Leading through generations

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Abstract

With employees that belong to Generation Y and Generation Z making up over half of the workplace, there is high demand for employers to learn how to communicate and maximize the strengths of these individuals. Each generation has been shaped by the time period they grew up in, which formed distinct values and behaviors that differ from each other. When leveraged using effective management practices, employers can create a synergistic culture where both Baby Boomers and Millennials can thrive.

Key words: leadership, management, generations, engagement

Résumé

Comme les employés appartenant à la Génération Y et à la Génération Z représentent plus de la moitié du milieu de travail, les employeurs font face à une forte demande pour apprendre à communiquer et à développer les atouts de ces individus. Chaque génération a été façonnée par la période durant laquelle elle a grandi. Chaque période engendre des valeurs distinctes et des comportements différents. Lorsqu'ils profitent de pratiques de gestion efficaces, les employeurs peuvent créer une culture synergique favorisant la prospérité des baby-boomers et aussi des milléniaux.

Introduction

It is expected that by 2020, Generation Y (Millennials) will make up for 35% of the global workforce with Generation Z reaching 24% – making up over half of the US workforce. There has never been a more critical time for employers to learn how to communicate with these generations and maximize the unique talents and opportunities they bring to businesses. Yet, for many managers in the workforce, engaging and motivating younger generations has been challenging. In part, this is due to a saturation of resources that oversimplify solutions to manage people and by labeling generations with false stereotypes that create confusion around their value in the workplace. In order to maximize the potential of talent in your organization, it is important to understand the differences that exist between generations and how those differences formed their values and behaviors. Only then, can we identify practical approaches to use with different generations in the workplace.

Understanding Generations in the Workplace

Currently there are 4 generations that exist in the workplace. Each generation is unique from the other and have been influenced by significant factors in their lifetime. Specifically in the United States, looking at our history and the significant events that occurred in each generation's upbringing gives us a better understanding of their values and behaviors.

Traditionalists (1925-1945)

Traditionalists or the Silent Generation grew up in a pivotal era of the United States where citizens experienced the Great Depression, winning World War II, and migration from farms to suburbs of growing cities. They also saw the development of large corporations and the expansion of communication through newspapers, radio, and automobiles. Factors such as these have been credited with forming values and behaviors of Traditionalists including following the chain of command without challenging authority, saving money and avoiding credit, and being private with their personal lives. Traditionalists place confidence in experts, leaders, and government and are known to be loyal, disciplined, and patient.

Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

The Baby Boomer generation experienced post war economic expansion which grew wealth for many American families. With growing wealth, there was a massive increase in births, which led to greater spending and crowded classrooms. This generation also witnessed a pivotal moment in Civil Rights and Women's Rights. Baby Boomers are known for their intuitive judgments, optimism and competition. They were also characterized for their work ethic, "climbing the ladder," and permissive parenting.

Generation X (1965-1981)

Individuals that grew up in Generation X witnessed the Vietnam War, President Nixon and the Watergate scandal, and growth in technology. Many who were born in this time had working parents and were commonly referred to as "latchkey kids." Generation X is characterized for being self-reliant and independent while having a strong work ethic and transactional relationships with others. Generation X is known to have grown up with natural growth parenting.

Millennials (1982-1998)

It is no secret that Millennials experienced a major expansion in technology with the development of the internet and globalization, which created a culture of immediacy. Children were celebrated for participation instead of winning based on merit. Millennials grew up in a family-centric society where parents created a "bubble of love." Millennials are digital natives, which has led to constant contact and sharing amongst each other. It also promoted diversity and social responsibility, which has led to many being discerning consumers. Millennials value collaboration, transparency, and interdependence.

Generation Z (1999-Present)

The most current generation grew up in post-9/11 America and have only ever known smart phones, social media, and any information at your fingertips. Individuals in this generation are known for being entrepreneurial, ultra-competitive, and great multitaskers. They value face-to-face communication over instant messaging and tend to expect older generations to adapt to their needs and expectations of the workplace.

Effective Ways of Communication

One of the greatest challenges with engaging different generations in your organization is communication. We just explored the differences in values and behaviors of each generation in the preceding paragraphs, so what are the implications of that when it comes to communication? The paragraphs below outline which methods of communication resonate the most with each generation.

Baby Boomers
1. Meet face to face or over the phone
2. Interactions should be collegial, recognize hierarchy of authority
3. Draw from existing experiences
4. Provide periodic feedback on overall performance
5. Provide opportunities for career longevity

Generation X
1. Initial meeting should be face to face
2. Provide autonomy in their work
3. Give explicit directions, then leave them to get it done
4. Provide feedback close to when event occurred, with examples
5. Ensure their skill set is current and marketable
6. Create opportunities for advancement

Millennials
1. Communicate with texting and short emails
2. Engage through opportunities to learn, provide inclusivity in meetings
3. Access to senior management
4. Set clear expectations
5. Provide feedback often with bias towards positives
6. Ensure new experiences in order to enhance resume
7. Recognize them through awards and "feel good" programs

Generation Z
1. Face to face communication; not texting or instant messaging
2. Establish trust by communicating with candor/honesty
3. Provide feedback often
4. Autonomy and independence on projects
5. Encourage entrepreneurial mindset on projects

Recognition

A key component of employee engagement is how the manager recognizes the quality work they do. Every individual values affirmation that they are contributing to the larger mission and success of their organization, but the form of recognition tends to differ across generations. For example, individuals from Generation X tend to prefer the manager showing his/her gratitude by trusting them to do the work their preferred way. In this case, autonomy translates to trust, which is viewed as positive recognition by Generation X. This is different for the Baby Boomer generation. Here, individuals tend to prefer formal recognition in front of their peers. Recognition does not need to be frequent, but it should be thoughtful and presented in a more structured way. Millennials and Generation Z are similar in this regard, except only amplified. Many young workers seek regular positive feedback from their managers to be constantly assured they are adding value to their employers.

Commonalities Across Generations

When managing employees that belong to different generations, it is important to understand the differences that exist among them. With that said, it is crucial to acknowledge that while they grew up in different environments, they are still people. People have innate values and desires that need to be fulfilled in the workplace. If a manager can understand and fulfill these needs for their employees, they will establish a healthy culture where individuals of all ages can thrive. First, people want to be respected. They want to know that they are valued and that their work contributes to the larger purpose of the organization. They share similar overarching values including family, loyalty, and meaningful relationships. Researchers have proven that all employees from all age groups seek continual growth and learning opportunities. They want to gain expertise and experience in areas of work they are passionate about.

Practical Tools for Leading Younger Generations

As you think about how to apply the information presented above, there are some helpful tools to guide your leadership style with younger employees in your organization. When it comes to creating a collaborative culture where each generation is engaged, there are 3 points to remember: 1) adapt to others' work style, 2) guard against stereotyping, and 3) engage in meaningful conversation.

Adapt to Others' Work Style

Using the information presented in this paper about differences in generations, one can begin to create an environment that suits the work styles of the individuals in that organization. For example, there may be employees from Generation X who prefer to work independently with a large amount of autonomy, while there are Millennial employees that require more attention and feedback from their manager. When it comes to communication, managers can adjust the way they share information depending on what is most effective with his/her employees. Being aware of generational differences and responding to the unique needs of each generation are great strategies to engaging talent young and old.

Guard Against Stereotyping

As we have experienced before, it can be easy to take mental shortcuts and associate individuals with stereotypes of that age group. While some stereotypes of generations can be true, these mental associations can be harmful to your relationship with that employee and ultimately can have lasting effects on their development and impact in your organization. When you find yourself taking those mental shortcuts, it can be helpful to remind yourself of the commonalities that all generations share and thoughtfully process information about the behaviors of that individual.

Engage in Meaningful Conversation

The final, but arguably most valuable, strategy to engaging employees of younger generations is to make sure that all voices are heard. Even with a lack of work experience, young professionals can bring valuable perspectives into the workplace that could have immediate impact on the business. A common practice for managers in some organizations is to have a young person "mentor" them. This creates opportunity for the sharing of ideas and perspectives that may not have occurred otherwise. The ultimate goal as a manager is to create a synergistic effect among his/her team of differing generations. If there is a concern about a younger employee's commitment to the organization or how they go about doing their work, the best way to approach the issue is to simply have an honest conversation with them.

Conclusion

Leadership consulting group, FranklinCovey, says it best: *Mediocre* leaders recognize that there are some differences in the generations, but do not think it impacts the workplace that much. *Great* leaders believe that understanding and leveraging the differences in each generation is key to unlocking everyone's full potential. As a manager, you have the unique opportunity to develop people to reach their full potential. Each individual possesses their own strengths and weaknesses, values, and behaviors. If leveraged and cultivated properly, not only will that individual be committed to your organization, but they will reciprocate that leadership to the people around them.

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