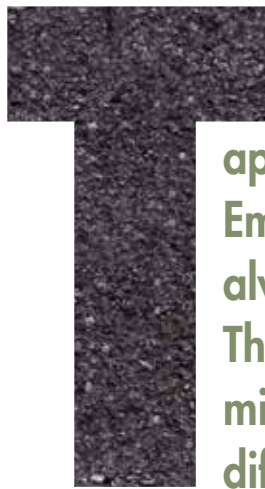


# CREATING A CULTURE OF COMMITTED MILLENNIALS

By Eve Tracy Coker, PhD







apping into the “millennial mindset” remains a challenge. Employers are often in a different career stage, so it doesn’t always seem easy to connect with younger employees. Thankfully, more research coming out shows that maybe millennials — now the workforce majority — aren’t so different from older workers after all.

Even though meaning in work can be important to a person of any generation, millennials might derive their sense of meaning differently than others. For example, in Amy O’Connor and Amber N. W. Raile’s research, many of the participants rejected the concept of a “real job” as being a meaningless concept, whereas some still held onto the notion that it was a rite of passage or mark of distinction. Still, there isn’t a clear consensus on if millennials are more driven by money or by a sense of purpose and satisfaction, but the quick and easy answer is that it depends on the person.

Individuality aside, what helps millennials perform well and stay committed to their company? Like anyone, they could be following a passion, or maybe they are focused on making enough money to enjoy life outside of work. Yet, both types of millennials often express they are more likely to stay engaged with a company depending on their experiences of meaning in work while employed there.

### POSITIVE MEANING MATTERS

What is meaning in work? A person may follow a calling, or perhaps simply find a job that pays the bills, but both look to the work environment to provide a positive sense of meaning needed in order to stay engaged in the organization. A person may reflect on a job and ask, “Why am I doing this?” This could include why one is at specific company, doing specific job tasks. The answers could reveal positive factors that keep the employee giving back to the company, or negative ones which drive the employee away. Positive meaning is important because it contributes to the well-being of both the worker and of the organization as a whole. People typically attempt to either find a sense of meaning in their work or make it more meaningful.

Conversely, workers with a sense of negative meaning, or even a sense of meaninglessness, are found to experience burn-out and detachment in work. They may even behave without



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authenticity, meaning they're not bringing their full, true selves to the job, and this has implications for performance and organizational stewardship. In this digital era, many millennials have grown up with their full, true selves on display. Many hit a crisis when they can't be themselves in an environment. This isn't a bad thing, as it means they haven't been taught or accepted the traditional corporate

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façade behavior which so often leads to harmful groupthink. Groupthink prevents new ideas and critical thinking from reaching decision-making processes. In a nutshell, workers who find meaning in work, and are able to express themselves authentically, are going to promote better ideas and eliminate more errors in a company.

As it would be ideal for workers to serve the organization to the best of their ability, so too would it be ideal for the organization to serve its workers; aside from the moral impetus to ensure that the organization is meeting workers' needs for health and well-being,

employees will contribute best to the organization when their needs are met – especially when they recognize the sense of positive meaning their workplace actively imbues in their lives.

### **INFLUENCE OF WORLDVIEWS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

As reported in Research in Organizational Behavior in 2010, employees can find positive and negative meaning in work in two ways: how they view the world and how they interact with others. One's worldview dictates how events and circumstances in our work environment are interpreted, and this in turn impacts one's behavior in that environment. Although a person's worldview is formed by the values, motivations, and beliefs acquired throughout life, it could also be influenced by what needs are being met during any time. This could in turn impact how one interprets what is happening in contexts like job tasks and culture. All of this becomes fluid when we analyze how interpersonal relationships hold sway over internal perceptions.

Interactions with others extend beyond relationships with co-workers and leaders to how a job impacts relationships with family members and important others (and vice versa). Relationships with others determine how communication from them is interpreted, and how worldviews apply to words and behaviors. At the micro level this may refer to individuals who are important to us, but at the macro level it includes groups and communities ranging from professional associations to ethnic affiliations. Relationships not only impact the sense of meaning one experiences in work, but how one's very identity is linked to that sense of meaning as well. This brings us back to the importance of authenticity. No matter what has brought an individual into a specific position, one's perception of meaning will deeply influence behavior and decision-making.

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## **THE STUDY: HOW MILLENNIALS EXPERIENCE MEANING IN WORK**

Research was recently conducted with millennials to better understand their experiences of meaning in work. Although each had distinctly unique stories, the following shared patterns were present in all of their experiences:

- 1) autonomy and structure,
- 2) value as a person,
- 3) working relationships,
- 4) altruism, and
- 5) personal care.

Positive and negative experiences in each of these patterns strongly lent to the participant's desire to either stay engaged or to disengage.

Those who wished to stay engaged at their workplaces described enthusiastically doing their best to please their leadership and/or champion the best interests of their companies and their clients: they were grateful for what their companies had to offer. Those who sought disengagement were doing their best to simply endure; functioning minimally in what they perceived to be a dysfunctional arrangement, and quietly biding their time until they could hastily retreat to better opportunities.

## **STRUCTURED AUTONOMY**

Participants expressed they wanted autonomy because they despised micromanagement. They had firm ideas about how to do the job most efficiently and effectively, and often appreciated training and supervisory guidance in this matter. However, autonomy was only as good as the structure and expectations put in place through clear and proactive communication of policies, procedures, and leadership structure. This included performance expectations and learning goals. When the individuals knew how they were expected to operate, their autonomy gave them a sense of meaning in being able to exert control over

# **ENGAGING MILLENNIAL WORKERS**

**Establish personal, respectful  
relationships with employees.**

**Balance autonomy with clearly  
communicated parameters.**

**Stick to fairness and ethical actions.**

**Refrain from hiring and promoting  
practices that reward relationships  
over work ethic.**

**Develop a culture of employees  
motivated to serve the organization  
and each other.**

**Encourage and model personal  
responsibility and work-life balance.**

**Balance support with demands.**

**Value what employees say and do,  
while weaving in learning opportunities.**





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their jobs. When there were few parameters and unclear expectations, the autonomy was meaningless because they questioned how to operate without negative repercussions.

### **FEELING VALUED**

Being valued as an individual was a huge part of helping participants find a sense of meaning. When participants felt valued, they expressed loyalty to their companies and motivation to do their best work. Leadership played a majority role in the perception of being valued, and participants frequently expressed that they would do anything for their leader – even if they did not completely agree with it – if they felt valued by that leader. Otherwise, participants felt like “a cog in the machine” and were not only unmotivated to do well, but experienced highly negative perceptions of company leadership. In these instances, working relationships came into play as participants felt that interactions with co-workers could either make or break their job.

### **CO-WORKER CONNECTIONS**

The participants enjoyed being surrounded by competent co-workers with similar social and work ethic values. Morale was harmed when surrounded by others who possessed seemingly poor social skills and poor work ethics. Here, a sense of altruism could mitigate dissatisfaction with co-workers when participants wanted to do good for other people or for the company as a whole. Participants reported satisfaction when helping clients and co-workers, whether in a work-related capacity or a social one. Additionally, helping their organization allowed them to feel as though they were also contributing to the world outside their organization. However, when positive experiences were blocked, such as being unable to help or contribute, seeing leadership and co-workers as contributing to a negative environment, or

even becoming emotionally or personally over-involved in their jobs, the participants expressed frustration and stress.

### **THREE FORCES OF ENGAGEMENT**

Related to the five identified patterns, three equalizing forces could help mediate the engagement or disengagement:

- 1) power,
- 2) personal responsibility, and
- 3) adaptability.

Although a participant could be having a negative experience with any of the five patterns, gaining a sense of power, taking greater personal responsibility, and having opportunities to adapt helped the experiences to be perceived more positively. Conversely, positive experiences were ruined by perceptions of powerlessness, a lack of personal responsibility, and the inability to adapt.

### **FEELING IN CONTROL**

Power or powerlessness came from the amount of control participants felt they had in their environments. Individuals may have had bad experiences, but with the right amount of control were able to improve their sense of meaning in work. Conversely, great experiences, amid feelings of powerlessness, left participants with little interest to stick around in their current positions.

### **ACCEPTING PERSONALITY RESPONSIBILITY**

While power is something organizational leadership can manipulate, a sense of personal responsibility rests with the worker. This personal responsibility helps determine how workers learn from their circumstances, behave with integrity, and become healthy individuals. For example, two participants described challenging job conditions. One decided she was going to establish clear boundaries by taking

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care of herself and making sure her spouse didn't bear the brunt of her bad days. She reported finding a better job and becoming a healthier person. The second possessed a strong work ethic, but expected companies to completely meet his needs and invested all his hopes into his employers. When his expectations were repeatedly unmet, he developed mental health issues related to anxiety and depression.

### **A DESIRE TO ADAPT**

Adaptability comes from both the employer and the employee. Often, less than ideal situations harmed morale or even caused the participants to look for another job. Yet, the participants reported being able to adapt when allowed to do so. A clear example from the research: One participant was upset about unfair pay, since co-workers with less experience were suddenly at his salary level. He was looking for another job until a person from senior leadership showed interest in him, valuing him as a person, and grooming him for a move up the corporate ladder. He was pleased with the recognition and stayed with his company, eventually being promoted to a higher position.

### **REAL STORIES FROM THE RESEARCH**

The most notable example of how these patterns played out together occurred when two participants experienced consequences for making very costly mistakes.

Worker A belonged to an organization where expectations were laid out clearly and he was given plenty of autonomy. He knew he was valued and he respected his co-workers and leaders. When he made a costly mistake, management quietly disciplined him in a way that preserved his dignity and helped him learn not to make the mistake again. After the mistake, he appreciated the lesson. He was determined to stay with the company, and to continue proving his worth.

Worker B came from a place where expectations were unclear, despite being given autonomy. He experienced poor interactions with upper management and felt as if any attempts to recognize his value were shallow gestures. When he made a costly mistake, due to lack of communication, his managers made sure everyone in the organization knew of his error. He accepted that he made the mistake and that it required consequences, but he had no interest in investing more of his effort into his company and made plans to leave as soon as possible.



### **FOSTERING MEANING IN WORK FOR MILLENNIALS**

Of course, the research has its limitations and many would argue that these findings could apply to people who aren't millennials. Aside from what the broad patterns can tell us, these findings can be distilled into practical tips:

- Establish warm but appropriate and respectful relationships with employees. Create mentor-like relationships with workers, balancing support with expectations and demands. Let workers know each is an important part of the organization, and that you are interested
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in each individual's well-being and satisfaction while still maintaining firm professional boundaries. These efforts allow communications to be interpreted in positive and meaningful ways.

- Make decisions for the good of the organization, not personal whims – and choose language that reflects organizational stewardship. Refrain from “I need” or “I want.” This will not only help fuel others’ interests in contributing to the company, but will help them feel less like that “cog in the machine.”
- Allow employees to have learning and team bonding opportunities related to social skills and valuing each other as teammates. This helps establish an environment of teamwork and mutually held goals.
- Balance autonomy by clearly and regularly communicating rules, policies and expectations during onboarding, training, supervision, and other means by which employees are most receptive. This allows for employees to use their creativity while maintaining mutually held expectations between the employee and the organization.
- Stick to fairness and ethical actions. This reinforces competency. The most frequent violation of this was when leaders hired or rewarded employees who appeared to get by solely on charisma instead of work ethic, or when those employees had a friendship with the leader.
- Model and encourage personal responsibility, authentic behavior, and work-life balance. Admit errors and ask for input from others. Although the company is responsible for meeting certain needs of the employee, the

employee is equally responsible for taking steps to meet those needs and to find satisfaction. Personal growth and professional ambition reportedly thrive in these conditions.

- Validate what employees say, especially if you ask for their input. This will help them feel valued. If they are incorrect, this offers opportunities for training. Appreciate their thought processes, consider their views, recognize their efforts, and respectfully let them know if there's another way to look at the situation. We learn much better when someone we trust is guiding us through the lessons instead of dismissing us.

Regardless of whether one feels called to do a job or is merely seeking compensation, the perception of meaning in work impacts how well one can engage in the workplace. In turn, this greatly influences performance, commitment, and even organizational sustainability. Anyone at any stage of an organization, from millennial to top leadership, can take steps to find positive meaning in work. However, the structure of the organization must allow for that meaningfulness to take shape.



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