

# Mentoring Gen Y's

Building successful intergenerational and developmental relationships

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## **Abstract**

Millennials (Gen Ys), who are born between 1981 and 2001, are the fastest growing segment of today's workforce. With the large exodus of Baby Boomers, the US faces a significant labor shortage, which Millennials play a key role in rebuilding. As a result, organizations are experiencing increased age diversity, and a greater demand for intergenerational collaboration and mentoring. Intergenerational understanding and developmental relationships will be paramount to organizational effectiveness and the long-term success of Millennials within their profession.

A recent survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers of over 1, 500 Millennials indicate that training and development are a highly valued employee benefit, and 98 percent believe working with strong coaches and mentors is an important part of their development. Traditionally, age and experience are given more respect and credibility within organizations, particularly when adults and young adults work collaboratively. Recognizing the diverse skills and resources Millennials contribute and entering into age diverse relationships with equity are essential tools when fostering professional leadership skills in young adults.

In this paper, the author will discuss intergenerational collaboration and intercultural competence as a strategy for developing successful mentor/protégé relationships across generational differences. The author will review generational characteristics, debunk common misconceptions of Millennials, and demonstrate how intercultural competencies can be applied to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to build intergenerational developmental relationships with equity and mutual respect.

## Introduction

It is important to note that cultural and generational generalizations are grounded in academic scholarship but are not finite. In this section, generalizations are presented based upon the work of generational theorists, educators, and professionals.

Interculturalists recognize that within each cultural group there are exceptions.

Generalizations made of any specific group can be seen as typical or common, but do not bind all affiliated individuals to these characteristics, values or behaviors.

Millennials (Gen Ys), who are born between 1981 and 2001, are the fastest growing segment of today's workforce. With the large exodus of Baby Boomers, the US faces a significant labor shortage, which Millennials play a key role in rebuilding. In the Harvard Business Review it was reported that "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" (Meister & Willyerd, 2010, p. 1). As a result, organizations are experiencing increased age diversity, and a greater demand for intergenerational mentoring. Intergenerational understanding and developmental relationships will be paramount to organizational effectiveness and the long-term success of Millennials within their professions.

Age diversity presents organizations with a unique opportunity to tap into a varied pool of talent and resources. Many organizations seek diversity, yet struggle with the unique challenges which arise when people from different cultures interact with one another. Intercultural training is a common approach used by professional teams and organizations to improve their understanding of difference as across ethnicity, nationality, and/or gender. However, generational culture has not been as widely recognized as a cultural issue, but rather a developmental one. In the simplest of terms, culture can be defined as the learned and shared values, beliefs and behaviors of an interacting group (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Generational Theorists Strauss & Howe (as cited by Tooker, 2006) suggest each generation has a set of shared experiences which shape their values, beliefs and behaviors. In addition to other cultural influences, their generational culture also establishes common values on work, family, quality of life, and overall world view (Tooker, 2006). Intergenerational mentors and protégés can benefit from having a more complex understanding of how their generation has shaped their values and how those values differ. The ability to understand and accept those differences facilitates the mutual respect and equity necessary to foster successful intergenerational developmental relationships.

While it is not unusual for there to be an age difference between a mentor and protégé, it is the fast growing numbers of Millennials, their readiness for mentoring, and the misconceptions of their generation which makes an intercultural approach to these relationships relevant. Therefore, we begin by identifying the cultural markers of those generations most represented in today's workforce; Baby Boomers, Gen X'ers and Millennials (GenY's). Every 20 years, give or take a year or two, a new generation is born. Millennials are the most recent generation and are shaped, more so than any other generation, by the changes in technology. This generation is tech savvy having grown up with technology, they are more reliant on it and prefer electronic communication to more traditional forms (Everett Community College, 2011). Chatting, texting, and using online interfaces like Facebook and webinars fall well within their comfort zone. They find new and creative uses for technology, and do not see it as a deterrent to the development of their interpersonal skills, but rather as a tool for facilitating new and existing while diversifying their skill set (Hall, 2007; Tooker, 2006; Wieck, 2007).

Millennials are a very ambitious generation; they have mastered the life-work balance. They prioritize family over work, and would rather work a flex schedule or trade high pay for fewer hours (Everett Community College, 2011; Meister & Willeyard, 2010). This generation is not afraid to question authority and ask for what they want, which is to be included and involved. They are also achievement oriented as they were raised by parents with very high expectations. Uniquely this generation has great relationships with their parents and family (Tooker, 2006, p. 20). The close familial relationships have birthed a generation which is confident, and used to being pampered and nurtured. Because of their family systems, Millennials want to have the same nurturing experience with employers. They seek constant feedback and validation and expect employers to mentor. Additionally, they expect employers to support meaningful work and the workplace being an environment for learning (Meister & Willyerd, 2010, p. 1). They like to receive feedback and input from others, and are quite open to guidance and mentoring, making them ideal for developmental relationships within today's organizations (Everett Community College, 2011).

Proceeding the Millennials is Gen X or the "Me" generation, those born between 1965 and 1980. This generation is most identified by putting oneself first, in addition to being incredibly diverse and well educated, with over 60% who attended college (Everett Community College, 2011). This generation was often raised by two incomes families, so they were the first generation of "latch key" kids; children who came home from school to an empty house. This created an individualistic, independent and resourceful

generation who resisted authority. In the workplace, Gen X'ers prefer autonomy with managers who take a "hands-off" approach, and are ambitious and eager to learn (Everett Community College, 2011; Wieck, 2007). This generation was introduced to technology early in their careers so they are comfortable and confident with technology, yet understand the value of a phone call and handwritten note. Gen X'ers aim for a life-work balance, believing one must work hard and play hard. Many in this generation had parents who were workaholics so they committed less to their employer and have been willing to change jobs or careers to improve their quality of life (Hall, 2007).

Different from both Gen X'ers and Millennials, Baby Boomers, are well established in their careers, although, as noted earlier, will be soon retiring and leaving the work force in droves. Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964, and earned their name from the post World War II baby boom, marked by 79 million babies being born in this era (Rosenberg, 2012). Baby Boomers currently are in positions of power and authority within our educational and political systems. This generation identifies itself as hardworking and is motivated by position, power, and prestige. Known as workaholics, they are very career focused and goal oriented. They equate hard work with position, and resent those who do not seem to work as hard as they do (Everett Community College, 2011; Wieck, 2007). This generation grew up in the 70's during times of radical change and reform, so they are comfortable questioning authority and the status quo. As a result, Baby Boomers see themselves as agents of change, who are independent, confident, and most importantly, self reliant (Everett Community College, 2011; Wieck, 2007). This generation was introduced to technology late in their careers, and it has been embraced by some and resisted by others. Most put more value on face to face interactions, and perceive the reliance on technology as a lack of interpersonal skills (Hall, 2007, p. 22).

The differing values and approach to work are the generational culture differences which pose potential barriers to intergenerational developmental relationships. For example, if a Baby Boomer mentors a Millennial, and they value putting in long days at the office, while the Millennial protégé believes they would be more productive with a flex schedule which allows them to also work remotely, and neither understands how or why the other holds those values, their behavior could be unfairly attributed to personality, creating conflict within the relationships. There is potential for cross cultural conflict when our values, beliefs and behaviors are not shared, it impairs our ability to effectively engage with someone else with understanding. These types of value differences create bias when others attitudes and behaviors are judged because they are inconsistent with another's values, beliefs and behaviors. Where Gen X'ers and

Millennials may perceive Boomers as antiquated and no longer relevant in a technology reliant world, Millennials have been labeled entitled, lazy, disinterested in hard work, over eager to achieve success and wealth, disconnected, lacking in interpersonal skills, and over reliant on technology. In most cases, it is Boomers and Gen X'ers who are organizational leaders, addressing the misperceptions of Millennials is vital to their ability to lead and integrate this new generation into the workforce.

The misconceptions of Millennials could not be farther from the truth. Educator Jeff Tooker (2006) "discovered...that with all of the concerns coming from the adult worlds about our youth, the Millennials have been reversing negative youth trends and are perhaps becoming the most prepared generation in American History to lead our country" (p. 19). Tooker (2006) finds Millennials to be civic minded, with high levels of trust and confidence (p. 20). In fact, research finds that "this generation is not seeking to distance itself from community, but is instead looking for new and distinctive ways to connect to the people and issues surrounding them" (Tolman & Pittman, 2001, p. 7). A survey done in 1998 by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Do Something (as cited by Tolman & Pittman, 2001) found 73% of young people aged 15-29 believe that they can have a big or moderate impact on making their community a better place to live (p. 8). With this more balanced understanding of Millennials, other generations are better positioned to have a more complex perception of them, an increased understanding of the values which shape their beliefs and behaviors, and a greater acceptance of difference necessary to facilitate meaningful and productive intergenerational developmental relationships.

## **Mentor and Protégé Relationships**

An excellent definition of the mentor-protégé developmental relationship comes from Lois J. Zachary (2005), president of Leadership Development Services and mentoring author, who says, “Mentoring is a reciprocal learning relationship in which mentoring partners agree to a partnership in which they work collaboratively toward achieving mutually defined goals that focus on developing mentee skills, abilities, knowledge, and/or thinking” (as cited in Zachary, 2009, p.76). In the best possible cases, the mentor does not hold any bias or judgment towards the protégé in order for there to be effective reciprocity. The mentor-protégé relationship must be entered into with a sense of equity and mutual respect to be successful, with understanding and acceptance of generational differences. It is no longer an effective model for mentors to assume superiority to the protégé. While this may have been a coveted position of former generations who give more credence to position, the Millennials will reject, question, and challenge it. As Zachary (2009) clearly states, “The current paradigm [for mentoring] has evolved...The mentee plays an active role, the mentor functions as a learning facilitator rather than an authority, and critical reflection and self-directed learning drive the relationship” (p. 76). The Millennial protégé has different needs, desires, and attitudes from former generations.

Millennials are eager for guidance and feedback; they seek mentoring as one of the many tools they will need to succeed. Meister and Willyerd (2010) found that “...they want a road map to success, and they expect their companies to provide it” (p. 2)” and “They want work to afford them the opportunity to make new friends, learn new skills, and connect to a larger purpose” (Meister & Willyerd, 2010, p. 1). Zachary states, “A mentor’s role is to facilitate your growth and development “(Zachary, 2009, p. 77) making it necessary for mentors to explore various approaches to establish the mentor and protégé relationships which are culturally appropriate for both.

## Intercultural Competence

Developing intercultural competence is a practical approach to foster developmental relationships across generational difference for the mentors and protégés affording them the opportunity to understand their differences with more complexity and less judgment. The most agreed upon definition of intercultural competence comes from the work of researcher Darla Deardorff who consulted with the top 20 interculturalists practicing today and concluded that it encompasses “The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (as cited in Deardorff, 2006, p. 247) and includes “...the ability to shift one’s frame of reference appropriately, the ability to achieve one’s goals to some degree, and behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 248). Similarly, Alvino Fantini (2000) identified that intercultural competence requires knowledge (cognition), skills (behavior), awareness (of self and others), and attitude (affect) to develop and maintain relationships, communicate effectively, and cooperate and comply with others (pp. 28-29). The application of intercultural competence to generational differences creates the opportunity to gain the knowledge, skills, awareness, and attitudes which empower the mentor and protégé to understand the others worldview and the lens from which they see it.

Increasing intercultural competence must be recognized as a developmental process. It requires practice, time, and most importantly self-awareness to successfully advance ones competencies. The process begins with awareness of self and the exploration into one’s own attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. It is easier to recognize the differences in others when we have a more thorough understanding of our own worldview. Increasing self awareness demands critical reflection of one’s own worldview and perceptions of others. This can be a transformative experience as one challenges their own values, beliefs, and behaviors (Fantini, 2000, p. 29). In most cases, humans operate on “auto-pilot” making unconscious choices and assumptions everyday with little consideration or thought to the underlying value differences which may influence our own behavior and that of others. Increased intercultural competence opens the door to a greater consciousness or awareness of those cultural differences when engaging with others. The ability to accurately analyze and accept diverse worldviews is the transformation. Darla Deardorff (2006) noted in her research, “It is important to note that only one element received 100% agreement from intercultural scholars, which is “the understanding of others’ world views”. This substantiates other literature that upholds respect for others worldviews as essential to intercultural competence where world view is described as basic perceptions and understandings of the world” (Deardorff,

2006, p. 248). Based on the knowledge of generational differences, it is more evident that the basic perceptions and understandings of the world are different, yet equally real and relevant.

When an individual is interculturally competent, they possess abilities and traits that equip them to navigate difference more effectively and appropriately. Increased intercultural competence develops the ability to suspend judgment and tolerate ambiguity. Other traits are respect, patience, empathy, flexibility, curiosity, openness, motivation, and humor (Fantini, 2000, p. 28). This equips the mentor or protégé to be able to perceive difference without judgment. An interculturally competent mentor will have the “Ability to identify behaviors guided by culture and engage in new behaviors in other cultures even when behaviors are unfamiliar given a person’s own socialization” (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). An intercultural competent individual is able to match their own culturally informed behaviors which equip them to better assess with culturally informed behavior in others and appropriately adapt their own behavior when necessary. Darla Deardorff’s Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence demonstrates how the process of developing these requisite attitudes, skills and knowledge produce a set of internal and external outcomes of increased intercultural understanding and improved intercultural behaviors (Deardorff & Hunter, 2006). The mentor and protégé are able to more accurately interpret behavior, understand the value differences influencing behavior, and make different choices about their own behavior to co-create a developmental relationship where both are able to accept differences and appropriately adapt their behavior.

## Conclusion

Intergenerational developmental relationships can be a benefit to mentors and protégés and their organizations. When intergenerational relationships are entered into with equity and reciprocity it can result in relationships which are more productive and inclusive, greater creativity and adaptability, better decision making, a higher level of individual engagement and satisfaction, legacy building, and the creation of new opportunities.

However, these types of developmental relationships come with the added complexity of generational culture differences. To facilitate the success of these relationships, mentors and protégés who apply intercultural competence as an approach to bridging the culture gap are more likely and better equipped to enter into the developmental relationship with the mutual respect and equity necessary to facilitate learning and growth. Author Valerie Taylor offers, “Mentoring is a tool for evaluating your current competencies, identifying competency gaps, and developing strategies to acquire new and required competencies.” (Taylor, 1999, p. 12). If either mentor or protégé recognize generational culture differences as a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of the relationship, identifying intercultural competence as a gap, and utilizing it as a strategy provides each with the attitudes, skills and knowledge needed to foster a learning relationship across generational differences. Considering intercultural competence as an approach to understanding generational culture differences offers organizations committed to the development of their Millennial employees a strategy for more fulfilling and productive intergenerational development relationships.

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