



GENERATIONS OF LAWYERS AT WORK: COMMUNICATION ACROSS GENERATIONS

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Why are we here?

- To improve communication and relationships with coworkers of different ages
- Why is this such an important topic?
- Millennials=those born between 1982 and 2000 (livescience.com)— also called “peter pan” (never want to grow up) “generation Y” (after GenX) “generation Me” (narcissistic/self centered tendencies) or “boomerang” (moving back in with parents) generation
- *Trophy Kids* by Ron Alsop detailed this generation being rewarded for minimal accomplishments or mere participation, and as a result, they have unrealistic expectations about life
- Represents a large segment of the current workforce and customer base (80 million in U.S. alone) that is very different from Baby Boomers and Generation Xers in practices, expectations, values

We are in the midst of a Cultural Shift

We are now in an age dominated by key issues affecting all of us, but Millennials in particular:

- 1) Narcissism,
- 2) Technological innovations, and
- 3) Political correctness.

We will discuss this morning how in a nutshell each of these issues affects workplace communication and culture, and I will provide some suggestions for communication strategies to address generational differences.

Issue #1: Narcissism

- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition: a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy...variable and vulnerable self-esteem, with attempts at regulation through attention and approval-seeking, and either overt or covert grandiosity.
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- Narcissism as an “epidemic” among millennials has its roots in part in (pseudo) reality television, social media

Effect of popular culture on this generation's rates of narcissism

- Ramani Durvasula, Ph.D.: “The Rise of Narcissism”
- A recent NIH survey showed rates among 20-somethings is three times higher than those over 65. A San Diego State University study of over 16,000 university students across the U.S. showed a 30 percent increase in narcissism scores from 1980 to 2006. Published in Twenge and Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*
- “Narcissism is the new black”
- “The selfie. Reality TV. Social media. What’s your brand? Am I fabulous? Will you follow me back? Narcissism is, indeed, the new world order.”

Our culture not only reinforces and enables but *celebrates* narcissism:

“Gaggles such as the Real Housewives of (choose a community), the superficial antics of the Kardashian clan, or the mean-spirited ramblings of judges on makeover/ entrepreneurship/cooking/dancing/singing competition shows have become the narrative, and town criers for an entire generation. Loud blasts of emotion and invective with little regard for how words and actions affect other people are the norm. We lambast bullies yet give them endless platforms and attention for harming others. Hours and lifetimes spent acquiring possessions and sharing the imagery with the world have become a cultural zeitgeist that has elevated admiration seeking and plumage pimping above everything else. It doesn't matter if you are mistreating others, as long as you look good. Empathy appears to have gone the way of the VCR.” Durvasula, 2015

Results of narcissistic tendencies among this group:

- Millennials are particularly driven by *personal* goals—and also particularly brave in sharing their complaints or criticisms
- Perceptions that they don't respect older coworkers' wisdom and experience
- Millennials expect others (supervisors) to reach out to them but don't often reciprocate
- Barrier to well-functioning work culture—Theory of Independent Mindedness (Infante, 1987) that emphasizes the importance of cultural congruity between an organization and the larger culture within which it operates—values of the macroculture should be reflected and fostered within an organization (microculture). A mismatch in cultures will be detrimental to organizational success and productivity, reduced motivation and satisfaction among employees.
- “Narcissism is an epidemic, and no one is free from its effects.” Durvasula, 2015

Communication Strategies

- Focus is on identifying narcissistic tendencies for what they are—can't try to change, only address.
- Psychologists generally recommend the following on how to communicate with a narcissist: be straightforward and direct, have a plan to propose, provide constructive messages but don't expect too much positive feedback in return, don't try to “fight fire with fire” or withdraw as this only serves to instigate a battle of wills.
- Organizational communication: provide multiple opportunities for positive reinforcement, feedback, encouragement. Semi-annual or annual reviews are not enough. Provide opportunities for them to “do good” for the sake of doing good (helps maintain empathy perspective while also bolstering need for self-worth/importance). Millennials must be made to feel important without triggering or encouraging narcissism—a tricky balance.
- They want to feel like their workplace is a “family”—you are not just their supervisor or coworker but friend and mentor, even Mom or Dad. Communicate your relational expectations. We can no longer assume they understand—“I am not your Mom.”

Issue #2: Technology

Recent introductions/uses of communication innovations: DVRs, wireless communications, smart phones, email/electronic document sharing/cloud-based networks—these innovations have transformed how we communicate, use and share ideas and products.

- <http://www.ispot.tv/ad/7HRX/eggo-waffles-sharing-a-photo>

Technology Etiquette—differences in expectations

What other generations think is completely unacceptable (i.e., texting or looking at your phone during a conversation) is how these young folks have been *acculturated*.

Technology has also enabled what I believe is the biggest pitfall in our current times: “Helicopter” or “snow plow” parenting of the millennial generation.

- As a result, they tend to think they are better, smarter, more deserving than anyone else, but conversely demonstrate minimal problem-solving abilities and a lack of healthy coping strategies as adults.
- They expect immediate response to any question, immediate, unlimited access, and a shared use of technology simply because it’s there—and because this is what they’ve come to expect from their parents.

Technology and millennials

- Technology and social media incentivize narcissism, offering constant reinforcement and validation, “a steady diet of admiration” Durvasula, 2015
- For discussion: Who is “right” in their behaviors? What are your impressions of the pros and cons of each generation’s common practices regarding communication technology?

Communication Strategies

- Remind millennials of differences in expectations, use—but don't cite as excuse for delays
- Point out their behaviors and encourage them to be reflexive in their practices (for example, when they make last-minute changes or requests)
- Remind ourselves of the positive effects of the introduction of new technologies on our daily habits
- Ask millennials for help! (They love to help, especially with technology)

Issue #3: Millennials grew up in the age of “political correctness”

- Efforts specifically intended not to offend or disadvantage a particular group
- Allan Bloom’s 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind* commentary on “political correctness” in higher education; 1990 New York Times article by Richard Bernstein resulted in growing public debate about “PC”
- New shared definitions, attention on issues of racism, sexism, prejudice, harassment, bullying
- “PC” may seem overzealous or over-reacting to older generations, but millennials expect--and will react (if true to narcissistic form, passive aggressively rather than directly)

Communication Strategies

- Be sensitive to current issues, definitions, and perspectives on race, gender, harassment, bullying
- Be aware of “borderline” or “informal” sexism
- <http://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/outside-voices-careers/articles/2016-01-04/6-casually-sexist-things-to-stop-saying-at-work>
- Search popular hashtags in social media (for example, #BlackLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter) for some perspectives on current public dialogue about race in the U.S.
- Communicate an expectation of both civil/professional behavior that fosters mutual respect (disagree without being disagreeable), but also an expectation that we cannot go looking to be offended—encourage younger employees to speak directly and clearly if they find anything offensive, consider motives (or lack of) when voicing complaints, take responsibility for their own behaviors and opinions

A final note: Some positive news about the future

- Millennials are being replaced by a new generation: The “Founders”
- “MTV President Sean Atkins says the name acknowledges that while millennials have disrupted society, it’s this new generation’s job to rebuild it. ‘They have this self-awareness that systems have been broken,’ he told TIME ahead of the announcement. ...Research is beginning to show that teenagers today are more pragmatic and independent than their millennial predecessors. They’re more likely to stand out than fit in. They’re digital natives who don’t know a time before being constantly plugged in. And they’re part of the most diverse generation in history, a generation that will soon be as coveted among marketers as millennials.” (time.com)
- Younger generation will (we hope) be able to share in efforts to reshape corporate/organizational culture and communication expectations and behaviors.



One final note of encouragement...

There are no universal truths about human behavior —there are exceptions to every general rule or trend. Some millennials share our confusion about their peers, and we can and should enlist their help!