

Mentoring Millennials: Don't Be a Kung Fu Master

"Why can't he just get here on time?"

"Did you notice her texting during the meeting?"

"Doesn't he realize you don't talk that way to an executive of the company?"

"Why is he so uptight about everything?"

"That idea probably won't work, but they don't want to hear what I have to say."

"The deadline is next week. Why do they seem upset I'm not finished yet?"

These are the kinds of questions and statements you might hear when different generations are together in the workplace. Some of them come from the "seasoned" workers, and some from those newer to the workforce. You can probably figure out which is which!

"Generational tensions are inevitable, but they don't have to leave you stuck," says Haydn Shaw in his excellent book, *Sticking Points: How to Get 4 Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart*. In fact, learning to work through those tensions can lead to a more productive and invigorating environment at work.

Lessons Learned

Here are some lessons I've learned both from the literature as well as my own experiences here at Man in the Mirror:

1. People don't like to be categorized. Just because people are in the same general age group does not mean they are all

alike. Several people I know in their twenties have said they don't like the label *millennial*. Sure, some millennials like video games and still live at home. But there is a rich diversity of interests, skills, beliefs, worldviews and so on among every age group. Labeling an age group and assigning them a stereotypical list of attributes is, frankly, lazy and demeaning.

2. People under 30 grew up in a world that is much different than the one people over 50 did. They have seen two recessions, they're often in student debt up to their eyeballs, and they've lived their whole life being told they can become whatever they want to be. So frankly, it's no wonder that today's younger person is eager to make more money sooner—particularly for the same work as another (older) worker may be doing, regardless of seniority. And by the way, who created the world the younger people grew up in? That's right! The people who are now hiring them and complaining about their work ethic.

3. Younger people tend to do things with more intensity for shorter periods of time. Again, a generalization, but most younger people I know tend to work in spurts. "Slow and steady" is not a value. I've noticed a great commitment by younger folks to get the job done, but often with great, concentrated bursts of effort—sometimes at odd hours—rather than incrementally over time.

4. Younger people, particularly younger men, crave being mentored—but not being condescended to. The current generation of people in their 20s and 30s may be the least "fathered" generation in American history. Over 40 percent of all children are born out of wedlock, and about the same number don't live with their biological father. I've heard repeatedly from younger guys that they want to have older guys to talk to. I've never had a younger guy say "no" when I've asked him if wants to have grab lunch or get a cup of coffee. But don't think of yourself as the "wise old

master” from some bad Kung Fu movie instructing a novice. Think of yourself more like an older brother. Be a listener and question-answerer, not a lecturer or authoritarian.

A Story

My friend Dennis, a business consultant, told the story of a business owner who had a salesman that she was getting ready to fire. She explained that he was her *best salesman*, but he was infuriating to work with. He was always late to meetings, never turned in his paperwork, and didn’t seem to respect her authority. He acted like the rules just didn’t apply to him. (Haydn Shaw tells a similar story in *Sticking Points*.)

Dennis’ advice? Send him flowers and a note of apology. Then stop trying to make this high achiever adapt to rules that inhibit his ability to succeed! An hour on a report is an hour not selling, in this case.

Younger workers really want to succeed, and they get frustrated when the systems get in the way. Sometimes “loosening the reins” will show a younger worker that you’re willing to meet him halfway. Usually they’ll appreciate your willingness to adapt, and they’ll meet you there.

Got a younger guy at work who is frustrating you? Here’s a sure-fire plan to make it work: Get to know him. Grab lunch regularly. Get to know his family background. Find out about his hopes for the future. Don’t offer unsolicited advice, but always be ready to answer questions. Be honest, but be open to the idea that you’re not always right.

Paul told Timothy to not let the older men look down on him because of his age. Let’s make sure that we’re not the guys Paul was talking about. {eoa}

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