don’t be surprised if we come up with a different way to do it.

In the end, I think our generation has a bad reputation. We’re not unmanageable, we’re determined. We’re not self-absorbed, we have different priorities. We’re not narcissistic, we’re self-confident. Aren’t those the same characteristics boomers were known for at our age? We learned from the best. ■

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