

The Hidden Gift Your Gen Y Employees Are Offering You

By David Lee

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Yesterday, I read one of those “10 Tips for...” type of articles on how to manage the Millennial or Gen Y employee. They included recommendations such as:

- Provide leadership and guidance.
- Listen to the Millennial employee.
- Provide challenge and change.
- Provide structure (i.e. clear expectations, goals, assessment of progress, etc).

One of the website’s readers posted a point-by-point criticism of the article, concluding with: “The advice given is good for employees of all ages. Contending that it is uniquely applicable to a new generation is nonsense.”

While I agree with the rather prickly poster’s perspective that the author’s advice applies to all employees, I do think he missed the nuances the author was trying to convey.

More specifically, practices that are helpful for workers of any generation are even more critical with Gen Y employees because of the cultural milieu this generation grew up in: extremely involved parents, the self-esteem movement, unrelenting emphasis on fame and making your mark on the world, etc.

So for instance, while providing leadership and guidance is just good management practice, regardless of the direct report’s age, it takes on greater significance with the Millennial employee. Given that Millennials have been described as the most coached and micro-managed generation (think “helicopter parents”), they,

on average, want more attention and interest from their manager than would the “typical” Gen X employee.

Thus, simply writing off recommended practices for bringing out the best in Millennials as no different than with other generations, ignores the deal-breaker importance of these practices if you want to attract, retain, and engage the Millennial generation.

The Source of “The Gift” Gen Y Employees Are Handing You

So, when you look at what the research on what the Millennial generation wants in a work experience along with their unique attitude towards work, it’s hard to escape this conclusion:

“Gen Y employees want what everyone else wants in a work experience. However, if they don’t get it, they are far more willing to speak up....or leave.”

While obviously not everyone in a generational cohort thinks or acts the same way, on average, Gen Y employees are known for being much more comfortable challenging authority and speaking their mind. Gen Y employees are also well known for not sticking around if they’re not happy.

While many managers and HR professionals tear their hair out over these tendencies, they miss out on the priceless information their Millennial employees are giving them because of these proclivities.

Gen Y Employees: Your “Canary in the Coal Mine”

Your Gen Y employees are the Canary in the Coal Mine in terms of your managerial practices and the work experience you deliver.

A quick synopsis of the term in case you’re not familiar with it: Long ago, before sophisticated technology, coal miners would bring a canary down into the mine shaft as their early warning sign that CO₂ levels were getting dangerously high. If the canary keeled over, it was a good time to head to the surface. Because canaries are more sensitive to CO₂ levels than humans, they showed the effects before the men did. Thus, the canary’s increased sensitivity saved lives.

Your Gen Y employees are your Canary in the Coal Mine for those things that lead ALL employees to become disengaged. Things like:

- An impersonal boss who only sees you as a tool to achieve his/her goals, and shows no interest in your well-being or professional development.
- Outdated, nonsensical policies that make it hard to do your work.
- Lack of respect for your right to have a life outside of work.
- Being kept out of the loop, so you always feel like you’re laboring in the dark.
- A boss who only gives negative feedback, never praise or appreciation.
- No clarity around how your work matters and contributes to the big picture.
- Few opportunities to make a difference; to do something that truly matters outside of your routine tasks.

“I Quit... But I’ll Still Come to Work”

While ALL employees want these things, many of those from older generations tolerate them, rather than complain or leave. Instead, they will join the ranks of what the Gallup Organization calls ROAD Warriors—Retired on Active Duty. These employees who no longer

care comprise 55% of the workforce, according to Gallup’s research. These are the people who say:

“I’m so mad, I am no longer going to work here...I’m not going to leave though...I’m just not going to work.”

The fact that 55% of employees in the average organization are just going through the motions is only half the problem. The other half is that because they don’t speak up or leave, their employer doesn’t realize “CO₂ levels are rising.”

Thus, it’s easy for employers to go along blithely unaware of the huge price they are paying for ineffective management practices and organizational policies. Because these employees are not as vocal or willing to leave as Gen Y employees, it’s easy to think that:

- New employees don’t notice or don’t care about the sloppy, boring-as-watching-paint-dry orientation program and indifferent welcome they received.
- Conducting an employee survey and never reporting the results didn’t have an effect on morale and trust.
- When managers speak disrespectfully to their direct reports, it’s quickly forgotten by those employees, and leaves no emotional wake.
- Not asking employees for input over changes that directly affect their jobs is just something they need to get over.

Without Feedback, It’s Easy to Think Things Are Fine When They’re Not

Without dramatic feedback—either an “in your face” confrontation or high turnover, it’s easy for employers to lose millions of dollars a year in lost productivity and lost customers due to disengaged customers...and never even realize it’s happening.

But with Gen Y employees, there’s no mystery. They’re more than happy to let you know what you’re doing wrong. And that’s the hidden gift of this generation:

You don't have to wonder about whether you are doing the things that prevent you from attracting, retaining, and engaging talent. You don't have to worry about laboring under the illusion that all is well when it's not.

Your Gen Y Employees Will Tell You... Or Leave

So no matter how cheeky they might seem in their delivery, or how annoying you find their lack of loyalty, they are giving you valuable information. It's sort of like being told you have bad breath. It's not pleasant news, but it's better than not knowing.

So What to Do?

1. **Help your less vocal employees speak up** – Banish the “suck it up” message that pollutes many organizational cultures. This is not a call to Whiners, but a request for frank, adult-to-adult conversation about what you do as an employer that makes people want to stay and do their best, and what makes people polish up their resume. If you doubt the importance of making it safe for people to speak up, read my article “The Movie Scene Every Manager Should Watch...But Might Be Afraid To”.
2. **Thank employees for speaking up** – Do this both when it happens and later in a public forum. Share examples in your team and organization-wide meetings of how employee feedback is being used to make your organization a better place to work. This both communicates that management values employee input and it also energizes people, because they hear proof that they *can* make a difference, they *do* matter.
3. **Don't devolve into an arrogant “It's an employer's market they're lucky to have a job” mentality** –

While you may have the upper hand in terms of people being security-conscious right now, remember the ROAD Warrior phenomenon. Even if people don't leave, poor management and organizational practices significantly reduce the performance of those who stay. In this economy—or any economy for that matter—can you afford 10,20, or 30% less productivity than your workforce is capable of?

4. **Help your managers help you.** – Since an employee's supervisor plays the most significant role in that employee's performance and level of engagement, according to Gallup's research as well as other studies, make sure your managers know how to do the things that lead to maximum performance and engagement. Make sure they also have the skills to engage employees in “crucial conversations” and foster honest, open dialogue.
5. **Involve your employees in making improvements** – Doing this helps you in three ways. First, it taps into the human need to matter, to make a difference. Believing that your input matters and that you can make a difference are huge drivers of employee engagement. Second, involving employees in making improvements fosters an adult/adult relationship with management, rather than “kids complain to mom and dad” dynamic created when employees are encouraged to speak up about what's bothering them, and management's job is to come up with solutions.

Third, engaging employees in finding solutions is a powerful antidote to the feeling of helplessness and lack of control many people feel during these difficult times. Solving problems and generating creative solutions triggers the biochemistry and emotions of confidence and success, which puts employees in a more productive frame of mind to face the big challenges ahead.



About the Author: David Lee is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. He is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, as well as over fifty articles on organizational and individual performance that have been published in trade journals and books in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. For more of his articles, go to HumanNatureAtWork.com. For information on David Lee's services and programs, call 207-929-3344 or email:

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Related Programs By David Lee

"How to Attract, Retain, and Engage the New Generation of Young Workers"

"Constructive Feedback: How to Give It So They Want to Hear It... and Use It"

Comments about David Lee's Work:

"Thank you for doing such an outstanding job keynoting our conference. As you could tell by the response, participants loved both the content and the delivery of your presentation."

Dr. Ian Gawler, Director, The Gawler Foundation, Victoria, Australia

"David's presentation style is unparalleled! The substantive and timely content of his subject materials is immediately adaptable to the workplace making his seminars an invaluable aid to an employer seeking to be an "Employer of Choice."

Lynn M. Lombard, VP, MMG Insurance Company, ME

"I've now worked with over 150 presenters since you last were a part of MEBSR's Spring Conference, and still you stand out as the best person we've ever had come and present on how we best work with one another, increase productivity and thrive."

Sanna McKim, Executive Director, Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility, ME

"Having seen a lot of speakers, I can't tell you just how impressed I was by David. I even waited in line to talk with him... I learned a great deal and laughed my butt off in the process... When we have someone who is so genuine and so well prepared, we owe it to each other to spread the word.... I take it very seriously when I recommend someone else's work and... he's great!"

Naomi Judd

"It was a sheer delight to sit back and listen, learn and laugh as David weaved his extensive knowledge of the material with his abundant practical wisdom generously sprinkled with personal reflections, stories and his own wholesome humor. David brings a rare blend of practical knowledge and genuine humanity to his presentations. One cannot help but leave his sessions smarter, and a better human being, as he has a way of touching one's heart as well as one's head."

Bill Gaertner, MD, Wisconsin

"I was inspired by David's presentation. As onboarding new ladies and gentlemen at the Ritz-Carlton, Hotel Company LLC is one of the cornerstones of our success, I cannot agree more with his statement that, 'Everything you do in onboarding matters'."

Diana Oreck, Vice President Global Learning & Leadership Center, Ritz Carlton, Maryland

David, I wanted to thank you for being part our show in Las Vegas. The feedback I have received about your sessions was fantastic!!!!!! Three cheers to you.

Julie McNeney, COO, International Council on Active Aging, Vancouver, BC

"David's unique blend of humor and professionalism provides an engaging forum to absorb the content of his presentation. David does not hesitate to encourage participation and captures the audiences attention consistently throughout the seminar. I left the seminar feeling that this experience was well worth the time and money."

Dennis Hebert, Jr., President, Merrimack Valley Chapter of the NH Credit Union League, NH

"I can honestly say that your sessions were highlights for me at the conference. Since then I have perused your website and read many of the articles posted on there. Again, thank you and kudos to you for the great presentation!"

Rob Huppée, Amica Mature Lifestyles Inc., Vancouver, British Columbia

"Without you realizing, David woos you into learning by appealing to what you naturally know to be true by your own experience. He's incredibly down to earth and balances stories, humor, statistics and research to engage his audience in a time defying way. His programs will benefit anyone looking to gain awareness, passion

and spirit in the workplace (and beyond). I was so riveted and inspired that when David said he was wrapping up his program, I was dumbfounded by how much time had passed. I was convinced my watch was mistakenly an hour ahead. Thank you, David, for following your passion & curiosity from which we greatly benefit."

Krista Irmischer, Human Resources Manager, Jøtul North America, Maine

"David has an uncanny ability to not only capture the attention of his audience, but also maintain a consistent level of interest in his students... Although I recognized and easily understood most of the concepts that David presented in his class, his perspective (which I value immensely due to his knowledge and intellect) and innovative style of teaching sparked my curiosity and interest, and more importantly, triggered my brain to ask more questions, deeper questions... David also has that rare ability to teach effectively to individuals that are at different levels of comprehension and understanding, and exhibit different styles of learning. ... Lastly, I would like to add a very important detail regarding David's style of teaching and his personality. His wit and great sense of humor were very appreciated in the class by all. He has what I like to call 'intelligent' humor which is a gift."

Aditi N. Thakur, Accenture, Colorado

"What makes David unique is his ability to take analytical information, creatively apply it to real life workplace situations, and then deliver it in a really fun way."

Fran Liataud, DialogueWorks, Maine