

**Author:** Sandeep Chatterjee

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Leading a diverse Millennial Generation: Lessons from Everest Base Camp Trek

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Project Management Leadership > Harmony in Diversity & Millennial Generation

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**Abstract:**

The Millennial Generation is more intelligent and smarter than the previous generation as they have evolved through Darwin's Theory of Evolution. The Everest Base Camp Trek is one of the most popular treks and is undertaken by 35000 people every year. Leading a group of youngsters from diverse B-schools, family backgrounds, tastes, idiosyncrasies was a challenging task with a war-footing scenario. This paper looks at how project management fundamentals were leveraged to pull the group together in reaching the Everest Base Camp under the most adverse conditions (snowstorms, slippery ice, dissent within the team, Altitude Mountain Sickness, lack of connectivity, non-availability of water, to name a few).

**Intent: (Mandatory)**

While the Project Management fundamentals have not undergone drastic changes, the world around us has changed considerably. As more and more millennials (also known as Generation Y) enter the workforce, we have new challenges in harmonizing the workforce. And to add to that, we are living in a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of general conditions and situations) world. The real test comes during adverse conditions and it becomes increasingly challenging to hold the team together. The only thing which is constant is 'Change' and it is imperative that we contextualize the Project Management fundamentals in managing the ever increasing complexity. The lessons learnt from the Project Everest Base Camp Trek in leading and managing a team of 10 Millennials under the most adverse conditions will help address the challenges in today's work environment.

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## Introduction

The theory of evolution by natural selection, first formulated in Darwin's book "On the Origin of Species" in 1859, is the process by which organisms change over time as a result of changes in heritable physical or behavioral traits. Evolution by natural selection is one of the best substantiated theories in the history of science, supported by evidence from a wide variety of scientific disciplines, including paleontology, geology, genetics and developmental biology.

Extending the above logic, generations have evolved following the principles of Darwin's 'Theory of Evolution'. In that respect, the current generation is a more evolved generation as it has survived the process. A generation is a group of people born around the same time and *raised* around the same place. People in this "birth cohort" exhibit similar characteristics, preferences, and values over their lifetimes. There are big differences between the generations.

Currently, five generations make up our society. Each of those five generations has an active role in the work place. Depending on the specific workplace, the workforce includes four to five generations. The following are the birth years for each generation<sup>1</sup>:

- Gen Z, iGen, or Centennials: Born 1996 and later
- Millennials or Gen Y: Born 1977 to 1995
- Generation X: Born 1965 to 1976
- Baby Boomers: Born 1946 to 1964
- Traditionalists or Silent Generation: Born 1945 and before

In the last few years, Millennials have become the largest generation in the workforce. Millennials are also the fastest-growing generation of customers in the marketplace, bringing the greatest lifetime value. In addition, Millennials exhibit different attitudes toward employment, sales, and marketing, which are challenging many conventional strategies and approaches.

## The Millennials

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<sup>1</sup> <http://genhq.com/faq-info-about-generations/>

Millennials are likely the most studied and talked about generation to date. They are the first generation in history that have grown up totally immersed in a world of digital technology, which has shaped their identities

and created lasting political, social and cultural attitudes. Millennials primarily have the following characteristics<sup>2</sup>:

(a) Multitaskers

Millennials are great multitaskers and can juggle many responsibilities at once. They are easily distracted and find social media and texting hard to resist.

(b) Connected

Millennials know everything about social media because they are living it.

(c) Tech-Savvy

There's no doubt that the majority of Millennials are more tech-savvy than other generations, although Generation Z may soon surpass them.

(d) Instant Gratification & Recognition

Millennials need to feel like what they are doing is important and that they are on the right track.

(e) Work-Life Balance & Flexibility

Millennials are not as willing as former generations to sacrifice their personal life in order to advance their careers. They like to “work hard – play hard” and want to be at a company that appreciates this desire for balance. They also expect a more flexible work environment than previous generations and want to work for a company that supports various causes.

(f) Collaboration

Millennials are extremely team-oriented and enjoy collaborating and building friendships with colleagues.

(g) Transparency

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<sup>2</sup> <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/2013/12/8-millennials-traits-you-should-know-about-before-you-hire-them>

Millennials want to feel like they have an open and honest relationship with their manager and co-workers and that there won't be any nasty surprises when they join a company.

(h) Career Advancement

Millennials want to know that they will have the opportunity to advance and develop their careers within the company they choose to join.

## The Everest Base Camp Trek

*"No place is more spectacular than the Everest region. It is where four of the world's six tallest peaks rise above everything else. On Everest Base Camp Trek we experience astounding mountain views, get glimpses of the life of the world famous climbers (the Sherpas), enter Sagarmatha National Park, a world heritage site, and tour high altitude Buddhist monasteries before accomplishing **our ultimate goal-reaching the base camp of the world's tallest mountain, Everest.** But nothing beats the thrill and sense of accomplishment that grips travellers on seeing the power and grace of the mighty Everest up close."*

Mount Everest has mesmerized men and women since the 1920s. The exploits of legends such as George Mallory, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay put the mighty mountain on the map. In 2012, between 35,000 and 37,000 people trekked in the Everest region.

XLRI Adventure and Nature Club (XLANC) organized a series of Everest Base Camp Treks from March 2017 to May 2017 comprising more than 200 students from B-Schools across India. The 14-day Trek started from Lukla (2880m) to Everest Base Camp (5364m) and Kala Patthar (5545m) and back.

## Key Challenges

The Everest Base Camp is a difficult trek but is achievable with a moderate level of fitness. The trek which we undertook from 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2017 had a total of 10 students from various B-schools and had its own share of challenges namely:

(a) Millennials:

The group comprised 10 Millennials from various B-Schools namely IIFT (Delhi), MICA (Ahmedabad), IMT (Ghaziabad), and MDI (Gurgaon) with their own idiosyncrasies. There was an age gap of around twenty years between the leader and the rest of the group and just being elder

did not help the cause. With a craving for recognition, there were 10 leaders trying to lead the other 9.

(b) Trekking Experience:

Only three people had prior trekking experience. Though trekking experience was not mandatory, a basic fitness level was necessary. And the fact that only one had trekked in the altitude made it even more daunting.

(c) Problem of unfamiliarity:

This was a very diverse group comprising 7 males and 3 Females. Each of them had a very different background in terms of quality of life, ego, upbringing and value system. They had never met before and being so individualistic, it was a herculean task pulling them together as a unit. And everybody believed that his/her thought process was the best and needed to be imposed on the group.

(d) Nature's Fury:

Usually the Everest Base Camp Trek is a difficult one but doable. But fate had a different story to tell. The group was caught in a severe snowstorm at Gorak Shep (5170m) at a temperature of -26 degree Celsius. The guide was immature and wanted the group to trek under those circumstances as they had lost valuable time.

(e) Difficult conditions:

Some of the group members had joined the trek assuming it to be a luxury trip. It was bitter cold with the last point (Gorak Shep) being at -26 degree Celsius. Food was very basic (Bread and egg for breakfast, Rice, potato and pulses for lunch, Sherpa soup for dinner) though there were some variations which were available. Since most of them carried their own luggage, there was a limit to the weight which could be carried under the extreme conditions. Water was available from the springs but had to be treated with a tablet. One 1 litre of hot water was available in a day. The restrooms were not in great condition and there was only ice in the restrooms because of the temperature. Having bath was completely ruled out.

(f) Communication Channels:

While mobile services were available in Lukla, there was no connectivity from Dingboche onwards. It was a very tough call in case of emergencies. In case somebody was down with Acute Mountain

Sickness (AMS), the communication was only possible through a messenger on horseback. Though there was Everest Link wireless services, but it is non-operational most of the time. Horseback and helicopter were the only means of evacuation. There was no doctor available.

(g) Surprises everywhere:

No wonder how well you planned, there were always surprises. Though there was a proper plan for 14 days with intermediate days for acclimatization, the group lost a day due to snowstorm and the entire plan had to be retrofitted. Because of heavy snow, the group had to walk on snow but the shoes were not equipped to walk on ice. Because of the crashing of the schedule, some of the journey had to be done at night with poor visibility. Two group members unfortunately met with AMS and had to go back on horseback in snow. One of the group members was down with dehydration but was brave enough to complete the expedition.

(h) Interpersonal problems

This was a group comprising Millennials from reputed B-schools and hence led to ego clashes. First of all, electing a leader was difficult but thanks to two senior members, the task was easy at the end. In case of eventualities, the guide and group leader took the decision for the benefit of the group. The two members who were affected by AMS did not want to go back and valuable time was lost. There were accusations and counter-accusations leading to slower decision making.

(i) Problem of flow balancing

In the mountains, nobody climbs faster or slower. It is the group which climbs. There was a huge variation in the walking speeds and hence the group was as strong as the weakest link. As a result, there were sub-groups resulting in group members getting lost. But three people in the group tried to ensure that the last man was in. Under ideal conditions, the guide was supposed to be at the front and the group leader at the end. But due to slower speed, some of the group members were losing valuable energy resulting in them moving ahead leaving behind the rest.

(j) Resource Crunch

Six of the group members decided to carry their load all by themselves while the remaining four hired the services of a porter. Since this was a difficult trek over quite a substantial elevation, there was a limit on the load which could be carried in terms of clothes, food and water. And as the trek started becoming more demanding, some of the group members decided to lessen their load. As a result there was resource crunch at certain points and the group had to shell additional money to

buy those. Since most of the goods are transported either on yaks or on helicopters, they are expensive as we move up.

## Back to Basics of Project Management

As per the PMI definition, a project is temporary in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources. And a project is unique in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal.

Extending the same logic, the Everest Base Camp Trek may be classified as a project as it is temporary, unique and has a defined start and end. It also has a defined scope and resources (minimum 10 and maximum 15).

The following was the Project Plan:

- Day 01: Arrival in Kathmandu (1,350m/4,428ft) : before 3 pm
- Day 02: Fly to Lukla, trek to Phakding (2,651m/8,700ft): 40 minutes flight, 3 hours trek
- Day 03 Phakding to Namche Bazaar (3,438m/11,280 ft.): 5 hours
- Day 04: Acclimatization Day/Rest Day - Namche Bazaar
- Day 05: Namche Bazaar to Tengboche (3,870m/12,694ft): 5 hours
- Day 06: Tengboche to Dingboche (4,360 m/14,300 ft.): 5 hours
- Day 07: Acclimatization Day/Rest Day - Dingboche
- Day 08: Dingboche to Lobuche (4940 m/16,207 ft.): 5hours
- Day 09: Lobuche to Gorak Shep (5170 m/16,961ft), visit Everest Base Camp (5364 m/17,594 ft.): 6 hours
- Day 10: Gorak Shep to Kala Patthar (5,545m/18,192ft) to Dingboche (4,360 m/14,300 ft.) 6 hours
- Day 11: Dingboche to Namche Bazaar (3,440m/11,280 ft): 6 hours
- Day 12: Namche Bazaar to Lukla (2,800m/9,186ft): 6 hours
- Day 13: Fly to Kathmandu in morning. Sightseeing (Buffer Day)
- Day 14: Kathmandu: Sightseeing (Buffer Day). Possible Bungee Jumping (3rd highest in the world)
- Day 15: Go back to India

As per the PMBOK, Project Management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements. A similar approach was used for the Everest Base Camp Trek.



The Project management of Everest Base Camp Trek was accomplished through the following phases:

- Initiating

At the first go, a committee was formed under the umbrella of XLRI Adventure and Nature Club (XLANC). The committee spoke to various service providers for the trek and finally zeroed on to a popular provider in Kathmandu. They themselves did a recce to understand the conditions better. Communication was sent out to various B-schools with tentative dates of departures. They were able to **get the total cost down by 50%-60%** due to bulk discounts and cutting out the middle agencies in organizing the trek.

- Planning

The next was to have a detailed itinerary keeping in mind the fitness levels of this segment of the population. 2 acclimatization days and 2 buffer days for proper conditioning were part of the itinerary for risk mitigation. The dates were announced followed by the finalization of the groups. The payment was done in instalments but it was ensured that everybody paid before starting the trek. A set of instructions on insurance, clothing, food, etc. was sent out in advance to give sufficient time for preparation. Guides were decided for each group. The lodging and boarding along the trip was arranged well ahead.

- Executing

Once the team landed at Kathmandu, they were put up in a hostel to familiarize them with the merits and demerits of working in a group. The organizers ensured that each of them did not carry too much load. Each member had a flag of his/her college while the group leader had the Indian flag to provide rigor to the trek. Arrangements were made for the flight to Lukla. Lukla happens to be the world's most dangerous airport and sufficient measures were taken to have buffer days. Guides were assigned to the groups at Lukla. The lodging and boarding was seamless.

- Monitor and Controlling

The control point was Kathmandu and the group was always in contact with the control tower for feedback and improvements. Some of the groups had complained about the food and hence this feedback was incorporated. Some people had to be air-lifted due to AMS and the control tower coordinated all this. Though there was no communication at certain places, human messengers carried the news to the control tower. Anxious parents called up the control tower for daily updates.

- Closing

Once the group reached Kathmandu post the trek, the organizers were at the airport to receive the group. Social media was used extensively to track and close the trek. Feedback was taken and any cost escalation was taken care of by the organizers.

## Critical Success Factors

All the groups were successful in reaching the Everest Base Camp and back barring few individuals who were down with AMS. Essentially this reconfirmed the belief that a normal fit person can do these treks. Even people with asthma, diabetes, high BP routinely do the whole trek with no issues. This being a millennial group, the challenges were very different and the following were the critical success factors:

(a) Youth:

Since this was a young group, there was a lot of energy which helped them complete the trek. At the end it becomes a mind game and the millennial group had a lot of that.

(b) Thirst for instant gratification and recognition:

The group had already done enough publicity and hence failure was not an option. The group took selfies with their flags and used social media for publicity. The fact that somebody was watching them helped them push. Additionally, the inter-college rivalry went a long way in reaching the destination.

(c) Preparedness:

The group had done thorough background work and was prepared both physically and mentally. They knew what shoes to wear, what to wear and what to do in case of emergencies. This is the power of the connected generation.

(d) Collaboration:

Though there were inter-personal issues, the group pulled it together during the adverse situations. The millennial generation understands that not all battles can be won alone and that they need to

leverage on the strengths of the others. In the mountains, individuals do not win but groups do. There were cases when people waited for the last person to pull the group together. In fact in one

case when the guide wanted the group to trek through severe snowstorm, the group collectively decided against it.

(e) Respecting wisdom over youth:

The millennial generation knew that they were smarter than the previous generation but did not discount the wisdom and experience of the elders. All the instructions were followed meticulously and in most of the cases the guide was the supreme authority. The group understood that with more number of years, the previous generation had learnt from their mistakes.

## Lessons Learnt

While the fundamentals of how a project is managed has not changed but it is imperative that we contextualize it as more and more millennials enter the workforce. Following were the learnings for a Project Manager when dealing with millennials:

(a) Respect Youth:

The millennial generation has evolved and are definitely a better generation. As a Project Manager, it is imperative that he/she takes into consideration their view points as sometimes they have better ideas (but not making it a democratic process). At times, autocracy is needed but some ideas are worthy of a second thought. This was very useful when taking the decision on whether to trek in the snowstorm.

(b) Be Transparent:

The millennial generation is a tech-savvy generation and is very well connected. And they are better equipped to handle the bad news. Hence it is better to be transparent to avoid problems at a later stage. The total cost structure was explained to the group beforehand and there was no complain at a later stage.

(c) Reward, Reward and Reward:

The millennial generation craves for instant gratification and recognition. Hence it is important to encourage every small effort which builds the morale of the team. Handing the flags representing

various B-schools was a big boost to their ego. Certificates were provided to people completing the trek which was a great way to encourage them.

(d) Create avenues for Collaboration:

Though there are initial hiccups amongst the millennial generation in terms of inter-personal issues, but this generation understands the power of collaboration. So it is imperative to bind them on a common cause to get the best out of them. The fact that two of them had to return due to AMS under extreme adverse conditions brought the group together in achieving their goals.

(e) Leverage empowerment:

The millennial generation are fierce Multitaskers and want more and more responsibilities. It is in the better interest of the project manager to empower them so that they feel important and take the brunt of the load. Though there was a group leader, the team took turns in acting as the guide and group leader which went a long way in the success of the mission.

(f) Simulate and Simulate:

We are in a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) world and there are surprises everywhere. The Project manager needs to plan well, anticipate changes and adjust accordingly and the most important do a scenario analysis based on identified risks. The organizers had done their homework and had built in buffers because we are all handicapped in front of nature.

## Conclusion

“Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity”

~ John Muir

Nature teaches us a lot and as we move towards a world which is faster and ever-changing, it is imperative that we inculcate system thinking and apply the principles in life. Education is important and so is experiential learning. The Everest Base Camp Trek was a great experience in terms of not just viewing the mighty nature but also applying those principles to all walks of life. It was a well-planned trek, time tested again and again but still we had our own share of problems. And leading a purely new generation which is going to come in a big way into tomorrow's workforce was a learning of a lifetime.

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## Photographs



Photograph 1: Lukla Airport



Photograph 2: Dingboche



Photograph 3: Gorak Shep



Photograph 4: Everest Base Camp