



# Workplace 2.0

## Motivating and Managing Millennials

Ron Bronson

## The old rules don't matter.

The days of trying to convince kids half your age to come to work and be motivated by the things that motivated you simply won't get it done.

It doesn't matter that you don't like it. Or that they seem ungrateful, selfish and self-invested. That's the generation that reared them on display. And while you lament the decline of western civilization due to the insolent nature of a bunch of 20-somethings with a little too much attitude, your competitor down the road is keeping them fired up and motivated, and reaping the benefits of increased productivity and high employee satisfaction.

Welcome to the 21st century.

What motivates young people isn't the promise of a distant retirement check thirty or forty years after they've given all they have to a company that doesn't let them have a piece of the pie. The first thing you need to keep in mind is the fundamental idea of **ownership**.

You don't have to give up stock in your company to give young workers a feeling that they are contributing to themselves, as well as the firm's bottom line. But you *do* need to invest in their sense of desire to contribute in meaningful ways to institutions that matter. To them, coming to work is an exercise in mutual benefit.

- You benefit from their fervor, hard work and tireless labor.
- They benefit from you through a decent paycheck or the promise of promotion after they pay their dues.

This brings us to the topic of “paying your dues.” For millennials, the clock on dues paying starts from the minute they walk in. After the interview, they're expecting to be embraced and considered part of the team. These young people have probably spent more of their time volunteering than any generation that's come before them. Some have spent summers in search of experience, interning at professional institutions that give them some semblance of “how the corporate world works.”

What does this mean to you?

These folks are *not* amateurs. They don't expect to be treated with kid gloves, but they also don't want to be made to feel like rookies who are not deserving of respect. Professional decorum goes a long way with these young people. Rather than introducing your new young assistant as your “new young assistant,” why not consider saying, “this is one of our new valued team members?”

Sounds hokey, right?

Sure does.

You might be thinking “Why should you have to?” After all, you’re not running a charity. It’s a business and they can shape up or ship out, right?

That attitude probably helped you reach the top of the ladder, or at the least has been part of your ascent. But it won’t get you very far with Generation Y. Their mantra is *a little bit goes a long way*.

Giving up a bit of your time to mentor a young recruit who is eager to learn, taking them to lunch once and letting them absorb some of the tricks of the trade that helped you reach where you are, or simply being encouraging when they’ve done a great job are all ways to cultivate confidence and trust.

Unfortunately for you, there might be more politics going on in your office than you realize. Perhaps you hear the whispers, but don’t pay them much mind.

The truth is that noxious odor that you can’t smell is choking the energy out of your new, motivated young worker bee. You need to do all you can to prevent the “old way of doing things” to prevent them from becoming too entrenched in the silos of the office.

Only YOU can prevent youth decay.

Our offices are built into these silos. Folks pick their sides for all sorts of reasons. Maybe it’s internal politics, maybe it’s a bad hair day or something else. In any case, the real problem is these factional wars don’t provide your workplace with any semblance of fresh air. The staleness pervades and the personalities, the misconceptions and whatever else flows prevent collaboration.

You need to break down the walls.

Active Dialogue is comprised of four components:

**People. Ideas. Communication. Action.**

**People:** The idea of valuing your people is time tested. Make people feel important, no matter what their position is, and they'll usually work harder for you than they would someone else.

**Ideas:** Value their input. In meetings, it can be easy to dismiss the ideas of people who aren't usually called upon to speak. By soliciting new ideas and those off the beaten path, you're able to embrace different worldviews and, as a result, contribute to the team-building process.

**Communication:** People need to feel like what they have to say matters. But they need to also feel like they can openly express themselves, even when what they have to say isn't popular. That doesn't mean they can be reckless or say things for the sake of it. But, it's important to foster an open dialogue policy. With this, it's much easier to see threats on the radar and not be blindsided by them.

**Action:** All of the talk in the world means nothing if things aren't happening. Get people talking, but facilitate those dialogues and shape them from mere words in a pot to something "worth eating." Talk is cheap unless it leads to a place where you leave a room and feel like something actually happened. People notice this and it usually leads to more productive discussions if they know their contributions during a conversation will lead to something a meaningful yield in the end.

## THEY DON'T WANT WHAT YOU WANTED...

With more kids in their twenties going back home to save their pennies after college, the rules are quickly changing in ways we never imagined. Just when it seemed like the dot-com era was yielding heaps of young people who were making millions hand over fist, the first decade of the new millennium introduced us to young folks who were dreaming of those days, and while working jobs they weren't fond of and in search of something more.

Millennials are asserting themselves on the global stage and attempting to show that they want to participate at the “big kids table.”

These days, more first-generation college graduates are entering the workforce. They bring with them the dreams of their post-boomer parents. These young people expect some measure of the American dream for themselves. A house, a car, and some semblance of savings. They want the chance to move up the ranks in the workforce and participate as full citizens. In a world that continues to stunt the growth of its young people, deeming them “not quite ready” for the world, millennials are asserting themselves on the global stage and attempting to show that they want to participate at the “big kids table.”

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A SUCCESS COMPONENT

In the past, young people worked through experience. These days, they join social networking sites to get “Linked In” to people in their field. They email their colleagues and get professional advice via far-flung international networks of peers and mentors who do not know you, don’t care about your company and are simply trying to enhance their mentee or pal.

How do you contend?

First of all, realize that it’s not a competition. If your millennials are productive and contribute to your organization’s bottom line, then you have a compelling interest to nurture and develop their talents. Yes, even if it means getting them primed and ready to join someone else’s team.

You have the ability to grow your business on the knowledge base of young people who might understand the digital marketplace better than you do.

Career-driven millennials are always looking for the next step and are trying to plot their next move in the world. They’re trying to reach a point that they often seem to think is their birthright—success. They’ve grown up believing that if you work and dedicate yourself, that you’ll reap the benefits of that determination and success.

Couple that with the increased burdens that are put on young people upon leaving college—huge student loan obligations and the increased cost of living, despite the sagging economy in recent years—and you can understand why so many might be more concerned with “getting it all now” than actually exhibiting some of the patience of their forebears.

It’s not your job to help someone figure out what they want to do. You have enough to worry about as a manager. But you do have a role in helping guide successful people under your aegis to the pursuit of their success. It’s something that will contribute to your bottom line and will burnish your firm’s reputation as a nurturer of great talent.

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## LEVERAGING STRENGTHS 2.0

You have the ability to grow your business on the knowledgebase of young people who might understand the digital marketplace better than you do. They might not understand how to capitalize on it, but just by having the skills to use a site like YouTube, Myspace, Twitter or Facebook, you are opened to a world that's moving at a speed that's incomprehensible to those of us who grew up in more terrestrial pursuits.

What does this mean for you? Your business?

It really depends on what you *want* it to mean. It could be the wellspring to a whole new market for your products or could simply be a nuisance. After all, these sites aren't always a positive. The real reason for understanding them is that they're the way conversations are taking place among an increasing number of people of all ages.

Rather than pass your lack of understanding as ludditism, leverage these talents to your advantage. You never know what you'll discover.

## IF YOU GIVE THEM KEYS, LET THEM DRIVE

One of the biggest complaints I hear amongst the Gen Y people I speak with in workshops and other such forums, is the desire to be trusted to get the job done right. It'd be one thing if they're being hired to do a job and they fail to perform at the level expected. They understand the stakes are high.

But these aren't your grandmother's college graduates. Students at elite universities run organizations with budgets in the millions. They plan major events, coordinate and develop strategies and programs aimed at audiences of all stripes. These folks are well informed, connected to global audiences like never before and are passionate in their pursuit of success.

Doesn't this sound like the description of an arsenal you'd like to go to war with?

If you hire young people to do a job, you have to trust them to do it right. If you show them the right way, they'll follow. And if they don't, then they'll have to understand when you replace them with someone else. I understand that we're talking about a generation that often bring with them helicopter parents. But we're talking about motivated, successful people who do not bring their mom and dad with them to work on the first day. Success-driven millennials understand the rules better than ever before.

Undermining them from the start does nothing but breed worry and suspicion about what their role will be and in the long run, and will be detrimental to your game plan. You have your own goals and way of doing business, but few things are worse than turning your prized assets into your biggest problem.

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## CONCLUSION

Millennials are more entrepreneurial than previous generations. Ask one what their ultimate goal is and they'll consistently tell you "I want to own my own company someday." Embedded in that statement isn't the ethos of "I'd like to be a manager" or even an understanding of what it takes to do it. They've just been reared in a climate that pushes them to take control of their own destiny. It's admirable, but problematic when trying to rein in the ambitions of people who have very little professional experience, yet think they're going to manage people who have lots of it.

You have the opportunity to harness the talents of our next great generation. Motivating millennials is all about setting goals, understanding their perspective and trying to keep an open mind. Striking the right balance can be all the difference between an energized organization and falling behind the competition. 📌

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Bronson is a new media strategist with over a decade of experience working in public relations and higher education. He currently runs [Synonym](#), a company that helps people get their message out in a digital world and provides millennials the tools to discover what they're passionate about. Ron publishes [Reading, Writing and Big Ideas](#), a syndicated blog on higher education, Web 2.0, entrepreneurship and life.

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