



HELP! I HAVE MILLENNIALS IN THE WAREHOUSE!

GIVE YOUNG WORKERS A SENSE OF BELONGING AND CONTRIBUTION

I was recently perusing some online material from my favorite generational guru, Claire Raines. She is the founder of Claire Raines and Associates which specializes in training employers to manage generational conflict in the workplace. Her original book, *Connecting Generations*, literally pulled me back from the ledge when I was a young branch manager.

As I was rolling through her articles, I ran across an excerpt from her book *Millennials@Work*. In this excerpt, she discusses some “rules of engagement” to be used when working with this generation.

The term, which is typically used in a confrontational or war scenario, struck an uncomfortable chord.

Over the last few years, I have facilitated several branch and warehouse management training courses. Invariably, older members of the audience have expressed frustration to the point of exasperation with their younger employees. Although I am fully aware that communication breakdown is the overwhelming culprit, I can see how this frustration is fostered by a lack of basic knowledge of the rules.

In an effort to reduce this

frustration, and hopefully save a few sleepless nights for those charged with managing this group, I will review each of these rules and offer a few ways to implement them in your warehouse. By no means is this an exhaustive list; but hey, we have to start somewhere.

Millennials will become a better addition to your organization if they:

See themselves as connected to, and part of, the organization.

Right from the outset, this new generation wants to know how the company functions. I have been

working with a client on what the warehouse progression should look like in a typical distribution company. We discovered that there needs to be a real emphasis on the first week if the person is going to be successful in the long run. Part of this orientation is to help them understand the role of distribution in the supply chain and ultimately how the organization makes money. If done in a general manner, the concepts will not be too overwhelming and should help the new team member become engaged more quickly.

Fostering the team concept is very critical in the first week of employment. I would suggest that the owner, or high ranking executive, take a few minutes to introduce themselves to the new employee as soon as possible. These are folks who want to know the big picture early on. I used to hate it when my controller refused to learn anyone's first name for the first year. Although I knew he was exaggerating, it was a glaring example of how disconnected executives can be.

Are given opportunities to problem-solve with their colleagues.

We often send mixed messages to our newest employees. We want them to be thinkers, yet we tend to provide all the answers. Let's face it, these new folks are smart — I mean really smart. What they lack is structure and context.

Once your new person has learned the basic structure and function of your warehouse, challenge them. Learn to ask for opinions on how to handle a labor intensive task. When a difficult situation arises, ask them how they would solve the problem. Our ability to unlock this innate creativity is often the difference between long-term success or short-term failure.

Connect their individual contributions with their own and the company's goals.

Developmental plans tend to be a foreign concept in the distribution world. Most would lump this under the training umbrella, but I think it goes a little deeper. Essentially,

building a developmental plan with a new employee demonstrates your commitment to their goals as a person. Understand that individual goals and company goals do not have to exist in separate camps. In fact, the alignment of these goals is where long-term employees thrive.

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Get to know the individual through a combination of testing and monthly progress reviews. This group of young people needs high touch. As a manager, your job is to help them achieve these personal goals. I always liked the Richard Branson quote, "Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don't want to."

Furthermore, the review of company performance should not be a privilege reserved for management. As leaders, we need to learn to open the kimono a bit. I grew up in a company that shared a portion of net profit with every employee every month. Because of this environment, we all knew about gross profit, operating expenses and even the concept of corporate overhead. Help your newest people understand how they contribute to the whole.

Feel valued, respected, and rewarded for their contributions.

I am a strong proponent of creating warehouse incentive programs. Now before you brand me with a scarlet "L," incentive comp programs have nothing to do with paying

people more money for doing the work they should do in the first place. Yep, I have heard this argument once or twice. Building a warehouse incentive program based on SMART (simple, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based) principles will give newer employees a way to see how their contributions drive the success of the organization.

Remember, the rewards given from these programs do not always have to be monetary. Time off or team building events can often motivate better than money.

Develop social and professional relationships within the organization.

One of the more interesting things about members of this generation is that they work extremely well in teams. They thrive in a collaborative setting. This seems so ironic when the preferred method of communication still seems to be electronic and isolated in nature. Regardless, knowing that they work well with others, you might want to steer them toward group projects.

For example, give them an opportunity to work on a holiday party or some summer activity. Have them plan a customer appreciation event. With all the dead stock I see in most distribution warehouses, planning a clearance event wouldn't be the worst thing to promote.

Many organizations want to be more civic minded or charitably conscious. This is where the millennials thrive. Have them plan a work day with Habitat for Humanity or get involved with a charitable organization. Work teams and social events will help this group integrate with the more seasoned members of your staff.

You might think that these young folks are gunning for your job; but

what they are really seeking is some mentoring. Consider pairing them up with a more senior member of the staff. Create an opportunity for this pairing to work on a problem or create a promotion. By embracing the differences between the generations, creativity will flourish.

I encourage you to continue to study the dynamics of generational differences. Education is the antidote to frustration. Learn what makes them tick and get really comfortable with the new paradigm of business. The newest generation is not here to serve you. If you want to get off the turnover train, it is your responsibility to be of service to them.

As I mentioned earlier in the article, check out the work being done by Claire Raines at her website www.generationsatwork.com. She has some great material on managing the generational communication challenges we all seem to face. As a little bonus, she takes a stab at predicting the characteristics we will see in those entering the workforce next. Yep. In a couple years, we get a whole new crop to adapt to. Now if that doesn't drive the baby boomers into retirement, I don't know what will. Good luck! **cs**

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