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Coaching and mentoring millennials

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Generation gaps aren't what they were. It used to be a reasonable assumption that each younger generation was simply going through the growing pains of its predecessors; that the experience of an older generation was, by and large, directly relevant to them. Much of mentoring theory is based on this assumption. Yet the evidence has been accumulating for a number of years that current generations are increasingly different in the way they think and in their expectations. (Martin & Tulgan, 2001, 2006; Stanton-Smith, 2008)

The world, as seen by millennials (people who were born after 1980) is a very different place to the one I and other baby boomers (born 1946 to 1964) recognise. To baby boomers, work and achieving at work is fundamental to our sense of identity. To millennials, work takes a lower priority than family. They seek to work on their own terms, in the way they want to, with the minimum of stress. They see technology as integral to the way they work and live, rather than an option or tool. They are less reliant on face-to-face contact, can't see the point of emphasising spelling, expect any request they make in or out of the working environment to be dealt with immediately or at least rapidly (instant response), want to understand why they are being asked to do a task, have low tolerance for repetitive work and have a much more negative attitude towards business generally. They expect to be rewarded for their potential as well as their performance; and for what they achieve, rather than how they approach the task. It's not surprising that they see baby boomers as workaholics, with poor technological skills, who take too long to deal with issues, settle for less than they should and can't communicate.

There is some good news, however – they also expect to be mentored, according to research by consultants Deloitte.

So what are the implications for baby boomer coaches and mentors in learning relationships with millennials? Some practical guidelines include:

- Spend time learning how they view the world and, in particular, the working environment. Be prepared to accept their view has valid, even though it doesn't concur with yours.
- Take the opportunity to evaluate your own assumptions about work, careers and the working environment. What is "universal truth" and what is a specific perspective based on your generational experience? How has that affected your past choices and how does it affect the choices you make now?
- Help them understand the implications of their attitudes and perspectives, especially where these will limit their ability to achieve the career success they expect. Clarify the trade-offs they may have to make (as you did) but leave it to them to decide how they manage those trade offs.
- Help and encourage them to find ways to put their ideals into practice. Stanton-Smith's report of the Deloitte research finds that, while millennials want to implement a participative leadership style in line with their values, they believe employer organisations will not allow them to do so. Assist

them in developing political acuity and tactics that will enable them to role model new leadership styles.

- Develop a mutual understanding about the value and use of experience. Millennials can often dismiss boomers' experience as irrelevant to the modern age; while boomers may in turn assume that millennials have yet to accumulate experience that is worth sharing. Help them develop the skill of evaluating lessons from experience critically and objectively. Never assume that your experience will automatically be of value to them – develop the habit of asking whether specific experience you have might be relevant to them, or at least explaining why you think it might be.
- Engage them as true learning partners. Share your learning needs with them and welcome their help in building your technology skills.
- Be enthusiastic! Share your enthusiasms and encourage theirs. If their enthusiasms seem naïve, use critical questioning to help them refocus and redirect their energies in ways that will help them achieve their goals.

Communication across generations can seem far more difficult and pit-hole ridden than communicating across cultures – which makes these coaching and mentoring relationships potentially highly rewarding in terms of learning opportunity. The world of the millennials may seem alien to baby boomers like me, but there is much to gain from engaging with it and much to lose from not doing so!