

Taming the Tiger – Leading the Millennial

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Abstract:

The Y2K issue explosion was not in 01-01-2000 but is happening right here! right now! The oil industry is spending millions to de-risk itself from having to replace the almost ready to retire stoic, loyal and experienced workforce with the more dynamic, difficult to tie-down anti-routine GenNEXT. Construction industry is foxed at the pace with which it needs to adopt technology to accommodate the new breed architects and engineers who believe more in machines than pencils and sweat. HR of IT industry is pushing the boundaries of employee engagement; trying to keep attrition down. The list is endless...

The uniqueness of this millennial force is that they cannot be boxed, studied and handled. The variations amongst them, their motivators, their yearnings are as unique to them as each of their individuality. So there is NO silver bullet. And this is the main cause of frustration of many managers. This paper explores the challenges faced by managers and leaders in managing and leading the team of high-energy, super-talented and much-younger team.

It provides a broad set of pointers that a manager can use to understand the individual and hence his team. The paper also provides managers with concrete levers that can be used to leverage the innate talent of this GenNEXT group. It details workplace cases where these have been used individually or collectively to create a turn-around.

Intent: (Mandatory)

To provide a practical tool to the managers for understanding the motivations of the millennials to catalyse their individual performance at work

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Introduction

Millennials are a highly researched yet little understood segment of the populace. They are boxed in many fashionable, and not so warm labels – 'The Me Generation'¹, 'Trophy Kids'², 'Twixsters'³ and such. Qualities of cheekiness, impatience, transient, mild attention span and low motivation are attributed to them more often than their positive qualities such as intuitiveness, transparency and liberality. Their positive attitudes also seem to be cloaked in negative garbs.

Neil Howe and William Strauss attribute tensions between generations to stem from the inability of the older generation to accept the mortality of their collective memory⁴. If friction is natural between two generations – why is there so much noise around the millennials?

This is because the impact of 'Generation Gap' is no more restricted to relationship adjustments within family, parents, and social structures. The millennials have rocked the world of work by bringing in their personal attitudes, outlooks and behaviours to the professional space.

It is in this context that a serious inquiry into understanding the professional lives of millennials becomes important. This paper attempts to present observations from several years of working and studying the millennials. Our experiential learning has crystallised into a simple tool that has proven invaluable in catalysing the performances of the millennial.

Defining the Millennial

In this paper, we use the birth year between 1980 and 1993 to identify a millennial. They are distinct and different from their predecessors the Gen X (1965 – 1979) and Baby Boomers (1954 – 1964).

Millennial Impact - Myth? Hype or Reality?

Gallup's research⁵ (2016), show millennial to be the least engaged group (29%) in corporations. However, when the figures are juxtaposed with engagement quotient across other generation buckets the difference is not more than 5%. The millennials are in fact less anti-establishment (actively disengaged) than their predecessors.

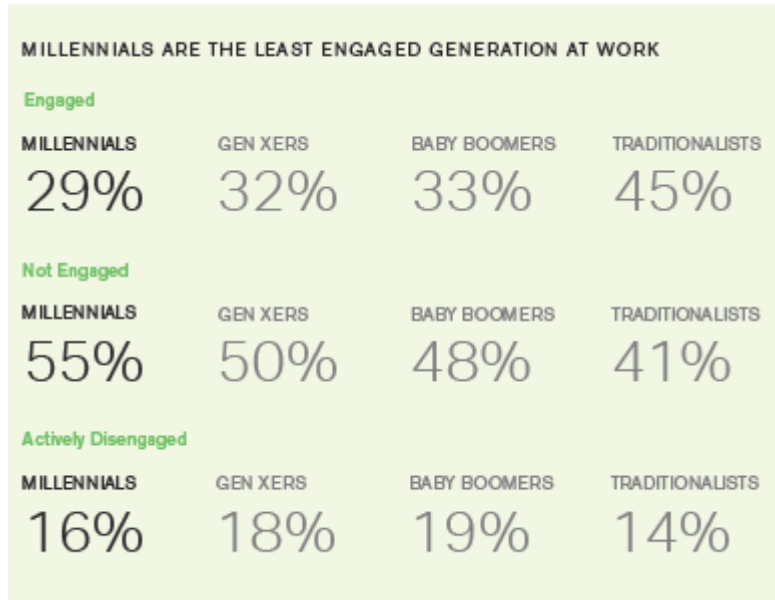





Figure 1: How Millennials want to work and live – Gallup Research Report 2016

A multi-generational study (2014) of over 1784 employees across 6 industries and 12 countries by the IBM institute of business⁶ corroborates the earlier cited Gallup finding.

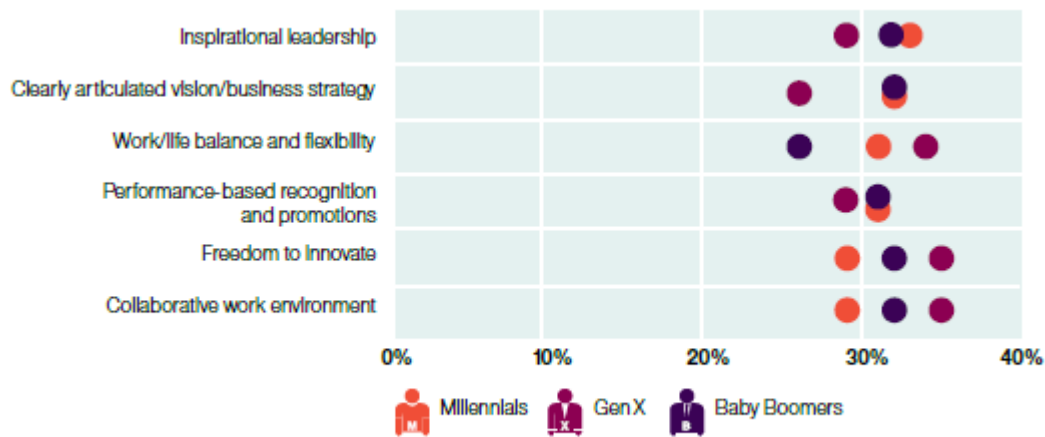
Employees of every generation have much the same reasons for changing jobs

Reasons for changing jobs	 Millennials	 GenX	 Baby Boomers
Enter the fast lane (make more money and work in a more creative, innovative environment)	42%	47%	42%
Shoot for the top (assume more responsibility in an organization with a first-rate reputation)	24%	19%	28%
Follow my heart (advance my career while doing work I'm more passionate about)	21%	24%	16%
Save the world (make a positive social/environmental impact and have more job security)	13%	11%	14%

Source: IBM Institute for Business Value Millennial Survey 2014, Millennials n=1,153, Gen X n=353, Baby Boomers n=278. Q26: Why would you leave your current job for a job with a different organization?

Figure 2: Snapshot of IBM institute of business value Millennial survey 2014

What does it take to engage employees at work? Millennials' priorities align with those of other generations



Source: IBM Institute for Business Value Millennial Survey 2014, Millennials n=1,153, Gen X n=353, Baby Boomers n=278.
 Q18: Which attributes does an organization need to offer to help employees feel engaged at work? Select your top three.

Figure 3: Snapshot of IBM institute of business value Millennial survey 2014

The study indicates that millennial are not really different from their older cohorts with respect to expectations.

Andrea Hershatter, senior associate dean in Emory's Goizeuta Business school concludes *“Despite conventional wisdom, they(millennials) do not appear to be any more altruistic, family-oriented, or motivated to succeed than those who have preceded them, nor are they any less concerned with making money”.*

The above indicate there is no fundamental difference in the view point between the generations. Can then the issues at workplace be viewed as a natural outcome of our social, political, spiritual and technological progression? Can we assume this would fade away as a new equilibrium gets established? Unfortunately, No.

The intensity of this generation, their ability and their sheer numbers demand we take cognizance of the difficulties that line managers face in working with millennial. This should be done with the intent to seek levers to enable the millennials performance and not to condemn them.

Managing the Millennials – Key Challenges

As the corporate world was taking in the first set of millennials into their fold in 2000, Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak could barely hide their enthusiasm and said *“Generation Next may be the ideal workforce—and ideal citizens—and generally the kind of kids you’d want dating your son or daughter”*⁸ However this clairvoyance seems to have failed in reality – with managers unable to sustain a meaningful professional equation with what they see as the most demanding workforce of their career.

True to the Pareto 80-20 rule much of the discomfort stems from just a few causes:

Demanding and Inflexible: Millennials' demand for transparency and access to organisational strategy is a necessary shift in corporate leadership. But their unwillingness to take on areas of grey in their job is a serious cause of conflict between them and their immediate supervisors. Assigning a task to them in which they do not see a clear career, skill or personal progression can be frustrating. They demand to understand what they are getting into. A manager summed his frustration 'They are like obstinate five year olds who refuse to go to school as they cannot perceive the value of education'

Attention Seeking: While the upper echelons of management (baby boomers) feel refreshing to welcome Millennials, their direct managers (Gen X) frequently describe their juniors as 'high maintenance' or 'needy'⁹. A product of an upbringing that relied on behavioural affirmation through rewards, Millennials had every act of theirs loudly recognised by doting parents and encouraging teachers. With academic life marked with stars and stickers – their expectation of affirmation continues as they walk into the portals of corporations. They are time-guzzlers, constantly approaching their managers for guidance, directions and instructions. Instead of being a help to the team, they become speed-breakers.

Work Life Balance: While for boomers career progression has been the prime life motivator, it is not so for Millennials. Work is a less significant part of their personal identities¹⁰, instrumental to supporting the lifestyle they desire. While Gen X would view flexible hours and liberalised reporting as a recognition to be earned with seniority and performance, Millennials view these as key differentiators in selecting their first job. Their commitment to causes that are socially meaningful is a source of constant ire to managers – who are unable to come to terms with their apathy to closer to home project pressures. You will find Millennials engaged in meaningful and highly emotional conversations around politics, social systems, education and an international crisis – but remain oblivious to the pressure of their project and dwindling image of the corporation. This creates an impression that work life is secondary to this group.

Many corporations have spent and will continue to spend a large portion of their budget in understanding, engaging and retaining Millennials. From 'Thank God it's Monday' initiatives to setting up ping-pong tables in the work floor corporations continue to experiment with the hope to woo the Millennials.

These and many such have resulted in a marginal improvement in the churn. Have they given any yield in terms of individual work-output and shift in focus? The managers would answer with a resounding 'Not yet!'

ECOPSKI Matrix – A tool to motivate the millennial

Our continued difficulties in engaging the millennials lies with us compromising the tree for the forest. Wisdom says cohort is but a collection of individuals while motivation is an individual specific attribute. However, corporations and managers seek the silver bullet by coming up with solutions that address group wide symptoms; and then wonder why individuals are not performing. The manager, needs to have a highly-focused game plan for individuals in their team. These must be specific and personalised, designed to turn levers within the individual for manifestation of their hidden potential.

This seems doable for a manager whose team is just a couple of people. The impossibility of the same becomes evident when one looks at a team size of even a dozen. Hence the manager needs a method, a strategy, a tool that will enable them to quickly assess, calibrate and understand individual team members.

A powerful tool in place to study individual performance is the will-skill matrix made popular by Max Landsberg in his book 'Tao of Coaching'¹⁰. The matrix is provided in figure 4

High will	Guide	Delegate
Low will	Direct	Excite
	Low skill	High skill

Figure 4: Will – Skill Matrix of Max Landsberg

Will (abbreviated from willingness) is the strong internal force that a person experiences to deliver results. After the wars, coming of age of nations from colonialism, advent of science and technology – wealth was the primary yardstick of success, and work was the predominant avenue to achieve this. Hence it was rightly assumed that everyone coming into work had the same reasons – and their inherent internal make-up (willingness) then is the variant that influences the output.

Today we are in an era where the 30s is the new 20s. The yardstick has moved from wealth to the more tangible and complex individual worth. With lesser economic pressures and compulsions, 'winning the bread' is no longer the focus. With that pressure off their shoulders, the avenues through which one can assert their individuality becomes wider, consequently the focus and dependency on work stands reduced.

While the above is true, with globalisation, economic liberalisation and democratisation of education a new breed of millennials have also emerged in the Indian context. These are the youth who are under what we call the 'Being First' pressure. Though they may not be looked up to running their homes, they are looked-up for setting examples by being 'first' in many things – 'First to move into the city', 'First to settle outside the family profession', 'First to travel abroad' and so on.

The reasons for which the millennial come to work hence are no more the same. It ranges from 'Having nothing else to do' to 'redefining the family's image.' This differing context strongly influences the expectations of the millennial from the work place and the perspective with which they view their professional career.

When we studied our Millennials, we understood what was influencing their performance apart from skill was not the "Will"; but the value that they are deriving from engaging in "Work". We understood "Will" was no more a standard parameter, but a variant based on how being at work was synching to a more deeper and subtler need of the millennial. We found millennials were most happy and productive when they could derive individual assertions from their work place. We also noticed that the source of individual assertions was not really financial gratification.

Standing on Max Landsberg we replaced "Will" with "Ecosystem Pressure" in the Will-Skill Matrix. The skill component was retained as without skill discussion on performance would be arbitrary. According to this matrix, two contributors that predominantly influence a millennial's output in the workplace are:

- a) Ecosystem Pressure – the pressure (influence) exerted by the individual's ecosystem (family, peer, community and society) that determines the value that they place on the workplace
- b) Skill – the ability of the individual to successfully complete tasks that are assigned to them.

High Eco Pr	Horses (Specific tasks / Short engagements)	Cheetahs (Poised for Performance)
Low Eco Pr	Elephants (As good as Mahout)	Rhinos (Poke to perform)
	Low Skill	High Skill

Figure 5: The ECOPSKI matrix

As we began using this more widely, we found the drivers to performance often followed a pattern. Over time we could with just couple of iteration arrive at the levers for individual performance. Associating a specific animal to the archetype enabled us to quickly communicate, understand and correlate underlying drivers

The Millennial archetypes at work

The Rhinos

A Rhino has little financial motive to work. They would normally sport a good record in academics (not necessarily toppers) and excel at extra-curricular activities. They will carry a distinctly superior attitude and an overrated understanding of their own abilities. They would have amazed you in the interview and you would feel let down on the floor.

They would demand a supportive and an indulging environment. You can catch them at many times unable to let go of the attention they enjoyed at college and from family. Continuing to be centre of attention in the personal sphere, they become indifferent to the luke-warm environment at work. They are likely to find tasks assigned to them mundane. Nothing much at work can inspire them into giving their full potential. As a result, they would seem listless and purposeless. Managers would find it tough to bridge the gap between their potential and actual output. Work according to them is a rat-race. Even if they win at work they will only be a best rat!

For the Rhinos, the answer lies in creating a source of individual assertion which is built on visible external affirmation at work. We decided to create opportunities for them to roar.

We anticipated Rhinos would best perform when we could create challenges / situation and give them the centre stage. From being a disinterested talented person, they moved swiftly into the zone of meaningful contributors. Rhino's we found performed especially well when they were made to work and improve their lower-skilled peers and subordinates. The star Rhino's were given a set of peers / and in couple of instances we threw in few seniors for honing a specific skill.

We took care that we assigned activities where their personal contribution to others could be visibly experienced by the peer group. The peer group provided them with genuine and sincere appreciation, and this hooked the Rhino's in turn to work. '

Competitiveness between the groups under the Rhinos gave them a good dose of positive adrenalin surge. We found many Rhinos like taking up technically challenging work which are exploratory in nature. We also understood more specific and more strategically aligned the challenge – greater is the enthusiasm and evolution of the Rhinos. A generic initiative like a newsletter or an office event had little impact on them. Our peer-to-peer mentoring programmes and short term focus groups transformed our lethargic Rhinos into super charged individuals - smart, suave and sincere.

The Cheetahs

The Cheetahs are vanilla flavoured Rhinos – without the razzmatazz. Cheetahs are a manager's dream - capable and willing.. These are the millennials who appreciate the opportunity to be working where they are presently. Cheetahs are poised for performance. They have just the right skill set to perform and the enthusiasm stemming from the need to be at work. Financial freedom for their family is a motivator but not the primary one. What drives their output is not the emolument, but a strong urge to prove their mettle to their family and be a transformational agent. However when corporation fail to understand this - you would see them hop jobs for financial gains.

Cheetahs would most often come from a background where their work will define financial liberation for the family, but more than that the Cheetahs would be seen by their families as transformation agent. At times, they could come from a background that has a personal story that needs to be set right. Cheetahs are easy to identify – they have fire in their bellies.

Typically, corporations attempt to retain a Cheetah by taking care of their financial aspirations. This really does not work. A Cheetah's source of strength comes from affirmation they get from their family and finance is just one component of it. Understanding this we shifted our focus to subtler aspects of their equation with family. We had special occasions where we would recognise a Cheetah in a manner that enhances their image with respect to their family. A lunch with CEO where the family is invited, rewards which communicates to the family the belief that company has placed on the individual, meaningful opportunities that were 'first' in nature. Most rewarding were the steps we took to mentor the Cheetah on their career and family responsibilities; and explored options to synch work plans with personal goals.

We found Cheetahs must be handled personally – and with sincerity that puts their goal ahead of everything else. Rhinos we found are more careful of their personal boundaries and could view many of these as intrusions and excesses.

The reciprocation that we received from Cheetahs was humbling and encouraging. Within the first year we could reduce the attrition figures to half, and even when tough calls on cost-cuts were taken, surprisingly it was Cheetahs who came out strongly in support. Recently a Cheetah who has been with us for over 3 years remarked shyly that in the second year he had got an offer that was far higher than the salary he was drawing, but his father had told him not to resign as he felt we were valuing him as an individual

The Horses

These are both rare and the most difficult to spot. They stand out from the crowd by their sincerity. Managers under the 'Halo' effect credit them with higher performance than they deserve and mistake them for Cheetahs. The Horses tend to overestimate their skills. The pressure from the ecosystem for a horse is not as much financial as it is with recognition. Horses are willing to take responsibility and accountability at work place, something they are unable to do in the personal space. We also found Horses to lack affirmation and recognition from their social and family environment. While Cheetahs and Rhinos have this in abundance. Horses seek affirmation from work and want to keep restricted to this boundary. They are relatively uncomfortable in letting work impressions percolate to their personal boundary. Cheetahs derive strength from showcasing their professional worth socially. Rhinos seek gratification to satisfy themselves.

A Horse looks upto the Cheetah and tries to emulate their behaviour. Cheetahs will often take to the Horses. Rhinos tend to steer clear off them.

Managers and corporations desperately want to convert the horses into Cheetahs. This is done through over-dose of mentoring, training and loading of responsibilities. This tragically leads to a drastic fall in self-esteem of the individual.

In case of Horses we found the best performance is obtained when we give short, specific, and tangible engagement and instructions. We found Horses seek recognition from their managers not in a grand manner like the Rhinos, but in a more discrete manner. A healthy feedback loop with managers was found to make a significant difference in performance. Horses were the most reliable but not necessarily the best capable resources at hand for the task. In any corporation, there are situations where reliability outweighs the need for brilliance in competency – and we fitted the Horses consciously there.

The Elephant

Elephant sports much of the quality described for a Rhino but lack the fundamental skills. Little inspires them within and outside of work. These are the millennials who are non-contributing, disinterested and are happy to be left alone. They neither seek affirmation nor responsibility. They form the floating crowd and exhibit brilliance sporadically. Managers will insist this is where most of the millennials are. A high performing Rhino is often mistaken for the more sedentary Elephant by such sweeping generalisation.

Having used this tool for some years, we have found the Elephants are a rare category – because energy and millennials are synonymous. Elephants are a fallout of ignored Rhinos. Resultant of an apathetic line manager. Elephants are made and not born! Though we have tried, we have found it impossible to reverse engineer an Elephant back into a Rhino. The level of lethargy and disconnect is very high. Which is why their output is only as good as their relationship with their managers. They view work as a routine event in a day – and are very likely to branch off into something completely contrarian in due course.

Having understood we cannot turn-around elephants, we take immense care not to let anyone slip into this. When we spot one, we use instruction based work allocation and work with them on a much tighter rope.

Our Experience

We did not hit right away at ECOPSKI. It evolved into a framework once we started viewing our millennials differently. It all started when we refused to relegate the millennials to be a bunch of 'lost generation'. Today the tool helps us to take the first step in understanding individual motivations. It is making us better managers and leaders as we learn to acknowledge, respect and appreciate the differences that millennial bring. For us ECOPSKI is not a secretive management map. We have integrated it along with our performance review and feedback. It has helped us get closer to our team in a manner that builds trust and mutual respect.

Conclusion

Understanding and managing millennials is an important challenge facing managers and corporations today. While there are number of assumptions and myths floating, little knowledge exists that can help a manager / corporation identify, classify, manage, and grow. It is in this context that a tool like ECOPSKI becomes valuable.

The most valuable resource at the hands of a project manager, to assure project success, is their team. Millennials are not just its most significant part but remain its least understood and most mismanaged portion. In coming times, learning how to manage a team of millennials will probably be the differentiator between a good and a great manager. We strongly believe ECOPSKI can help make this transition.

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