

What You Need to Know about Mentoring the New Generations

By Devon Scheef and Diane Thielfoldt

Which of the following means the most to you?

- * Elvis joins the Army.
- * Jimi Hendrix dies
- * MTV debuts.
- * Kurt Cobain dies.

Your answer, of course, depends on your age — or more specifically, on the generation you belong to. While pop music milestones may not seem all that important, the sum total of experiences, ideas and values shared by people of different generations makes for a melting pot of work approaches and priorities.

Once you understand where the newer generations are “coming from,” as a Boomer (born 1946-1964) might say, it’s easy to target your mentoring style to bring out their strengths and make the most progress. Remember to discard biases and pre-conceived notions, and you and your mentees from all generations enjoy your generational differences — and similarities!

Generation X	Millennials
Born 1965-1976 51 million	Born 1977 – 1998 75 million
Accept diversity Pragmatic/practical Self-reliant/individualistic Reject rules Killer life Mistrust institutions PC Use technology Multitask Latch-key kids Friends, not family	Celebrate diversity Optimistic/realistic Self-inventive/individualistic Rewrite the rules Killer lifestyle Irrelevance of institutions Internet Assume technology Multitask fast Nurtured Friends and family
Mentoring Do’s	Mentoring Do’s
Casual, friendly work environment Involvement Flexibility and freedom A place to learn	Structured, supportive work environment Personalized work Interactive relationship Be prepared for demands, high expectations

Source: *The Learning Café* and *American Demographics* Enterprising Museum 2003.

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Generation X: Declaring their Independence

The 51 million members of Generation X, born between 1965 and 1976, grew up in a very different world than previous generations. Divorce and working moms created “latchkey” kids out of many in this generation. This led to traits of independence, resilience and adaptability. Generation X feels strongly that, “I don’t need someone looking over my shoulder.”

At the same time, this generation expects immediate and ongoing feedback, and is equally comfortable giving feedback to others. Other traits include working well in multicultural settings, desire for some fun in the workplace and a pragmatic approach to getting things done.

Generation X saw their parents get laid off or face job insecurity. Many of them also entered the workplace in the early ’80s, when the economy was in a downturn. Because of these factors, they’ve redefined loyalty. Instead of remaining loyal to their company, they have a commitment to their work, to the team they work with and the boss they work for. For example, a Baby Boomer complains about his dissatisfaction with management, but figures it’s part of the job. A Gen Xer doesn’t waste time complaining — she sends her resume out and accepts the best offer she can find at another organization.

At the same time, Generation X takes employability seriously. But for this generation, there isn’t a career ladder. There’s a career lattice. They can move laterally, stop and start... their career is more fluid.

Even more so than Boomers, members of Generation X dislike authority and rigid work requirements. An effective mentoring relationship with them must be as hands-off as possible. Providing feedback on their performance should play a big part, as should encouraging their creativity and initiative to find new ways to get tasks done. As a mentor, you’ll want Gen Xers to work *with* you, not for you.

Start by informing them of your expectations and how you’ll measure their progress — and assure them that you’re committed to helping them learn new skills. (Members of Generation X are eager to learn new skills because they want to stay employable.) Gen Xers work best when they’re given the desired outcome and then turned loose to figure out how to achieve it. This means a mentor should guide them with feedback and suggestions, not step-by-step instructions.

The Millennial Generation: Up and Coming

Just beginning to enter the workplace, The Millennial Generation was born between 1977 and 1998. The 75 million mem-

bers of this generation are being raised at the most child-centric time in our history. Perhaps it’s because of the showers of attention and high expectations from parents that they display a great deal of self-confidence to the point of appearing cocky.

As you might expect, this group is technically literate like no one else. Technology has always been part of their lives, whether it’s computers and the Internet or cell phones and text pagers.

Millennials are typically team-oriented, banding together to date and socialize rather than pairing off. They work well in groups, preferring this to individual endeavors. They’re good multitaskers, having juggled sports, school and social interests as children, so expect them to work hard.

Millennials seem to expect structure in the workplace. They acknowledge and respect positions and titles, and want a relationship with their boss. This doesn’t always mesh with Generation X’s love of independence and hands-off style.

All Millennials have one thing in common: They are new to the professional workplace. Therefore, they are definitely in need of mentoring, no matter how smart and confident they are. And they’ll respond well to the personal attention. Because they appreciate structure and stability, mentoring Millennials should be more formal, with set meet-

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ings and a more authoritative attitude on the mentor's part.

Provide lots of challenges but also provide the structure to back it up. This means breaking down goals into steps, as well as offering any necessary resources and information they'll need to meet the challenge. You might consider mentoring Millennials in groups, because they work so well in team situations. That way they can act as each other's resources or peer mentors. ✨