

Millennial in Training

Today's young workers are ready to manage and lead in today's workplace, argues authors Michael Watkins and PJ Neal..

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Facebook Inc.'s Mark Zuckerberg is 30. Tech entrepreneur and investor Sean Parker is 35. With that in mind, how old is your next boss — or for that matter, your current boss?

Baby boomers are retiring in droves, and Generation X isn't far behind. Next up in the C-suite: the generation that gave us Zuckerberg and Parker. Millennials, the fresh wave of workers born between the early 1980s and early 2000s, will make up 75 percent of the workforce by 2025. And they're already in leadership roles.



Yet some companies are unprepared to deal with this rapidly unfolding generational shift in leadership. It's all too easy to believe that current approaches for developing leaders will work for millennials — they won't. A focus on leadership development as usual will leave you vulnerable to losing the best and brightest of your youthful workforce. You can embrace the challenge of doing what it really takes to develop millennial leaders or watch them walk out the door to head up a competitor's operation.

Unlike Zuckerberg and Parker, most of your new-generation leadership will begin as first-level managers. But they will share a commonality with high-profile tech entrepreneurs who manage virtual teams, lead across cultures and adapt to new technologies. Their experience as the first truly diverse and digital generation has prepared them well to lead the next generation.

But learning to wield authority effectively and managing performance issues with sufficient toughness will need more and different developmental attention than previous generations. Because much of their development experience has honed their ability to form and maintain peer

network, they could find it difficult to be a boss. New millennial leaders are more likely than their predecessors to try to continue to play the role of peer rather than embrace what it truly means to be a leader.

Dealing with technology, innovation and culture — a focal point of leadership development for previous generations — will largely take care of itself. Leadership development for millennials, paradoxically, must put much more emphasis on the traditional foundations of effective management.

Four Key Areas of Focus for Millennial Leaders

Want to make sure you're fully and properly developing your new millennial leaders?

Make sure you're focusing on the following critical areas:

1. Developing a leadership mindset.

Moving from individual contributor to frontline manager can be a difficult change.

Millennial leaders need to make sure they understand how to build trust and credibility, leverage emotional intelligence and begin to think of themselves as a leader, not just a contributor.

2. Leading yourself.

Millennial leaders need to make sure they develop personal agility to survive in today's environment. Focus on development areas such as agility, time and stress management, and delegation skills.

3. Leading others.

Two key areas for millennial leaders are accelerating talent development and developing high-performing teams. Focus on how to give feedback, be a coach, manage a team and effectively deal with team conflict.

4. Leading the business.

Millennial leaders need to successfully and effectively drive execution. They need to know how to create alignment within their team and effectively make decisions in a manner that results in their team members and stakeholders feel like they've been listened to.

—Michael Watkins and PJ Neal

Just what will these young leaders encounter? A much more complex world than that of previous generations, dominated by technology and characterized by a rapid pace of change.

They'll be operating in a world where there's no room for complacency. Organizations need to move quickly to respond to change, and as a result, frontline leaders need to act decisively, seizing opportunities when they arise.

Millennials will find that the world is their marketplace, but that the world is far from homogenized; managing across cultures and time zones is the norm. They'll be managing people much like themselves: a workforce that is increasingly looking more for flexibility and purpose than a steady paycheck and a long career with one organization.

If they don't already, millennials need to understand the reality that "employees don't quit jobs, they quit bosses." They are now those bosses, and taking care of employees is one of their most critical responsibilities.

Despite the challenges, millennials are hungry to take on leadership and managerial roles. In a recent survey, human resources consultancy Deloitte found nearly half of millennials already hold leadership roles in organizations, a higher percentage than boomers and Gen X at the same point in their generational arc.

They're Willing ... But Ready?

While it has been written time and again that millennials feel entitled and used to having things handed to them, they have a set of valuable characteristics that make them uniquely positioned to lead in today's workplace.

They're digital natives. They've grown up online, and they expect to be connected 24/7, so they don't really adhere to previous generations' steadfast notion that an office is the only place where work can be done. They have honed the ability to communicate in nuanced ways through many channels. If anything, their biggest communications challenge may be learning to be effective when they are physically present.

They're more global in their perspective, and more used to — and accepting of — diversity. It's not surprising: According to the Pew Research Center, millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation ever. With the Internet, they're able to make and maintain connections all over the world, interacting with a global community that shares their interest in gaming, music, science or film.

Millennials are used to collaborating online and are comfortable in the more fluid corporate structures replacing traditional hierarchies in many organizations. They are prepared to take the initiative and rapidly form and reform teams to get things done.

This cohort is also highly interested in innovation and voices its frustration when held back. Deloitte's survey showed that 78 percent of millennials consider an employer's ability to innovate when evaluating a job offer.

Do you buy into their argument that millennials are ready to be your boss? Can a 30-year-old lead your organization? Or department? Join us online:

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At the same time, most don't think their current employers are doing a great job with innovation. Some 63 percent say management attitude is the biggest barrier to innovation in their organization, followed by operational structures and procedures at 61 percent, and employee skills, attitudes and lack of diversity at 39 percent. Their heroes are entrepreneurs, and even if they aren't out on their own, millennials will embrace organizations where they're allowed to operate as "intrapreneurs." They want to work with purpose and make a difference.

Such attributes prime the pump for millennials to take on managerial and leadership positions in organizations today.

Making Sure They're Able

While millennials may be willing and interested in taking on leadership roles, they need to develop the skills, knowledge and attributes necessary to succeed.

For starters, if millennials are going to be managing others, they need to build management fundamentals, including basic managerial tasks such as performance management. Even if some of the systems and procedures seem outdated, they will still need to learn how to approve expenses, manage vacation requests, set up work schedules and conduct reviews. They also need to understand and be comfortable with exerting their newfound authority as a leader, including the responsibility to give feedback. They will soon learn that there is some truth to the criticisms older generations have made about managing millennials, especially when they deal with keeping their team engaged and focused.

Moving from an individual contributor position to a leadership role requires millennials to have more complex required skills such as negotiation, conflict management and coaching. And they likely will have to apply these skills to manage multigenerational mixes of former peers (often friends) and more experienced (Gen X or even baby boomer) employees.

Checking the Stats

63% of millennials say **management attitude** is the biggest barrier to innovation in their organization

followed by

81% operational structures and procedures

38% employee skills, attitudes, and lack of diversity

Source: Deloitte

Generational surveys repeatedly show that millennials have a desire to associate with organizations that have a strong sense of purpose, largely as a result of their collaborative nature and their tendency toward building networks with peers. To become managers and leaders, millennials need to fully understand the organization's strategy and mission and how their work supports that effort.

Finally, organizations need to lay the foundations as early as possible for millennials to assume even more senior roles. It will happen sooner than we can imagine, which means preparing millennial leaders to set the agenda for their organizations, establish direction and craft compelling visions for their teams, and motivate and mobilize those teams to achieve them.

Timing Is Everything

No new leaders acquire all the skills, knowledge and attributes they need to run a department or organization overnight. Much of the development of millennial leaders will happen the old-fashioned way: learning by doing and on-the-job experience.

Leadership potential shown in those first months after a transition to a new role is the most critical in determining whether a new leader succeeds. This will be as true for millennial leaders as it has been for all previous generations.

New leaders, no matter the generation, need to learn how to recognize common pitfalls that can derail them. They also must learn how to acquire the information they need fast and to use it to diagnose their situation so that they can understand the specific challenges and opportunities they'll encounter.

They need to hone their ability to set priorities for building the platform and momentum for success. They need to learn how to develop a productive relationship with their new manager, with their teams and with others. They also need to gain the all-important understanding of the organization's strategy, and how they can align behind it. While much of this applies to every leader, the reality is that millennials will need to do it faster and better.

There's no shortage of research on millennials' strengths, weaknesses, abilities and preferences, or what it takes to develop successful leaders in today's organizations. It's up to executives and HR professionals to find a way to combine the best qualities of this generation — the ability to confidently take on leadership roles and make decisions, utilize technology to solve problems and bring people together, and a desire to understand what the organization is trying to do and work to support that goal — and all that we know about what it takes to be effective managers and leaders. Providing opportunities for millennials to lead, and equipping them to succeed in their new roles, can yield tremendous benefits.

Whether we're ready or not, millennial leaders are here. We don't want to just get used to them. We want to make sure that we're tapping their potential to help our organizations, and themselves, succeed.

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