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Don't Make Assumptions About the Next Generation; Invest in It

by Col. Eric G. Kail | 1:00 PM January 25, 2013

Depending on where you draw the line, I'm either a very young baby boomer or a very old member of Generation X. These generations hold the majority of executive leadership positions across sectors. In other words, we're in charge.

Enter the millennials. This younger set hasn't always seen eye-to-eye with their baby boomer or Gen X colleagues and managers in the workplace. Negative chatter often hums around them, mostly centering on the assertion that they are entitled or narcissistic. This has led to a feeling that millennials are not ready to join the real world and work hard.

So it's the millennials who need to get in line — right?

Not so fast. I believe it's the leaders, not the millennials, who should be trying harder to bridge the generational gap. As we approach the inevitable crossroads of old and new leadership, it's our job to develop the people we expect to carry the torch forward.

In the years I spent at West Point as the military leadership course director, I got to know some millennials pretty well. I came to appreciate them as ready to work just as hard as previous generations, perhaps even harder. West Point graduates from the millennial generation have selected the most dangerous initial assignments for their Army service at rates higher than previous generations. They aren't looking for military jobs that will just set them up for good business careers later. They're demonstrating with their very lives that they're ready to join the real world.

It seems our differing generations suffer from two key stumbling blocks: communication gaps and preconceived notions. Communication has changed rapidly in the last ten years and not all of us have kept the pace. And both older and younger generations can fall victim to surrendering to negative chatter or stereotypes, instead of looking for common ground and goals.

So as leaders, you have a choice: You can make assumptions about the next generation or you can invest in them the way that others have invested in you.

The central position to what I'm suggesting is that we lead millennials forward and not drag them back to what we believe to be the "good old ways" of developing people. Seasoned leaders don't need to turn their backs on decades of experience, but they also don't need to subject emerging generations to the same techniques of learning and development that made sense 10 or 20 years ago.

To begin a paradigm shift in how we lead others, we need to first understand how they develop and learn. Recent advances in the behavioral sciences (here's an example (<http://www.apadivisions.org/division-19/publications/newsletters/military/2012/04/military-activities.aspx>) from military leadership) provide a richer and deeper understanding that people develop at different rates in different areas and at different times in their lives. For example, I learn creative requirements — such as motivating and leading others — in an ambiguous environment and perform those skills much differently than I learn and execute basic skills — such as marksmanship — that I master over time and through practice.

After being selected in the first round of the 2012 NFL draft, a nationally renowned collegiate football player said something defiant when asked about his low score on a cognitive ability test: “This test has nothing to do with football, so I blew it off.” New developmental approaches could have helped avoid this. Innovations in technology, like tablet devices or cloud computing, will allow for a more dynamic, relevant and valid assessment of individual learning and developmental styles. These updated techniques will move us from labeling someone as simply a “type” of learner, to creating a clearer understanding of how each person learns across different environments. And these improved assessment tools help remove the potential for responses based on how people *want* to be viewed by others versus how they *really* learn. This, in turn, impacts how we guide and train the younger generation for leadership roles.

I'm not suggesting millennials should get new rules simply to suit them, or even that they be allowed to pick and choose which requirements they complete. I'm saying it is incumbent upon us as leaders to ensure that what we ask them to do is relevant, meaningful and valid. Whether we manage a sales force, coach athletes, teach students, or carry the title of commander in combat, we are leading and developing future leaders.

This type of thinking requires leaders to consider more closely how their followers learn. It's a less leader-centric view of leadership. To truly guide and develop the younger generation, we need to practice transformational and authentic leadership.

U.S. Gen. Eric Shinseki offered great advice to old-school military leaders as he sought to introduce paradigm-shifting change across the U.S. Army. “If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less,” he said.

Let's become relevant to more than just ourselves.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this post are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.