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The Commencement Speech Parents Need to Hear

By Lauren Stiller Rikleen | 12:00 PM May 6, 2014

For graduating seniors, spring marks the season of advice as predictable as the flip-flops under their caps and gowns. Throughout the May and June rituals of Class Day celebrations and graduation ceremonies, successful members of older generations will urge this year's crop of Millennials to pursue their dreams and, by extension, travel the same path they did. But most of their young audience already knows better. They know they face an uphill climb on their path to economic independence and the markers of full adulthood.

The upbeat entreaties of this year's commencement speakers will likely not mention the graduates' extraordinarily high student debt load that, in the last year alone, has grown by 10%. Nor are they likely to reference data showing that recent graduates aren't earning enough to pay off their loans and face an estimated 12% unemployment rate.

Over the past several years, I have surveyed more than a thousand Millennials as well as researched thousands of articles, books, and studies about this young generation for my book, *You Raised Us – Now Work With Us*. Through it all, I have been most struck by the fact that, even if the graduates are lucky enough to find a job, they are entering a workplace where senior generations have already formed a negative opinion of their commitment, work ethic, and tendency to ask questions and seek feedback.

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For Millennials to move past these stereotypes and succeed in the workplace, perhaps it is time to change the patterns of the season, and have the senior generations be on the receiving end of the advice. After all, Millennials have been urged to speak up throughout their lives, but never has it been so important for other generations to listen. Before the 2014 graduates embark on their collective journey into workplaces still struggling to adapt to changing demographics, senior generations would benefit by heeding advice from the Millennials' perspective.

For Millennials, such a speech would be directed primarily to one particular group in the audience: the parents who raised them at home but cannot understand them at work. And that speech would likely go something like this:

Parents, as you come here to celebrate your child's graduation milestone, remember that the young person whose accomplishments you celebrate will soon be in the workplace – which also means that the Millennials raised by those who surround you will be in yours. Remember that each time you form a stereotype or paint the entire generation with an unnecessarily broad brush. And in that spirit, consider these six principles as guidance in your interactions with young people at work.

First, think of each new hire as a future leader. As 10,000 Boomers turn 65 each day, and with too few members of Gen X available to replace them, Millennials will be taking on increasing responsibilities at younger ages. Do not expect this exceptionally large, diverse, and educated young generation to walk into your workplace and assimilate. To retain Millennials and develop their leadership potential, set aside preconceived notions and, instead, pay attention to what truly will motivate young employees.

Second, recognize that the "entitled" label you tend to attach to Millennials is not entitlement at all, but rather the self-confidence and self-respect that you have instilled in them since birth. You raised your children to believe in themselves and to believe in their future success. They will need this self-confidence now more than ever, since the economy serves as a sobering backdrop to their positive expectations. Embrace this generations' confidence as a building block of future leadership.

Third, many of you were fortunate enough to provide your children with a large safety net. Once Millennials are away from that protection, it may be difficult to learn how to thrive in an environment that encourages risk-taking through reach assignments and problem-solving without clear direction. There is a difference between being pushed by parents along the path to success and knowing what to do when that path must be traveled alone. Workplace navigation skills are critical to career success and advancement, but do not assume that all young workers arrive adept at steering their way forward. But if you are willing to invest in the process of meaningfully

integrating young employees into the culture of your workplace, you will maximize the likelihood of optimal performance.

Fourth, replace clout with mutual respect. Millennials are often viewed as being disrespectful for asking too many questions. Getting past this reaction is crucial, however, to bridging generational differences at work. A free and open exchange of ideas invariably leads to a better result and a more engaged workforce.

Fifth, pay greater attention to workplace dynamics, particularly around technology. Consider ways to provide internal credit for a Millennial's unrecognized role as tech support when they are frequently asked to troubleshoot the problems senior workers encounter on their devices. In addition, formalized reverse mentoring programs can help Millennials develop stronger relationships with their more senior colleagues, which has the added benefit of making older workers more technologically proficient.

Finally, recognize that research consistently documents that Millennials are committed to a life in which family responsibilities are not overshadowed by work. This is no longer a woman's issue alone, as the desire for flexibility has become a gender-neutral issue. Millennials value work-life flexibility and its availability leads to workplace loyalty and engagement.

In the pomp and circumstance of the next several weeks, graduates need to hear speeches grounded in an understanding of the actual challenges they are about to face, as well as the expected acknowledgment of their past accomplishments. As this year's Millennials embark on their career journeys, the best graduation gift would be a workplace in which senior generations stand ready to welcome them with an understanding of their strengths, and a genuine desire to help them succeed. The health of our workplaces, and our economy, depends on it.

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