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4 keys to managing a multi-generational workforce

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Tim was on a destructive path, wreaking havoc in his company and spiraling out of control. He met a talented leader who saw his potential and knew how to truly engage people. He hired Tim and created the conditions for him to engage and thrive. Corporate executives and HR professionals consistently say that increasing employee engagement is a critical priority for their organization.

Research shows that engagement levels hover close to 20 percent nationwide, although there has been a minor uptick in recent years.

more productivity, customer satisfaction, quality and profitability and less absenteeism, turnover and theft. Those who are not engaged are adrift from their work and business mission. They are compliant, but require close supervision.



Generational Challenges

We are at a unique point in history where the nexus of economic, technological, medical and sociological forces have gathered four generations into the same workplaces. Late traditionalists, now in their seventies, and boomers, now in their fifties and sixties, can be found working alongside Gen Xers and millennials, who are the age of their grand and great-grandchildren.

Previously, age, expertise, status and power were well aligned in the workplace. Older folks had more; younger folks had less. It was an orderly system. Now it is more of a mixed bag and much harder to navigate. While older workers still possess a greater share of the perspective, context, and wisdom required for problem-solving, younger workers often possess the marketing and

To be highly effective in today's world, leaders need to learn the propensities of each generation, and employ strategies for engaging them in ways that reflect their expectations, style and priorities.

Following is a general overview of the generations and recommended leadership practices appealing to each one.



Traditionalists (ages 69 - 89)

Traditionalists comprise only about 4% of the workforce. Some are in the upper echelons of the corporate world and many work because they want to, so it is not surprising that this is the most engaged segment of the workforce.

Traditionalists follow the rules, show more discipline, respect authority, and are loyal to the company. They are accustomed to working in hierarchical organizations, respect the chain of command, and believe that tenure counts for a lot

Engagement strategies for traditionalists should focus on their needs for control, connection, significance, learning, and accomplishment.

Control: Traditionalists are comfortable with a directive style of leadership, expect it, and may not respond well to other styles. Many are sticking around voluntarily, but they don't necessarily want to exert themselves. Offer flexible work options such as part-time schedules, contract and temporary work. Let them choose when to work and the kind of work they will do.

Connection: The draw of relationships at work helps keep traditionalists around, so avoid disrupting long-standing relationships if possible. Relate and express appreciation to them in "old fashioned ways – in person, with handwritten notes, plaques and awards.

Significance and Learning: Encourage traditionalists to engage in two-way mentoring relationships with younger employees. Place traditionalists on committees as advisors so they can share their hard-earned wisdom. Be sure to clearly define their role, and explain how the team will operate.

Accomplishment: Though many are fully engaged, a few are hanging on just to collect a paycheck. Appeal to their sense of responsibility. Assert authority tactfully and sensitively, and explain they are still expected to contribute fully. Tolerating loafing drags the team down and sets a bad example.





Baby Boomers (ages 50 - 68)

Though they still occupy many of leadership positions, early boomers are into their retirement years and many more are headed there shortly. Despite round after round of layoffs and scandals, their inner idealists yearn for the good old days when tenure and loyalty counted – a lot. Though they are known for their competitiveness, goal-orientation, ambition and work-centric lifestyle, boomers invented the idea of work-life balance. Now, 20 years after coining the term, many are starting to learn what it means. Still, they expect others to keep the pace they kept in their younger years.

Engagement strategies for boomers should revolve around the need for: control, connection, significance, challenge and accomplishment.

Control: Boomers should be afforded the freedom to exercise their skills and behave responsibly. Give them plenty of freedom of supervision and the opportunity to work on teams. Provide them with the chance to set their own hours and telecommute as desired.

Connection: This is the last generation to identify with the team and the organization. Be sure to tell them how valued they are and how important they are to the team.

Significance: Titles, offices and official recognition can be important to boomers. More than others, they want jobs that recognize their experience, offices that reflect a respectable status, monetary rewards, and formal recognition from the organization. Acknowledge people who are not in formal leadership positions by giving them lead roles on teams, positions as technical advisors, and encouraging them to mentor younger colleagues – according to their talents.

Challenge: Even the youngest boomers have a tremendous amount of experience, so it can be hard to challenge them. Meet with boomer employees to chart a career plan that focusses on what they still want to accomplish

Accomplishment: Boomers are an idealistic and goal-oriented generation. Appeal to their ideals and set challenging goals for them. Friendly competition between teams can also be especially motivating for this generation.



Generation X (ages 35 - 49)

Early on, Xers learned to rely only on themselves. They are independent, pragmatic, resourceful, innovative, results-focused and thrive on challenges. They tend to distrust institutions and are loyal only to people and results. As teens and young adults, they lived through corporate mergers, downsizing and scandals. In response, they became the earliest entrants in the free agent economy.

Engagement strategies for Xer's should revolve around the need for: control, challenge, learning and accomplishment.

freedom to pursue their own interests by setting time apart for personal projects and/or by allowing them to choose their assignments. When assigning must-do work, be sure to explain why it is important.

Challenge: Xers thrive on challenges. Since they are not as much into teamwork as other generations, try to give assignments that allow them to shine independently. Frame challenges in terms of their value rather than the benefits to the company. Give them lots of assignments, and let them figure out how to prioritize them.

Learning: Xers are learners but prefer to choose what, how and when they learn. More than others, they can handle direct constructive feedback, but be sure to be as direct about what to do about it. Point out developmental needs directly and ask how they plan to address them. They may need help in dealing with office politics, so offer coaching and mentoring in this area.

Accomplishment: To this generation, results are what matter and they expect to be rewarded for what they achieve. Resources also matter. Be sure to supply the information and technology tools needed to get the job done. They expect visibility, promotion, and rewards to be based on their results rather than tenure and resent "losing" them to politics and tenured people.





Millennials (ages 16 - 34)

Besides being “connected,” millennials are confident, well-educated, socially conscious, highly collaborative, and savvy learners. They were taught that they are valuable and were invited to express their opinions. Now they want to contribute, and they want to do it now.

Engagement strategies for millennials should revolve around the need for: connection, learning, significance and accomplishment.

Connection: Time with friends and family are prized by this generation, but they are willing to work remotely and outside the traditional work hours. Give them the technology and freedom to do so, and it is likely that they will stay connected and productive from unusual times and places.

Millennials want to work in teams and expect to work directly with their leaders. Throughout life they worked alongside their peers and developed close relationships with their leaders. Teachers, parents, coaches, friends (and the games they played) all provided them with abundant and immediate feedback and encouragement. Is it any wonder that they expect the same experience in the workplace? Though other generations may be uncomfortable with this kind of feedback and intimacy, the reality is that all people need it and thrive when they have it. Structure work processes so that millennials can work collaboratively, make time in the schedule to work directly with them, and give them plenty of feedback.

Learning: This generation has embraced learning as a way of life. When they don't know something, they consult the Internet. Google, YouTube and countless other sites all have the information they need. Unlike prior generations who realized that information is power and hoarded it, this generation knows that information is power, so they share it. Learning, or anything for that matter, isn't confined to a specific place an time; it takes place in the moment because the world is literally at their fingertips.

Partner these junior professionals with experienced colleagues on teams and projects and encourage traditionalists and boomers to mentor them. This practice will engage the staff and help to meet critical knowledge management needs.

Significance: Millennials have learned a lot from their parents and are seeking to live meaningful, well- balanced lives. Work is an important component, but it is not THE priority in life. While they believe that having a well-paying job is important, millennials readily sacrifice money to live the life they want.

Accomplishment: Because of their youth and their generation, millennials want to make a difference. They want to solve problems and make the world a better place. Consequently, they are attracted to organizations with a socially minded mission who invest in good causes. Give the company mission and its societal value prominence in any communications and tie job duties and special projects to that mission.

More than other generations, millennials resent being treated “as children.” They believe in themselves, expect to contribute, and want to be challenged. Many managers are reluctant to do this because they have become accustomed to the Gen X style, and they are justified to feel this way. It would be unwise to apply Gen X values to this generation because they often lack practical hands-on know-how, and they don’t want hands-off leadership. Instead, give them what they want: challenging work along with coaching and leadership.





Virtually all companies say “our people are our greatest asset.” Most truly believe it, but many are naïve about how to unleash their employees’ inner zealotry. Others fail to commit fully to changing their culture and practicing what they preach. It is a significant effort that requires the full attention of every leader, from the executive suite to the call center. That may sound disheartening to the first line manager who has zero sway over corporate direction, but it doesn’t have to be. There is good news.

Individual supervisors have more power over employee engagement than anything else. So they can change zombies into zealots by ensuring that team members are truly connected to others, are challenged and learning while doing meaningful work, and are properly directed and resourced so they can accomplish what they set their minds to.

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