



The Care and Feeding of Your Millennial Leader

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If you were wondering, yes, I do screen your phone calls. It's not that I don't want to talk to you; I'd really love to connect. It's

just that I would rather you text or email me first if you want to get in touch. I'm a millennial. In addition to my aversion to phone calls, I exhibit other expected millennial qualities, such as disdain for meetings that could have been emails, preference for virtual meetings, and a lack of patience for change.

While I fully accept and embody my millennial persona, I also recognize that a "millennial or bust" mentality isn't necessarily the best approach to leading a multigenerational bar

association like the CBA. Still, we millennials aren't going anywhere. As more of us begin to lead organizations, we all need to be prepared to navigate the cross-generational pain points that are sure to arise. So, let's get to know millennials—how we lead and how we want to be led—to drive success in Colorado's multigenerational bar association.

Generational Divides

There are five generations currently "at work" in the United States today. While there's no official demarcation for generational boundaries, the Pew Research Center defines them as follows:¹

- the silent generation (78 to 95 years old)
- baby boomers (59 to 77 years old)
- Generation X (43 to 58 years old)

GENERATION	BIRTH YEAR
Silent Generation	1928-1945
Baby Boomers	1946-1964
Gen X	1965-1980
Millennials	1981-1996
Gen Z	1997-2012
Gen Alpha	2013-Present

- millennials (27 to 42 years old)
- Generation Z (11 to 26 years old).

Millennials became the largest generation in the US labor force in 2016 and will remain so for quite some time.² Today, they account for about 35-40% of the workforce, followed by Gen Xers (about 30-35%) and boomers (about 20-25%).³

Perhaps the most profound distinction between all these generations is technology. The amount of technological development that has happened between the silent generation and Gen Z is so extensive that it has essentially created two entirely different life experiences. When baby boomers began work, for example, a computer at each desk wasn't commonplace. But millennials have never known a world without computers and Gen Z has never known a world without smart phones. It's not surprising, then, that millennials love technology in leadership functions—we've always relied on it to reduce drudgery and save time at work.

Millennials as a group also value "purpose over paycheck,"⁴ and are sometimes referred to as the "purpose-driven generation."⁵ While it's true we don't want to work long hours just for a paycheck or wealth generation, it's not because we're lazy (or don't need money). It's because we want to make a positive difference in the world. As a result, millennial leaders are focused on creating, building, or impacting something bigger than ourselves. This can result in a desire for more generative conversations and idealistic goals and outcomes.

Millennials are also optimistic by nature—our baby boomer parents raised us to believe

we can accomplish anything. Teachers, coaches, and other trusted adults also drilled into our heads that “if you believe you can achieve it, you probably can.” But we’re not just optimistic about our own abilities—we have a collective confidence that fuels our work. Millennial leaders don’t let the immense challenges we have before us dampen our spirit. Instead, we’re determined to work together to solve problems, because we really do believe that things will get better.

Cultivating Millennial Leaders through Cross-Generational Leadership

Cross-generational strife is hardly a new phenomenon. Older generations have probably always viewed younger generations as quick to act and short to listen, while younger generations have probably always viewed their older counterparts as not knowing how to adapt, or worse, unwilling to do so. Despite such misgivings, it is possible to minimize the growing pains that come with generational shifts in leadership. It just requires an open mind and some give and take.

On the whole, millennials tend to respond positively to mentoring, structure, and a sense of purpose. We want to be a part of something larger than ourselves, and we respond to leadership styles that encourage this mentality. Creating effective millennial leaders will require baby boomers and Gen Xers to become open to seeing the “business of the bar” done differently. More senior generational leaders need to ask themselves where systems, structures, policies, or other “ways we’ve always done it” should be reconsidered to appeal to new ways of thinking.

This process does, however, need to be a two-way street. Millennial leaders need to learn to understand the value that experience provides an organization. We may know what’s next, but our predecessors will know what was. Leaders of prior generations will have built relationships with influential people in the organization that are important for millennial leaders to leverage. So, while millennial leaders can present a fresh and optimistic perspective, baby boomer and Gen X leaders can help ground us in the realities of the organization and the work to be accomplished.


Making the Leadership Transition Easier

As the number of millennials assuming leadership positions increases, organizations will need to adapt to the priorities of this new cohort. So, what can organizations do to make the experience a positive one? A few simple tips can make the experience constructive and affirming for everyone involved.

- **Mentoring over management.** Nobody enjoys being micromanaged, but millennial leaders prefer not to be managed at all. Instead, we seek an environment that promotes collaboration and transparency. To assist your millennial leaders, provide numerous opportunities for mentorship with fellow leaders, predecessors, and peers. We’re much more responsive to this style of learning.
- **Don’t hide the ball.** While many Gen X leaders don’t shy away from figuring things out on their own, millennials want to be provided with all the information we need to be successful. We want to ask questions and engage in a thought-partnering process to find the answer. Don’t hide the ball. Answer our questions directly and point us in the right direction.
- **Get good at giving feedback.** Millennial leaders not only want feedback—we want instant and encouraging feedback. We’re accustomed to being graded or evaluated on everything we do, and most of us have boxes full of participation trophies and ribbons at home. A good technique is to give constructive or challenging feedback in the form of a “compliment sandwich,” where the constructive feedback is sandwiched between pieces of positive feedback.
- **Squirrels and shiny things.** Millennial leaders are often sprinters, not marathoners. We’ll work hard and fast on projects that interest us, but our attention spans can be short, and we can get bored or distracted with slow and complicated long-term projects. To keep millennial leaders engaged, look for opportunities to break big projects down into smaller tasks with more opportunities for feedback and immediate gratification.

- **Know the value proposition.** As previously stated, millennials are civic minded and value oriented. We’re motivated by meaningful experiences not résumé builders. If you’re seeking to recruit millennial leaders, you’ll need to make the value proposition for their engagement. If you’re already working with a millennial leader, be prepared to measure impact.

Make Way for Millennials

Like it or not, millennials are changing the way we work and will have an impact as leaders for many years to come. This should be seen as a gain not a pain. Bar associations, with their focus on community development, are a natural fit for the unique talents and values of millennial leaders. While it’s normal to like constancy, doing things the “same old way” isn’t a recipe for success in an era of hyper change. The CBA must adapt and evolve to best serve the interests of attorneys, their clients, and the profession, and millennials are ready to take a leading role in this purpose-driven work. 

NOTES

1. See Dimock, “Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins,” Pew Research Center (Jan. 17, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins>.
2. Fry, “Millennials are the largest generation in the U.S. labor force,” Pew Research Center (Apr. 11, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force>.
3. These are ballpark figures. The US Labor Department doesn’t provide data based on generational lines because there is no official demarcation for the various generations. See Zumburum, “How to Tell if a Fact about a Millennial Isn’t Actually a Fact,” *Wall Street J.* (Nov. 27, 2014), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-REB-29210>.
4. Moore, “Millennials Work For Purpose, Not Paycheck,” *Forbes* (Oct. 2, 2014), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/karlmoore/2014/10/02/millennials-work-for-purpose-not-paycheck/?sh=682555106a51>.
5. For an interesting article on this topic, see Goleman, “Millennials: The Purpose Generation,” Korn Ferry, <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/this-week-in-leadership/millennials-purpose-generation> (“Which generation cares more about society? It’s a moot point. The better question is, who has the most power to change things?”).