ARTWORK Gus Powell,
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Mentoring Mill

Delivering the feedback Gen Y craves is easier than you think. *by Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd*

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ennials

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.

Mentoring with Microfeedback

One tool that can satisfy the thirst for guidance with minimal resources is microfeedback. Think of it as performance assessment for Twitterholics—succinct and nearly real time.

Susan Hutt is now the senior vice president of services and product development at Camilion Solutions, a Toronto-based software company. At her previous job as a senior VP of Workbrain, a San Jose–based software company, she realized she needed to change the way she coached her staff. Millennials made up most of her workforce and, she says, "wanted constant feedback and information on their career progress."

Hutt instituted quarterly reviews and an online, on-demand assessment system that limited feedback to 140 characters. To employees accustomed to instant messaging, texting, and Twitter, the brief advice and suggestions for improvement felt digestible and timely, not curt. The system

"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.

What Millennials Want

...from their boss

TOP FIVE CHARACTERISTICS MILLENNIALS WANT IN A BOSS

- Will help me navigate my career path
- Will give me straight feedback
- Will mentor and coach me
- Will sponsor me for formal development programs
- Is comfortable with flexible schedules

...from their company

TOP FIVE CHARACTERISTICS MILLENNIALS WANT IN A COMPANY

- Will develop my skills for the future
- Has strong values
- Offers customizable options in my benefits/reward package
- Allows me to blend work with the rest of my life
- Offers a clear career path

...to learn

TOP FIVE THINGS MILLENNIALS WANT TO LEARN

- Technical skills in my area of expertise
- Self-management and personal productivity
- Leadership
- Industry or functional knowledge
- Creativity and innovation strategies

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.

A TYPICAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN A MILLENNIAL AND HIS TEAM MEMBERS USING AN ANONYMOUS ONLINE FEEDBACK TOOL:

MILLENNIAL

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.

tunity to gain understanding of a segment of their workforce they might not otherwise get to know.

Group Mentoring

Group mentoring is a less-resource-intensive but still effective way of giving Millennials the feedback they crave. It can be led by a more senior manager or can be peer-to-peer, but in both cases, the company sets up a technology platform that allows employees to define mentoring in their own terms.

At AT&T mentoring takes place in self-organizing, topic-based groups, which AT&T calls leadership circles. The self-organizing approach allows them to reach far more employees than programs run by HR. Using an online platform, one mentor can work with several mentees at a time—sometimes in different locations—on skills like generating sales leads or leading teams. The circles take advantage of platform features such as community forums, document-sharing spaces, group polling, and calendars that announce events and mentor availability. Since the supporting software has some built-in social-networking capability, mentees are able to connect to others with very little hands-on assistance from HR; peer-to-peer mentoring often starts to take place within a circle as it matures. Managers frequently share mentoring responsibilities within a circle—for instance, three executives might work together to advise a group of nine employees. Face-to-face meetings, conference calls, and webcasts supplement the online coaching.

BT, the British telecommunications firm, offers another example of group mentoring: a peer-to-peer learning program it calls Dare2share. "We found 78% of our employees preferred to learn from their peers, but little money or attention was focused on this," explains Peter Butler, the head of learning at BT.

Dare2share is a social collaboration platform that allows employees to pass on their knowledge and insights to their colleagues through short (five- and

10-minute) audio and video podcasts, RSS feeds, and discussion threads, as well as through traditional training documents. 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.

Improving your firm's ability to give honest, timely, and useful coaching will benefit employees of all ages.

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 Mentee,

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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