

THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOUR BUSINESS?

I recently attended a session given by a Generation Y expert at a client retreat. The purpose was for the owner, the board and senior managers of the company to learn how better to engage that generation of workers in the business.

The key buzzwords that we learned were how “special” that generation has been made to feel by their “helicopter parents” (parents who hover over their children solving all their problems for them). This special feeling is then reinforced in school where there is apparently no longer such a thing as failing a grade without the parents’ permission.

So far so good, I suppose, for the blessed child until he or she then enters the workforce and is now hearing anything but “you are special” from his or her boss! I now get it why this generation bounces around from job to job – they’re busy looking for an employer, any employer, who will tell them how special they are.

The lessons we learned for the employer who relies on having millennials in its workforce go like this – understand what makes them tick and then “partner” with them in a way that works for them and for you (i.e. try to find out what career path they are looking for and see how you might satisfy that in your business). Coddle them in a way that works for you. Provide them with opportunities for advancement earlier than was the case for your generation, if possible. More than anything else, give them a reason to want to work for you, make it meaningful for them.

For the business owner, there are some key related questions that should be answered:

- What is so special about your business? What would make someone want to work for you and stay working for you? What attracted them to your business in the first place? What attracts them to your business today?
- If you have senior management that is “not getting any younger”, what are you doing about that? Are you unwittingly posing a barrier to entry for talented young people lower down the food chain?
- Are you one of those “helicopter parents”? If so, does that somehow translate into your workforce and what are you doing about that?

A key starting point could be for you to write down 3 things in bullet point form that set your business apart from the rest in a meaningful way. Then bounce your list off others for their opinion – or ask them to create their own list and compare. Whatever you do, make sure that these are not “yes people” and encourage them to be as honest as possible with you. If you don’t feel comfortable doing that on your own, get someone to help.

Whether you call it a vision statement, a mission statement, a values statement, a this-is-who-we-are statement or whatever, the important thing is to be as brutally honest as you can be. The Four Seasons hotel chain became a world leader according to its founder, Isadore Sharp, because early on he decided to apply in every aspect of his business a simple lesson that he learned from his mother – “do unto others as you would

have them do unto you”. His autobiography describes what he did and includes the company mission statement.

Another example is Robert Half International, the world’s first and largest specialized staffing firm. As far back as 1963, before the Civil Rights Act in the United States passed, Mr. Robert Half lobbied against racial discrimination in the staffing industry, urging fellow staffing firms to not only follow the letter of the law but to abide by an even greater jurisdiction: “the laws of common decency”. Everything that the company does to this day – long after the passing of its founder – is guided by its “ethics first” philosophy.

If brutal honesty leads to a re-assessment of what you are doing and how you are doing it, all the better. One way or the other, people out there whether they are employees, prospective employees, customers or prospective customers are looking for the authentic you. Not the trumped-up you, not the marketed you, but the real you.

Have fun and good luck!

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