Getting the Most From Millennials

Three steps to help you with younger coworkers

BY KATE ZABRISKIE

What was she thinking wearing that to work today? This is the legislature, not a night club! How does he not know to bring a notebook and a pen to a committee meeting? Do I have to tell him everything? What would make her think it was OK to party with lobbyists until 3 a.m.? Unbelievable!

If you have new hires fresh out of school, or interns who are still in school, some of these observations may have a familiar ring. Are these new employees just bad hires? Probably not.

Rather, the source of such surprises more likely has to do with training (or the lack of it) related to workplace expectations. Before you say, “But they should know,” don’t waste your breath. Maybe they should know, but they don’t. Young, freshly minted employees or interns don’t know much about the workplace because most of them haven’t been in it that long.

Think about it: If the shoe were on the other foot and you found yourself in some kind of “Freaky Friday” role reversal, would you totally understand today’s high school or college social codes? Dream on, and good luck with that!

As someone with more experience than the people you hire, you have a responsibility to get them off to a good start. You can short-circuit many of the problems people encounter when working with new, young staffers if you follow these three steps.

1 Get to Know Them

Of course, millennials are not all alike, nor do they all exhibit the same behaviors and values. But generally—as a generation—they share some characteristics that define them and differentiate them from older generations.

Born between 1982 and 2004 and raised in an era when parents often treated their kids like friends, more than a few millennials still live at home and don’t plan on leaving soon. Many had to borrow money for college, and may have student-loan debts that are similar to some home mortgages. That doesn’t mean, however, that they’re clueless about life outside the nest. But their financial circumstances are probably very different from those previous generations knew at the same age.

These young people also grew up surrounded by ever-present technology in an era of instant answers. You may have had an Atari or Nintendo, but they had Google. They are multitaskers who are used to being able to find all kinds of information quickly and who find social media and texting hard to resist.

With parents as buddies and information available at their fingertips, many of these individuals have no problem questioning authority. In the legislature, you already may have noticed that they ask questions and interact with senior leaders confidently and boldly, in ways you wouldn’t expect.

Another difference is how they view praise. Unlike older generations, millennials grew up showered in praise, rewards and recognition—for excelling, sure, but often just participating was enough. Sports teams got trophies for showing up. School kids were recognized with ribbons and certificates for being polite, having integrity or displaying common courtesy. Millennials expect feedback larded with praise whether merited or not. On the other hand, they often work well in teams and enjoy collaborating with colleagues.

Millenials also view loyalty to an employer and longevity in a job very differently. They work hard and play hard

Kate Zabriskie is president of Business Training Works Inc., a Maryland-based talent development firm that helps businesses establish customer service strategies and train their people to live up to what’s promised. For more information, visit www.businesstrainingworks.com.
and cherish the flexibility to do both. In the past, it was a major taboo to job-jump or have gaps on a résumé. These days, you’ll find this generation will gladly take six months off to hike along the Appalachian Trail or to volunteer somewhere overseas. Strangers to delayed gratification, they aren’t saving those activities for retirement. They don’t expect to spend a lifetime at a job that’s not flexible when they have a bucket list to complete. Instead of thinking millennials will be part of your team for a decade or more, look for ways to make the most of the limited time you have together.

2
Spell It Out

Millennials are not the Amazing Kreskin. They don’t have clairvoyant powers. Most of them don’t even know who he is. (For those who don’t, he’s a mentalist who was popular on TV in the 1970s.) Don’t assume they will just “get it” or “catch on” or “absorb it.” Some will, of course, but assume nothing. They appreciate open, honest communication and abhor ambiguity. Take workplace dress codes, for example. Spell out your expectations about what is and isn’t acceptable. Fashion rules have changed dramatically, and if you offer no guidance new staff will likely step into the capitol in footwear you wouldn’t wear outside your house and in skirts shorter than many of us dared to wear even in the late ’60s and early ’70s.

Also consider other interactions they will have outside the capitol. Will they attend constituent functions with you? If so, it makes sense to review your expectations before you head out the door. Most will likely do fine on their own, but if you expect a certain standard of behavior, you need to make clear what that is.

3
Use Praise, but Keep It Real

As mentioned earlier, millennials are used to getting praise. But a lot of them have figured out that the trophy thing wasn’t much like real life. Still, they want to feel valued, so pay attention, recognize good work and offer constructive feedback often. It’s more time consuming, but if you put in the effort, it will pay off. Make time for regular one-on-one meetings where they not only hear from you but have a chance to share their thoughts and ideas as well. Millennials aren’t hesitant to share their opinions, and may offer a fresh perspective.

A word of caution: Millennials know when they are being patronized just as well as the next person, so choose your words wisely. Don’t skip this step. It will ultimately benefit the new person, the legislature and you.

A Final Thought

Training any employee takes time, and working with millennials has its own set of challenges. But taking these steps will provide a few shortcuts along the road to success. How much effort you put into training another person is certainly up to you. But think back to your first days in the working world. If someone spent time to help you early in your career, you were lucky. If you didn’t have that opportunity, don’t you wish you had?

Learn more at the Summit in Chicago this August. Go to ncsl.org/summit