Mentoring Mill

Delivering the feedback Gen Y craves is easier than you think. by Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd
The makeup of the global workforce is undergoing a seismic shift: In four years Millennials—the people born between 1977 and 1997—will account for nearly half the employees in the world. In some companies, they already constitute a majority.

That shift may sound daunting to the managers charged with coaching these young workers, who have a reputation for being attention sponges. However, our research into the varying expectations and needs of employees across four generations has given us a more nuanced view of Millennials and uncovered several resource-efficient ways to mentor them.

We polled 2,200 professionals across a wide range of industries, asking about their values, their behavior at work, and what they wanted from their employers. The Millennials, we saw, did want a constant stream of feedback and were in a hurry for success, but their expectations were not as outsized as many assume. That’s good news for organizations wondering just who will mentor this rising generation. Baby Boomers are retiring, and Gen X may not be large enough to shoulder the responsibility alone. In the U.S., for instance, the 88 million Millennials vastly outnumber Gen Xers, who are just 50 million strong.

Millennials view work as a key part of life, not a separate activity that needs to be “balanced” by it. For that reason, they place a strong emphasis on finding work that’s personally fulfilling. They want work to afford them the opportunity to make new friends, learn new skills, and connect to a larger purpose. That sense of purpose is a key factor in their job satisfaction; according to our research, they’re the most socially conscious generation since the 1960s.
“Oh, they want total fulfillment?” managers may be thinking. “Is that all?” Yes, Millennials have high expectations of their employers—but they also set high standards for themselves. They’ve been working on their résumés practically since they were toddlers, because there are so many of them and so few (relatively speaking) spots at top schools and top companies. They’re used to overachieving academically and to making strong personal commitments to community service. Keep them engaged, and they will be happy to overachieve for you.

However, they want a road map to success, and they expect their companies to provide it. If you’re not careful, grooming them for leadership roles could drain your managers’ energy. To help you, we’ve identified three kinds of mentoring that will prepare Millennials for success without requiring your experienced staffers to spend all their time coaching. While these approaches will work with employees in other generations, too, they’re especially effective with Millennials, because they suit this cohort’s mobile, collaborative lifestyle and need for immediacy.

**Reverse Mentoring**

This approach shifts the responsibility for organizing mentoring to line employees, who learn from senior executives by mentoring them. A Millennial is matched to an executive and assigned to teach him or her how to, say, use social media to connect with customers. It’s an effective way to give junior employees a window into the higher levels of the organization, so that when the mentees retire, the younger generation has a better understanding of the business.

At Burson-Marsteller, a PR and communications firm with offices in 85 countries, a pilot program of reverse mentoring is bridging experiential divides. The company conducted training for both Millennial mentors and their older mentees, establishing ground rules around confidentiality. “It’s difficult not to slip into our traditional roles,” says Michele Chase, the managing director of worldwide human resources. “But this arrangement is building relationships. The mentors are getting access to more senior people, and they get to go behind the scenes, so to speak, to see how leaders think and offer insights.”

Inevitably, there are times when the older mentees give feedback or advice to their young associates, so in effect, the coaching becomes mutual. The added benefit to the younger workers is a potentially accelerated career track, as the mentoring arrangement raises their profile among senior executives of the firm. And the executive mentees have the oppor-
also allowed them to hear—quickly—from a broad set of people and find out whether they were on the right track. For instance, after an all-hands meeting, an employee could send requests for feedback to five people. “Was it relevant?” they might ask. “Did it cover the content you needed?” The length limit forces people to think carefully about their responses, and because they must respond so immediately, they’re able to provide useful detail. The software involved also collates the responses into a performance dashboard, so employees can track their own private trend lines on skills they are working to improve.

What’s one thing I can do to be more successful in my role at the company?

**FEEDBACK 1**
Hey, it’s Joe, your manager: Ask for more feedback from other members of your team.

**FEEDBACK 2**
You tend to leave things to the last minute. Plan your time better and start earlier.

**FEEDBACK 3**
You cut people off when you get excited about your ideas. It comes across as disrespectful whether you mean to be or not.

**MILLENNIAL**
Great suggestions, everyone. Will create a space on our team site where I will post early drafts of my project plan and get your input. I’ll demo at our next meeting.
BT employees can view content on Dare2share and rate each learning module according to its relevance and quality. If they want to learn more about the topic covered by a module, they can connect with the person who posted it and ask for more information.

Though just out of its four-month proof-of-concept stage, the program is already producing results: New hires now get up to speed more quickly, and training costs have fallen. Among some executives, Dare2share has become the communication tool of choice. For instance, the CEO of one business unit now uses it to report quarterly results via short videos, which give his message broader exposure.

Anonymous Mentoring
This method uses psychological testing and a background review to match mentees with trained mentors outside the organization. Exchanges are conducted entirely online, and both the mentee and the mentor, who is usually a professional coach or seasoned executive, remain anonymous. The engagement, generally paid for by the mentee’s company, lasts six to 12 months. In a typical exchange, the mentee might send a message such as this:

Hey Mentor,
Tomorrow afternoon I’m presenting our Q4 forecast to the board of directors. I am delivering some bad news and am quite nervous. In fact, I’m VERY nervous! Can you help?

The mentor might respond:

Hey Mente,
I got your message, and you should know that I have done literally hundreds of presentations—of good news and bad.

When I have bad news, I like to present a benefit/cost analysis of the news. I have found that quantifying it takes away the subjectivity of the message (and the messenger) and allows all parties to focus on what they can do to fix it.

Go there with a mitigation plan, i.e., some potential solutions to your bad news. I have found that boards like to make decisions, so giving them a set of options to choose from is great!

Finally, rehearse your presentation with someone. Let whoever is your audience be very critical of you. That way the real experience will be much easier.

Good luck, and let me know how it went.

One of the mentors we spoke with is Bob Wall, 64, of Connecticut. Having spent 29 years as a consultant and executive coach, he at first couldn’t imagine that anonymous mentoring could work. But once he was matched with a mentee, he was amazed at how well they were paired. “I felt like I had a twin out there somewhere,” he told us. “It turned out to be a highly intimate relationship while remaining completely anonymous.” In fact, “when the six months was up, it was like losing a dear friend.”

We heard from both mentors and mentees that the anonymity was an unexpected boon. Joanna Sherriff, 33, the vice president of creative services at Decision Toolbox, is just such a mentee. “My original thought was that it would be odd, and it was awkward initially,” she says. “In the long run, though, I could see why the anonymity was required. I would never have shared with my mentor some of the things I did if he or she had known my identity or my company.”

An additional benefit? Time zones don’t matter. Sherriff works from her home in Tauranga, New Zealand, and her mentor was in the United States.

An Edge for the Whole Organization
Improving your company’s ability to give employees honest, timely, and useful coaching won’t benefit just your 20-something workers. When we asked our survey respondents to rate the importance of eight different managerial skills, respondents in all generations placed a high premium on having a manager who “will give straight feedback.” And yet when we asked 300 heads of HR to rate their managers’ competence in the same eight skills, giving feedback was ranked dead last. Clearly, that’s a critical gap companies need to bridge.

All employees want to feel valued, empowered, and engaged at work. This is a fundamental need, not a generational issue. And, though Gen Xers and Millennials openly discuss and even demand more flexibility in their jobs, Boomers and Traditionalists (also known as the “Silent Generation”) want it too, even if they are less vocal about it. You can think of the Millennials as pushing for change that all generations want to see happen.

“Am I continuing to learn and grow?” is a question that resonates with employees of all ages. The way your organization helps them answer that question may be your competitive advantage in attracting, developing, and keeping tomorrow’s talent.

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