

# CORE COMPETENCIES FOR LEADING TODAY'S WORKFORCE

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A massive changing of the guard in the workforce has millennials taking center stage in the organizational agenda. The eldest of some 80 million baby boomers have already filed for Social Security as others are in queue. Baby boomers are history's largest, most wealthy, and influential generation, and they are not ready for "their ways" to be challenged.

Despite their values differences, Gen Xers "get" baby boomers and tend to fly under the radar when it comes to pushing their own agenda. They define the skill of "managing upward." Gen X has been patiently awaiting its turn to lead, and now millennials have burst onto the scene pronouncing, "What have you done for me lately?"

The millennial generation's size is equal to that of the baby boomers (80 million strong). According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, millennials currently make up about 25 percent of the U.S. workforce (40 million). The eldest have been working for about 8 years, and the rest of them will be punching the clock within the next 10 years—making them the largest age cohort in the workforce in the near future.

## Millennial Mayhem: Hype or Reality?

There seems to be two emerging opinions about the millennial phenomenon. One view is that the fuss about millennials can be attributed to *trend inflation* or a conspiracy on the part of consultants to create a new market. Trend inflation is the notion that you can create perception, if not reality, by saying something is so over and over.

The other view is that millennials do indeed have different values and attitudes that present managerial leaders with *real* challenges. If you work with millennials, odds are you fall into the second camp. We believe the buzz about millennials is in part the result of a generational clash about attitudes, values, and expectations.

## Our Curiosity

Having a seat in both the boardroom and the classroom has allowed us to notice some of the challenges millennials present. We have witnessed a growing frustration among managers and business leaders as they attempt to integrate younger workers into their organizations. We wanted to go beyond anecdotal musing, so we interviewed hundreds of leaders to get an understanding of whether or not the intergenerational tensions were real, and if so, why, and what could be done about it. The stories we heard portrayed reactions that ranged from amazement to incredulity to outrage. We found tension between generations to be real, the causes surprising, and the remedy readily accessible.

We interviewed two types of managers—people whose organizations thought were effective at managing millennials and people whose companies thought they struggled with the task. We were surprised to learn that both populations (the effective and the challenged) perceived the millennials similarly. Words like “entitled,” “brash,” and “smart” were common in all of the interview transcripts. The focus groups produced no discord or strong disagreement between the groups.

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Among other things, our study revealed differences in perspective that make or break what we call *generational rapport*. An underlying premise of our findings is that the people with the most responsibility have to adapt first. It may sound cliché, but by reaching out first, managers will create an environment in which the less mature will adapt. The chart below explains the differences in perspective between the effective and challenged managers.

## Suspending the Bias of Your Experience

You don’t have to be a generational diversity expert to be effective at leading millennials. As we continued to sift our data, we found that the single most important differentiator between the effective managerial leaders and those who were challenged was that the effective ones exhibited the ability to suspend the bias of their own experience. In other words, they started with the

| Perspective   | The Effective Managers  | The Challenged Managers  |
|---------------|---|--|
| Adaptability  | Talked about their own need to change in order to manage in “today’s world”           | Talked about how others needed to change in order to make it in the “real world” |
| Self-efficacy | Believed there was something they could do about their situation                      | Believed that there was little they could do about their situation               |
| Confidence    | Allowed their subordinates to challenge them (ideas, processes, ways of doing things) | Sanctioned or punished their subordinates for challenging them                   |
| Power         | Used the power of relationship versus the power of their position                     | Felt the only power they had was their positional authority                      |
| Energy        | Working with millennials made them feel younger                                       | Working with millennials made them feel older                                    |
| Success       | Saw themselves as key to the millennials’ success                                     | Saw the millennials as an impediment to their own success                        |

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## *Effective leaders started with the millennials' experience and not their own.*

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millennials' experience and not their own. If people cannot suspend the bias of their own experience, they will insist that "the way I did it" is the blueprint for everyone else. The inability to suspend the bias of one's own experience inhibits self-reflection or learning. Simply put, failing to suspend the bias of one's own experience excuses managerial leaders from the adaptive work that is required of them to lead in today's world.

Part of the adaptive process is getting outside of the orbit of your own experience and entering the world in which millennials live. Adapting does not mean acquiescing to the whims of an individual or a generation. Adaptive managers have the ability to create environments that allow for enough discomfort so that people will feel the need to change but are safe enough so that they can change.

### **An Example of Leader Bias**

The majority of today's managers (like the generations before them) grew up in a world where the primary access to information or knowledge was through relationships. The gateway to learning was through an authority figure. Millennials are the first generation that does not need an authority figure to access information. Their primary gateway to information is the Internet. Cameron Johnson gave us incredible insight into his generation: "We're a generation in which *I don't know* isn't in our vocabulary, as the answer is always just a search away." Millennials do not have a "felt need" to reach up and tap into their leader's experience or knowledge. Conversely, many of the managers we

interviewed *didn't think it was their job* to reach down, or they simply didn't know how. If you think about it, that changes the dynamic of how one relates to authority. One manager honestly quipped, "I kissed a lot of butts to get where I am today and now it is time for someone to kiss mine."

### **Nine Points of Tension Between Leaders and Millennials**

Although good communication can transform tension into greater understanding of one another that ultimately results in a stronger relationship, it is difficult to talk about something you don't quite fully understand.

Success at anything is often dependent upon the ability to focus on what really matters. The value of our work is that it provides leaders with a divining rod of sorts. We identify nine specific points of tension between managers and millennials, provide an explanation of why tension exists, and offer strategies for using tension as a means to connect rather than allowing it to mutate into conflict (see chart on p. 21).

The nine points of tension are related to how millennials are perceived in the workplace. While studying in detail the statements collected during interviews with managers and millennial employees, we recognized a pattern of responses that we refer to as *perceived orientations* of millennials. The orientations are *autonomous, entitled, imaginative, self-absorbed, defensive, abrasive, myopic, unfocused, and indifferent*. We use the term "perceived" because the orientations are based on how managers reported their experience of working with millennials. Perceptions are not necessarily reality, but perceptions acted upon often become reality.

In order to test the face validity of our model, we asked hundreds of millennial participants in our study for their reactions to the perceived orientations. Believe it or not, they agreed with the descriptions! We were just as surprised at the response as you probably are. The reason millennials resonate with the *perceived orientations* is because they recognize that the *intrinsic values*

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*“I avoid giving feedback that is not positive because I don’t want to deal with the drama.”*

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they hold cause their cohort to be perceived just as we described.

It is worth noting that most of the millennials we interviewed were both amused and intrigued by all of the attention they are receiving. Of course, one of their intrinsic values is *attention*.

## Competencies Leaders Need to Master

The *core competencies* we identified in the effective managers are a proactive response to the *perceived millennial orientations* and the *millennial intrinsic values*. The millennial orientations listed in the chart below are a reflection of how millennial values are perceived by

managers. The millennial intrinsic values describe the core values that characterize millennials. Managerial competencies refer to the specific ways effective managers adapt to millennials in the workplace.

We can’t go into detail about all of the competencies in this article but let’s discuss the *defensive orientation* to demonstrate how the competencies can diffuse tension and build rapport.

## The Defensive Orientation, the Value of Achievement, and the Competency of Disarming

“We don’t expect them to be our best friends but when they critique us we want them to do it in a friendly way.”

A Millennial

One real estate office manager we interviewed sighed and said, “Sometimes I avoid giving feedback that is not positive because I don’t want to deal with the drama.” It was not an uncommon sentiment. Millennials often experience anger, guardedness, offense, and resentment, and shift responsibility in response to critique and evaluation. They want to be told when they are doing well but not when they are doing poorly.

Millennials are experienced as defensive because *achievement* is the intrinsic value that drives their need

| Perceived Millennial Orientations | Millennial Intrinsic Value | Required Managerial Competency |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Autonomous                        | Work-Life Balance          | Flexing                        |
| Entitled                          | Reward                     | Incenting                      |
| Imaginative                       | Self-Expression            | Cultivating                    |
| Self-Absorbed                     | Attention                  | Engaging                       |
| Defensive                         | Achievement                | Disarming                      |
| Abrasive                          | Informality                | Self-Differentiating           |
| Myopic                            | Simplicity                 | Broadening                     |
| Unfocused                         | Multitasking               | Directing                      |
| Indifferent                       | Meaning                    | Motivating                     |

to be affirmed. Feedback that is not interpreted as being affirming is met with anything from incredulity to attack. Some suggest that hovering or overnurturing parents and praise-based curricula have created environments in which children have not been allowed to fail. Some argue that constant affirmation has undermined genuine recognition and left too many members of the millennial generation without the sense of security required to tolerate criticism or even listen to it.

The *bias of experience* that leaders have to overcome before they can practice the competency of *disarming* is illustrated by this manager's recall of his early career experience: "They [managers] didn't care about our feelings or if we were going to quit. If you were lucky they would shut the door, but people down the hall could still hear the 'butt chewing.'" Several managers did not think they would have become successful without having had a manager or supervisor who was willing to get tough with them. For many of the managers in our focus groups, the rough handling they received while coming up through the ranks was a badge of honor or rite of passage.

The competency of *disarming* can be as simple as taking an employee aside and letting her know that she wasn't the first person to make a particular mistake and she won't be the last. Another great strategy is to use your own failure as an example, like "I remember the first time I tried to call on a client. I backed into his car while leaving."

One of the "best practices" we heard was from a millennial who is an assistant manager at a surf and skate shop. He approached one of his friends who worked for him and asked, "Dude, why didn't you show up for work yesterday?" Evidently the friend's response was not satisfactory to the young manager and so he continued, "We're friends and we will always be friends but if you ever hang me out like that again, I'll have to replace you. Now, where do you want to go for lunch?" The conversation took less than two minutes but it revealed volumes. In some ways, it violated convention—done in public and confrontational. But the result was remarkable, evidenced by the friend's response: "You are right. I get it. I won't let you down again. How about Chipotle?"

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## *The competencies listed could be effective with every generation.*

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Here's what we learned from this remarkable young manager through this one encounter:

- The less pomp and circumstance, the better.
- Assure them about your relationship with them.
- Invite them to look forward to better times.

You may be saying to yourself, "The competencies listed could be effective with every generation. It is just good management." We agree. The competencies will work with every generation, but they are vitally important when it comes to managing millennials.

## **Leaders Are the Key to the Millennial Puzzle**

When it comes to addressing generational tension in the workplace, we identified managerial leaders as key to the solution because they have the greatest amount of responsibility and influence with respect to daily duties and interactions. That, coupled with the fact that employees leave managers and not organizations, leads us to believe that equipping managerial leaders is the best way to address the challenge of integrating millennials into the workforce.

All of the managers in our study had incredible experience and tacit knowledge (not written down) that is crucial to the future of their organizations. We believe that the nine competencies will help create environments in which knowledge is transferred, and both managers and millennials can contribute to the success of one another and their organizations.



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*For information about “Managing the Millennials” training programs and materials, visit [www.redtreeleadership.com](http://www.redtreeleadership.com).*