

RETAINING YOUNGER WORKERS IN THE WORKPLACE

You've hired them. Now how can you keep them around?

BY CAM MARSTON

Things aren't always what they seem. If I could give you one bit of advice on dealing with the latest generation of employees to come under your management, it would be to remember those words...things aren't always what they seem.

If you are like most business leaders, you've no doubt noticed a trend in the way employees behave in recent years. Most likely you consider it a negative trend - too much entitlement, not enough loyalty, no work ethic, only interested in themselves, and on and on. But I challenge you to consider that perhaps these are not negative trends, just different ones. Things aren't always what they seem.

To better understand who your employees are and what drives them to succeed, perhaps it's easiest to understand who they are not. You. That's right. They may even be your offspring but in the workplace they bear little resemblance to the "you" of yesteryear. Gen Xers (born 1965-1979) and Millennials (born after 1980) are operating in this world with a completely different perspective. Their definitions of loyalty, time and success are often quite different from yours. Rest assured they do recognize all of these concepts and value them in very important ways. The key to your organization's future success is understanding how the Millennials view the world and using that knowledge to motivate them in a way that works. Here's a hint: meet them where they are and they will achieve your underlying goals; try to force them to fit your definitions and they will run for the door every time.

So let's take a look at some of the pervasive myths about our youngest generation in the workforce and discuss why these changes are happening and how you can tailor your workplace to meet the needs of you, your employees and the company.

MYTH: YOUNGER GENERATIONS HAVE NO WORK ETHIC.

Reality: Younger generations have a self-centered work ethic. This is not necessarily the negative that it may seem at first. Millennials are dedicated to completing their task well. They have not been raised in a way that demands them to look around and see what should be done next. Instead they ask “what is my job” and go about figuring the best, fastest way to complete that task. Then they consider themselves done. This is a key differentiator between your employees and yourself.

The younger they are, the more your employees view their jobs as “something to do between the weekends.” For most, early employment has nothing to do with a career path; it is a way to earn money to have fun in their free time. And that is okay. When you understand what motivates your employees you are better able to set mutual expectations for success. Instead of being frustrated that your youngest employees are not interested in climbing your corporate ladder, embrace their true motivation - reliable spending money - and use it to your advantage. When you tell an employee, “I understand this is not your lifelong career, but to earn the paycheck every week, here is what I expect ...” they are much more likely to respond than if you try to motivate with promises of promotions and titles down the road.

Understanding that being at the job isn't as important to Millennials as completing the assigned task also opens up new opportunities for motivation and reward. Younger employees are very likely to respond to offers of paid time off. A leading retail organization has recognized this new way of thinking with its Working Hard Card: When managers witness an employee rising to a challenge, exceeding expectations or otherwise giving 110% they can hand the employee a Working Hard Card on the spot. Each card is worth a set amount of paid time off to be used at the employee's discretion. It is a simple strategy that rewards employees in the currency they value most - their time.

MYTH: THEY DON'T WANT TO PUT IN THE HOURS TO GET AHEAD.

Reality: They are willing to put in the time to do the job, however they are uninterested in “face time.” Gen Xers and Millennials view time as a currency. While Baby Boomers tend to see time as something to invest, the younger generations view it as a valuable currency not to be wasted. These are the generations that demand work-life balance and paid time off. They want to get the job done, then put it behind them and enjoy life.

Boomer managers have a tendency to lose the interest of their Millennial employees by looking too far into the future. Millennials live in timeframe based on right now. Their world has proven that nothing is a guarantee - from nationwide layoffs to war to soaring divorce rates, they have decided that there's not a lot you can count on. As a result they are not interested in promotion plans for five years from now. They don't even want to know what will happen at the end of the summer. Life is uncertain. To reach the Millennial employee and reduce turnover, make it certain.

Tell your employee that you have a plan. Take pains to ensure it is in a timeframe short enough for them to envision. Be prepared to fulfill your promise - once fooled, forever jaded. This approach feeds into their reality, while simultaneously building trust and buying you more time. Reward small successes along the way, string these milestones together and you will soon realize longer tenures among your staff.

MYTH: THEY HAVE NO RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY.

Reality: They have great respect for leaders and loyalty. But no, as a rule they don't respect authority "just because." For the younger generations, every ounce of loyalty and respect must be earned. But when it is earned, it is given fiercely.

In fact, loyalty to the individual is the number one reason Xers and Millennials stay in the job, especially during the first three, tenuous years. Dissatisfaction with the boss is the number one reason they quit. So in order to increase retention, managers must take a flipped view on leadership - it is no longer enough to hire the right people and show them the way, now you must BE the right person to win their affection. Sounds a little touchy-feely for the workforce, yet the faster leaders understand this new relationship, the sooner you will see the reward in the way of increased retention.

There is one big caveat to the "be the person they want you to be" approach to leadership, however. Millennials have a tendency to seek tight bonds - they want a boss who is close, caring and aware. And you can be all that. It is very easy to cross the line between "boss as advocate" to "boss as friend." That is a slippery slope. It can be especially tempting in situations where managers and employees are close in age. When activities outside of the office become too regular, too casual or largely social in nature, it is time to examine how this will affect your role as a leader. What Millennial need most out of a boss is a guide, not a social life.

MYTH: THEY DON'T WANT TO GROW UP.

Reality: They really don't know how. The youngest generations in today's workforce are facing a delayed adulthood. They are getting married later, having children later and just generally facing the "real world" later. This isn't the result of a mutated maturity gene, it just is. And if we are being completely honest, Boomers had a lot to do with why it's happening. First, as parents, Boomers had a tendency to coddle their children and use their own good fortune to make sure their children didn't experience adversity. Second, as career models, Boomers demonstrated the toll of working long hours and "paying one's dues" in a way that made their children less likely to follow in their footsteps. Millennials today look at the corporate ladder and think, "there must be another way."

My advice to you - don't waste time wishing they were different. Don't spend your energy comparing today's youth to the desires and drive you had at age 18. These employees are not a reflection of you, nor are they an earlier version of you. And again, that is okay. Your task is to take this new understanding and use it to reposition how you interact with, motivate and reward your staff.

Take attire for instance. Your 18-year-old self would have gladly donned whatever uniform was necessary to fit the company mold. Be it pressed khakis and a tie or a specific corporate uniform, fitting in was part of the package. Today's youth wants to stand out. They want their individuality to shine through even when required to provide a consistent standard of service and performance. Balancing corporate needs with individual desires takes some creative thinking.

Home Depot is one company that has addressed this dilemma at a very basic level - company uniforms. They simply require that all employees wear a standard Home Depot apron. Be yourself underneath (within reason) and show the customer that you are on the Home Depot team with this bright orange apron. Is there a standard that you can adopt to accommodate individual preferences? Something to think about.

NOT ALL CHANGE IS BAD.

As we've discussed, the myths surrounding today's young employees are not always what they seem. Attitudes toward work, life, loyalty and respect have all changed, but each is still considered valuable. In fact, some of the demands made by today's youth are creating positive benefits for employees in every generation. Flexibility and

respect for the individual, as well as the organization, are good for everyone. Loyalty from younger employees, once earned, is long-lasting. The adjustments you make to accommodate the changing attitudes of today's youth will be returned to you tenfold with decreased turnover, improved morale, and measurable business results.

And when the frustration mounts, just remember things aren't always what they seem. Open your mind to the possibility that there is a benign, generational reason for the disconnect between what you want and what your employees are providing, and you may just find room to create a shared vision of success.

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