

The Year of the Employee

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Forbes recently declared 2014 the Year of the Employee. “For the first time in nearly a decade, you will find the issues of retention, engagement and ‘attraction of talent’ to be the top on your priority list,” predicts author Josh Bersin. In the midst of an ever-growing to do list, an overflowing inbox, and a host of both routine and unplanned problems, we work in an environment that consistently demands our attention to shift based on urgency and threat level. Managing projects and external stakeholders often take precedence over leading our people.

We have the privilege and the responsibility of managing a young workforce. As the demographics of our staffs continue to change, we are no longer in a position to deprioritize this important resource. Bersin notes, “Companies who can’t engage and attract Millennials will lose out.” The conversation about understanding generational gaps is certainly not new; however, we are uniquely positioned to embrace the fire of a Gen-Y (ages 18-36) infused culture in the midst of a traditional hierarchy. These aren’t a bunch of kids invading our field; they are already here, established, and beginning to lead it. In an industry that is rapidly losing its brightest employees, it’s time to pay attention and craft an employee experience that matters.

Invite them to the table. In an era of too many problems and not enough answers, we often fail to bring the people that have the most insight to sit in on the strategic planning conversations. The next time the senior leadership team is trying to solve a problem disregard the organizational chart and ask the right people, no matter their age, experience or rank, to the table. Those closest to the problem often have perspective that regularly gets underutilized. Design an environment that encourages all members at the table to share their insights and be comfortable with the idea that despite your position, you may not have the best answer.

Believe in the power of their perspective. Gen-Yers are connected and optimistic. They have high hopes for what our work can do. It’s easy to undermine their ideas based on our own experiences and tenure, but take some time to revel in the idea of possibility and hope. Allow them to ask big questions and then challenge them to seek the answers. Be ready to listen when the answer may be something that’s either been tried or has been negated because of past constraints. Develop a culture of curiosity and critical thinking and recognize staff members that demonstrate those characteristics. If you haven’t spent time with young team members lately, find an opportunity to listen to them—their perspective will inspire you.

Celebrate the mission. Nielsen recently released a report that reiterates the value Millennials place on authenticity and creativity and their deep care about philanthropic causes. Incorporate storytelling in your project outlines; connect administrative, mundane tasks to the broader good that we’re trying to serve; and help all understand the value their contributions make in our ability to change a student, a member, and the world. These people are committed to impacting the world. Make sure to remind them of the influence their work can have to do just that.

Create development opportunities. Empower staff members to own their work and set the expectation to not only work hard, but work smart. If you have employees who have consistently exceeded those expectations, delivered consistent performance and demonstrated undeniable passion in their work, be open to promoting them to positions that may not exist. As Nancy Lublin, the founder of Dress for Success and author of *Zilch* (2010), advises:

The reward doesn't necessarily have to be financial. It doesn't have to be a fancy, familiar title. But it does have to be meaningful in some way for the person receiving the promotion. Seek input from the potential promotee. When you expand your range of meaningful promotions, you give yourself more ways to communicate to people that you appreciate and encourage their passion (p. 150).

If that kind of fluidity doesn't exist in your environment, pursue the conversation about meaningful development. Seek understanding of what is interesting and significant to your employees. Maybe it's sitting in on a meeting outside of their normal scope of work, getting connected to a staff member they admire, or learning more about a topic. With the increasing online community of resources, the possibilities to provide affordable, if not free, learning are endless.

Design moments for collaboration. Millennials thrive in spaces that allow them to connect with others and think freely and openly. How often are your staff members working together? Is your culture celebrating team members that seek peer-to-peer collaboration, or are you inadvertently prioritizing individual work? Make it easier for Millennials to shine by intentionally crafting interactive space that combines the potential of people and nurtures collaboration.

Engaged employees commit themselves wholeheartedly to the work and drive their organizations forward. Bersin advises that, "Your work environment, management practices, benefits and recognition programs, career development and corporate mission all contribute to engagement." Take some time to think about how each of those can be tweaked to better fit Gen-Y and make it easier for them to succeed. There's a new way to work and if we don't start adjusting, we're going to lose our most vital resource.

References

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