

Leadership Lessons: 4 Ways to Connect with Younger Workers

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Every year, a new batch of college graduates enters the job market. With each graduating class, the generational balance in the workplace shifts, leaving baby boomer and Gen X leaders wondering how to relate to their younger counterparts.

"As more millennials enter the workforce, experienced business leaders will be faced with some real challenges," said David Scarola, vice president of business coaching service provider The Alternative Board. "[Generation Y is] characterized as being technology-savvy, especially with social media. They are strong multitaskers, have high expectations of themselves and their employers, and prefer to collaborate and work in teams."

If you're feeling a little out of touch with your younger employees, Scarola suggested a few ways to engage and connect with them:

- Embrace technology. Although many baby boomer leaders are becoming more comfortable with technology, some are still hesitant about using it. Allow your younger staff to help lead your company in a more tech-friendly direction, with suitable IT controls.
- Provide employees with mentors. Gen Y is sometimes perceived by older generations as lazy, and this may have to do with poor expectations. Don't wait for the performance review to provide feedback to younger workers. Pairing them up with an experienced mentor is a great way to improve the culture of a changing workforce.
- Celebrate creativity. Younger workers want to do things differently, much like any "next generation." Rather than responding to their new ideas with, "That's not how we do things around here," keep an open mind. Not all new ideas are good, but plenty of them are. These ideas may help your business connect better with prospects and with employees.
- Support a civic cause. In a study by Bentley University, 84 percent of millennials think it's more important to make a positive difference in the world than to get professional recognition. If you can find a social mission for your business that engages your employees, they will see this as a higher purpose and feel more connected with the business.

Scarola cautioned that working with Gen Y is a two-way street: Leading a younger staff doesn't mean you should abandon the strategies that got you to where you are today.

"Baby boomer [and Gen X] business leaders have been highly successful because of their ability to think strategically, to plan, to measure, to adapt and to communicate," he told Business News Daily. "They are most successful when they rely on trusted advisers, and especially their peers, to leverage collective wisdom to improve the businesses and the personal lives of each other. Experienced leaders should seek to educate younger workers on the importance of the strategies and tools that they've used to create a successful business."