

Millennial leadership: What the Suits can learn from the Sneakers

By [Wayne Meisel](#)

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Throughout the business world, old assumptions about what makes a good leader and what success in the workplace looks like are being discarded.



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As millennials and Gen Zs - loosely defined as those born between the early 1980s and early 2000s - continue to advance up the career ladder, their distinctly different outlook on work and life is changing age-old notions of success and leadership.

The classic picture of the CEO as a grey, suit-and-tie wearing executive has been replaced by a dynamic sneakers-and-jeans sporting young leader with a more casual approach to office attire.

These 'Suits' most definitely have the experience and the business maturity on their side; however, the so-called 'Sneakers' - the younger, less traditional, more purpose-driven and digitally-native - are teaching the older Suits new ways of work and rewriting classic notions of success in the process.

Flexible approaches to work

Millennials are considered the first generation to grow up entirely with the internet as part of their daily lives. These digital natives have never known a world without the convenience of online shopping, the power of smartphones, or the connective threads of social media.

While baby boomers are considered to be more traditional, more likely to remain with one company for longer - sometimes even spending an entire career with one employer - and more comfortable with a 9-5 in-the-office workweek, millennials are upending many of these traditions.

Today, young professionals and executives are just as likely to be working in coffee shops as they are to be in the office. In fact, Deloitte's latest Gen Z & Millennial Survey found that 75% of Gen Z workers - and 76% of Millennials - prefer a hybrid work environment where they can work remotely at least some of the time.



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Where traditional workers kept to standard office hours, the new generation of young professionals are far more flexible in how they approach their workday. A millennial worker is just as likely to be found at the gym for a midday workout and answering emails late at night as they are sticking to what would be considered 'normal' office hours.

Leadership lessons from a millennial

So what does this mean for organisations wishing to attract, retain and motivate their millennial workforce? In my experience working in the leadership structure of a large technology company, millennials have several vital lessons to teach their older peers, including:

Lesson #1 - A strategy is more than bullet points on a PowerPoint slide

Remember that great slide the CEO showed that perfectly summed up the company strategy in a few bullet points? No one does. Modern leaders know that to inspire and motivate their teams, they need to communicate their strategy in a memorable way with a strong focus on storytelling.

A strategy that is just a few slides in a PowerPoint is not going to drive the desired action among your younger workforce. Focus on crafting a compelling story that inspires your team and gets their buy-in. And use fun elements to make it more memorable. Younger workers expect more than just working for a salary: they want to have fun doing it too.



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Lesson #2 - Purpose is the modern leader's superpower

Purpose is a major factor for how Gen Z and millennial workers make decisions over their personal and professional lives. 90% of respondents in Deloitte's latest Gen Z & Millennial Survey said they had made some effort to reduce their impact on the environment, while nearly two-thirds would choose a more sustainable product even when it's pricier than its less eco-friendly counterparts.

Career choices are also shaped by purpose. Among the top reasons why Gen Z and millennial workers choose to remain at their workplace, salary (ie. money) only ranks third, behind factors like good work/life balance and the opportunity to learn

new skills.

Smart modern leaders know to focus on purpose to inspire their younger workforce. They know that speaking about buying a new tool is not exciting or motivating; instead, they speak about the potential of how that tool can change the world. Companies with a clear purpose also find it easier to attract talented candidates that align with that purpose. In fact, nearly two in five Gen Z and millennial workers in one survey said they'd rejected a job or assignment because it didn't align with their values.

Lesson #3 - A diversity of views lead to stronger ideas

Science backs the importance of building diverse teams. Socially diverse groups - those with a diversity of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation - have been proven to be more innovative, better at solving complex problems, and anticipate alternative viewpoints than more homogenous groups.



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Younger workers understand the value of listening to, considering and taking on board a diversity of views from a broad spectrum of different personality types and backgrounds.

That's why nearly two in five Gen Z and millennial workers said they'd stay with a company for five or more years if they are satisfied with their employer's efforts at creating a diverse and inclusive workplace. Successful modern leaders will build programmes and help create a company culture that celebrates diversity.

Lesson #4 - Effective leaders focus on being relatable

Is anyone under the age of 50 really inspired by some obscure Winston Churchill quote delivered by someone who looks like they were cut and paste from the pages of Grey Suit Monthly?

Younger workers are shaping the companies of tomorrow by exploring new ideas and trying new solutions to old and emerging challenges. To inspire this new generation of professionals shaping the business world, leaders need to use language and examples that are relatable.

Having the input of a Gen Z or millennial at a board meeting or during executive brainstorming sessions can help close the gap between the older Suits and the younger Sneakers who will one day lead the organisation.

By ensuring leadership decisions are communicated in a relatable way, organisations can continue to inspire their younger employees to help drive the success of the business.

There is no doubt that this younger generation of purposeful and passionate leaders brings value to the workplace. Do they have all the answers? Absolutely not. Some of the most effective business strategies are still driven by the Suits who possess the gift of experience. The most successful organisations know how to create diverse teams that create learning and growth opportunities for both the Suits and the Sneakers.

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