

The millennial conundrum

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Leadership Briefings: What's the hardest part of managing millennials?

Bye: When I ask older managers about millennials, they say millennials are lazy, narcissistic know-it-alls who don't show up on time. It's a litany of stereotypes.

How do you respond?

I'll tell these managers that 80 percent of the millennials that I know personally do not fit that mold. They're amazing. They have high character, high ethics. They know they have Internet confidence but they also know they need to develop a broader confidence from experience.

What about the other 20 percent?

As a leader, you need to step up and figure out how to help that 20 percent.

How? Any suggestions?

Give them regular feedback and encouragement. Identify their talents and strengths and the things they're passionate about. Then try to align the job to fit their passion. Millennials are looking for a manager who's more of a coach and a collaborator who will support their career path.

But what happens if you have negative feedback or need to criticize their performance?

Millennials won't put up with a highly critical manager. But they do want on-the-spot feedback rather than waiting for annual or quarterly performance reviews. So give them regular feedback. If you're being critical, then don't talk about it in terms of failure. Instead, reframe it as an opportunity for lessons learned or positive steps to take in the future. It's better to say, "Let's extract some lessons learned from your behavior at last Friday's meeting" than "Your behavior needs to improve."

What's the best way to motivate millennials?

We're finding that millennials are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically motivated. They're more driven by the push to attain personal growth than the plaque on the wall, the new car, the new boat. They are also altruistically motivated. They want to make the world better. So managers can motivate millennials by focusing on their leadership skills—by identifying those skills they want to improve and then helping them develop those skills.

Some managers think millennials lack loyalty and will quit as soon as something better comes along. Is that true?

There is a belief that they will only be with you a short time and then take all the training you've provided and

all that they've learned from you and go somewhere else. The solution is to engage them so that they want to stay with you for more than 12 or 24 months. You need to understand their career aspirations, to ask them, "What do you want to give back to the world?" Then connect their answer to what your organization needs.

That sounds tough.

In 1995, I was national sales manager at a medical device company. I interviewed a young job candidate and asked him, "Where do you see yourself in two years?" He said he wanted to learn what he could from us about sales and move on in two years. I thanked him for his candor and declared, "I'll do everything I can so that you stay here for 10 years." I created a career path for him with milestones along the way. I kept giving him growth opportunities. He wound up staying with us for 10 years!