

Modifying Preconceived Notions

A study suggests millennials are happier with their bosses than many workplace observers thought; happier than baby boomers or Gen Xers. There could be many reasons for the phenomenon, experts say.

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Despite what we've been hearing -- or at least garnering from all the surveys, studies and advice being offered about younger workers -- millennials seem to be pretty pleased with their bosses.

Perhaps even more surprising, they're more pleased than Gen Xers and baby boomers seem to be.

A study just released from Wayne, Pa.-based Kenexa entitled *Exploring Leadership and Managerial Effectiveness*, part of its ongoing *WorkTrends* report, shows 68 percent of millennials (those born between 1982 and 1996) agree or strongly agree their bosses are doing a good or very good job.

That contrasts with 59 percent of Gen Xers and 55 percent of baby boomers who say the same thing.

The global poll of 29,338 workers also shows a contrast in the perceived appreciation of effort -- as 60 percent of millennials say their company values their contributions, while only 50 percent of baby boomers say the same.

"It appears our fears [about the difficulties of keeping millennials happy] may be overblown," says Brenda Kowske, research manager at Kenexa. "We all thought the millennials were all these malcontents."

Also consider, she says, "that a lot of that media blitz [about hard-to-please younger workers] was really a pre-recession kind of thing. That dialogue really started during a time of plenty."

Kowske also suggests that millennials appear to be more willing to take direction and accept authority than originally thought.

Ryan Healy, founder and COO of McLean, Va.-based Brazen Careerist Inc. -- host of BrazenCareerist.com, a career-management tool for next-generation professionals -- concurs. He says the findings make "perfect sense" to him, which kind of suggests the only reason the Kenexa research is such a surprise is that no one bothered to ask this demographic segment how much they liked their bosses until now.

"First of all, Gen Y [a.k.a., millennials] is a collaborative generation," says Healy, a member of that generation himself.

"We are constantly looking to figure out a solution through teamwork, and managers are a big part of the team. In contrast, Gen X is a very 'do-it-yourself' generation, which can often lead to a distrust of the authority that managers represent.

"Another factor ... is age" he says. "Generation Yers expect to be managed right now, and often look to their manager for feedback, career development, support and advice. Gen Xers and baby boomers have much more experience, and probably aren't so fond of being told what to do anymore."

Healy also suggests millennials grew up being friends with their parents and their parents' friends, "so many Gen Yers look at their boss the same way, as an experienced guiding hand."

David Lewis, president and chief executive of Stamford, Conn.-based OperationsInc., an HR consulting firm, says many organizations have generational distortions from historical norms in that managers are younger than the workers they supervise.

The promotions of millennials, Gen Yers and Gen Xers to managers may be because employers are seeking fresh ideas and technological skills or because they want to pay a lower salary than would be desired by more experienced, older counterparts.

At the same time, Lewis says, many older workers have taken lower-level jobs after being laid off or moved to a lower-level position to take it easy prior to retirement.

They're working for bosses who could be their kids or grandkids, he says, and, while they may not be as familiar with technology and social media, they know far more about the job and the company, yet don't always feel encouraged to speak up.

"The real question," says Lewis, "becomes, 'How long does that stay comfortable with everybody?' What are [the older workers'] end-game plans, if you will? Are they going to stick it out and 'play nice,' or are they going to go after a promotion aggressively

once the economy regains traction, eager to prove their superior knowledge and experience?"

In either scenario, there could be resentment on both sides.

In contrast, younger subordinates of the younger bosses are more likely to identify with their authority figures and be more eager to collaborate and learn than to prove their superiority and progress in the organization.

Baby boomers and millennials, says Lewis, are on two different experiential trajectories. They're at different points in life, looking for different things from their bosses.

"Millennials have much longer to learn and prove themselves," he says. "For older workers, time is running out," and there's a very strong correlation between their spots on the continuum and how they feel about the people giving them advice and guidance and, sometimes, orders and criticism.

How can -- and should -- HR leaders translate this new information? First and foremost, says Kowske, remember that it's an average; the percentages represent average workers.

"So take it as a hypothesis," she says, "to see if it matches with your workforce"

If millennials view the organization and its managers positively, she suggests that HR not "take that for granted, so think about channeling that happiness into stretch assignments and more responsibilities."

As for the less-enamored baby boomers? Kowske says the attitudes will change as their familiarity with social media becomes more commonplace and less of a defining demographic divide.

"At the end of the day," she says, "work is an equalizer. Older workers will get there eventually. When you have to get the work done, you will use the tools you need to use" and, perhaps, look more favorably on the bosses who provide them.