

# Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today  
Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

### Succeeding with Millennial Teachers

#### In a Nutshell

Things are changing in American classrooms. Baby Boomers, once the largest group of teachers, are retiring and they are being replaced by Millennial teachers, those born between approximately 1980 and 2000. Millennials are the first generation to grow up with computers as an accepted part of their lives and they are the most educated generation in history. They are also the most culturally diverse generation in our history, socially aware and active, and are open to change (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). What's more, they bring different attitudes and dispositions about where they work, how they do their work, and what they expect from school leaders (Taylor, 2015).

Hiring and retaining teachers and other personnel is one of the most important parts of a principal's job. The job is always easier when you have quality staff. With retirements and other turnover in staff, hiring is often a constant process made more complex by the changing demographics of people entering the teaching profession.

#### A New Generation of Teachers

Millennials already comprise more than one-third of the American population and members of this generation are graduating college and being hired as teachers throughout America. They often hold very different beliefs about work, about the workplace, and the balance between work and other things in their life (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Taylor, 2015).

Making generalizations about a whole generation of employees can be problematic. But it's important to understand the characteristics that make the Millennial generation unique. First, Millennials share an affinity and comfort with technology. Technology has been a constant in their lives and they expect that it will be available and used in the workplace. They also value working as part of a team. They're skilled at balancing multiple priorities like work, friends and family and thrive on being challenged at work. Millennials also want a clear path to advancement and expect an opportunity to immediately provide leadership in areas where they have expertise. Millennials also thrive in structured, but flexible, work settings. Perhaps the greater challenge for traditional organizations like schools is that Millennials often hold no long-term attachment to their employer or career. Changing jobs and changing residences is an accepted part of their lifestyle and they expect to do it often during their lifetime, particularly if they perceive that others don't value their expertise or if the workplace puts unreasonable demands on their personal lives (Taylor, 2015).

#### Characteristics of Millennials

- Highly educated, value education and attribute their success to education;
- Very comfortable using technology and expect it to be available in the workplace;
- Tend to be creative, innovative and self-confident;
- Committed to making a difference and contributing to positive social change;
- Want to be connected, updated and included and involved in their work;
- Incredibly diverse and comfortable with diversity in their personal and professional lives;
- Expect opportunity for growth, challenge and assignments;
- Committed to balance in their work and personal lives;
- Possess collaborative skills, are committed to team-building and are not afraid of accountability;

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## **Working with Millennial Teachers**

Because Millennials will soon comprise most of the teachers in our schools, it's important for leaders to understand, and respect, the strengths they bring to the workplace and how they can capitalize on those strengths to improve their schools. One thing that rarely works with Millennials is to force them to conform for conformity's sake. They expect to be listened to, to have their suggestions treated seriously, and to be provided reasons and rationale when their ideas are not accepted. That approach differs significantly from teachers from prior generations saw conformity as a path to advancement. For Millennials expectations to conform just because "that's the way we do things around here" is an impediment to their longevity in your school or district and will lessen their commitment to your organization (Friedman, 2015; Solomon, 2016; Vander Ark, 2014).

There are strategies that leaders can use to work well with this new generation of teachers.

**Establish shared vision and goals** – Millennials want to work in a setting with clear, shared vision including specific, measurable goals. Most importantly they want to be part of creating and owning that vision. They possess a commitment to service that is exactly the sort of value you want to cultivate. Make them feel valued. Welcome their suggestions and include them on all school decision-making and governance groups.

**Provide leadership opportunities** – Millennials expect to be involved and to assume responsibility. They don't automatically defer to more senior teachers. In fact, lack of leadership opportunity has been shown to weaken their allegiance and commitment to your school.

**Create a positive, supportive school culture** – A positive culture is important for everyone but particularly for millennials. Because they are the most diverse generation in our society, they are comfortable with diversity of all sort. Celebrate generational diversity and use cross-generational teams to work on curricular and instructional issues. But be clear that seniority isn't the most important factor in making decisions.

**Provide regular, candid feedback** – Millennials, unlike other generational groups, expect in-depth feedback because they want to contribute to the success of your school. They expect accountability, and value honest, open and personalized feedback and support.

**Embrace technology** – Millennials have had access to and used technology their entire lives. They expect the same access at school for both teachers and students. They recognize the value of technology for improving their teaching and student learning and expect that current, state of the art, technology will be available for them to use.

**Use data effectively and often** – Because millennials are comfortable with accountability they enjoy the use of data. This also sets them apart from other generations of employees including many school leaders. They want access to user-friendly data that can be used to improve their work and they are not reluctant to openly discuss the implications of data. They don't understand those that are fearful or reluctant to use data to guide their work with students.

**Encourage work/life balance** – Millennials are also clear that they will have a balance between their personal and professional lives. In fact, they believe that a healthy balance between work and one's personal life makes both better and makes them a better, more committed employee. Respect that choice and use it as a model for your own work/life balance. Unrealistic deadlines may be ignored by millennials but with advance notice they will respond appropriately. Understand that balance is important for millennials and the lack of balance may also loosen their commitment to their job and your school.

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## **Intergenerational Tension and Conflict**

The very strengths that Millennials bring to the workplace --- creativity, enthusiasm, teamwork, desire for leadership and use of technology, openness to data and accountability can create conflicts with teachers from other generations. Baby Boomers in particular may interpret a desire for work/life balance as a lack of commitment, or a desire for leadership as being impatient and unwilling to “wait their turn.” An openness to accountability and the use of data is almost anathema to Baby Boomers who often see accountability as intrusive to their work. A major national study (PriceWaterhouse, 2011) found that senior employees often didn’t enjoy working with newer Millennial employees and feel threatened by the personal drive and ambition they exhibit. Baby boomers often don’t understand Millennials’ motives, misinterpret their actions as disregard for established norms or past practice and fear that the values espoused by Baby Boomers are being rejected by those of younger employees (Solomon, 2016; Taylor, 2015).

There is no easy answer to this tension but there are things principals can do to assure their school is a comfortable and welcoming place to work for employees of all generations.

- Talk openly about differences – Get to know your teachers, regardless of generation, and spend time talking about their hopes, desires, and career path.
- Provide opportunities for shared leadership – When organizing work groups make sure that members of every generation are included. Avoid the appearance of a “senior teacher” group and a “new teacher” group.
- Create time to talk with one another – The more people talk, and learn, together, the more likely that they will be comfortable with each other. Welcome different points-of-view and value discussion of those differences.
- Encourage learning – Millennials enjoy learning and recognize the need to continue learning. Use professional development and other learning activities to build connections among teachers of different generations.

## **Final Thoughts**

Too often Millennials are seen as an overly indulged, pampered generation. That’s not an accurate reflection of the group. They were raised at a different time and have experienced different things than prior generations. They watched their parents, mostly Baby Boomers, never achieve work/life balance and wait years for advancement. They simply approach their work differently but they have much to offer employers including an intense commitment to social justice and positive social change.

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## Resources

### Online Resources

Council of Economic Advisers (2014). *Fifteen economic facts about millennials*. The White House: Author. This report has detailed demographic information on millennials. ([https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/millennials\\_report.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/millennials_report.pdf))

Friedman, N. (2015). *Making the most of millennial teacher mindsets*. This brief article provides an overview of the characteristics of millennial teachers. (<http://getttingsmart.com/2015/02/making-millennial-teacher-mindsets/>)

Moriarity, C. (2012). *Seven tips on managing millennials*. This article offers advice on how to manage the work life of millennial employees. (<http://www.businessknowhow.com/manage/millennials.htm>)

PriceWaterhouse Coopers (2011). *Millennials at work: Reshaping the workplace*. This comprehensive report examines the characteristics of millennial employees and the tensions with employees of other generations. (<https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/services/consulting/documents/millennials-at-work.pdf>)

Solomon, M. (2016). *You've got millennial employees all wrong*. This short article discusses the misconceptions others have of millennial employees. (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/micahsolomon/2016/01/26/everything-youve-heard-about-millennial-employees-is-baloney-heres-the-truth-and-how-to-use-it/#2324d70254ee>)

Vander Ark, T. (2014). *Millennials are tolerant, educated, enterprising, and hyphenated*. This article provides insight into the characteristics of millennial employees. (<http://getttingsmart.com/2014/12/millennials-tolerant-educated-enterprising-hyphenated/>)

### Print Resources

Howe, N. & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. New York: Vintage Books.

Taylor, P. (2015). *The next America*. New York: Public Affairs.

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