

How to Coach Millennials Into Tomorrow's Leaders

A Case Study of



Have you Googled “millennials” lately?

You’ll likely find out these 3 facts:

1. They get a bad rep from their Gen X and Baby Boomer elders¹, primarily because there is a generational gap in terms of beliefs, behaviors, motivators and expectations. They’re called the “Me Me Me Generation”, get labeled as “entitled”, “idealistic”, “narcissistic”, “scattered”, and so on.
2. They represent the largest source of new hires, having overtaken the Baby Boomers, and leading the Gen X population by almost 10 million individuals. According to a 2016 study by Pew Research Center², Millennials will represent over 40% of the workforce by 2020 – only 3 years from now! This is bound to have a drastic impact on company culture.
3. Companies are struggling to integrate them, yet Millennials are here so stay – so the issue cannot be ignored. This shift in the workforce mix requires an adjustment. In truth, the adjustment is not a departure from what skillful leaders already do: align, motivate, and develop their teams. The challenge resides in HOW to best do that with younger executives.

The Millennial “Issue”

I’d like to start with the question whether there truly is such a thing as a Millennial issue? I personally do not like the “Millennial” label nor the often negative assumptions tied to it. Many younger executives are absolute gems. They are hard-working, smart, deeply committed, and open to feedback and personal growth. I’ve had the privilege of working with a number of them while coaching Evite’s staff and develop their leadership skills, at all levels of the organization.

However, as adeptly remarked by Wallaby’s CEO, Matthew Goldman³, the challenge with hiring and managing Millennials is not merely due to their generation, but rather their age, and the historical markers which have shaped their overall mindset and priorities:

- They can’t remember a time before the Internet.
- Their childhood occurred during a time of peak economic prosperity in the United States.
- They don’t remember the fall of the Berlin Wall (or have any Cold War memories).
- They were not yet adults when 9/11 happened.
- They were deeply affected by at least one other post-1990 event – perhaps the Rwandan genocide, the Great Recession or even the election of Barack Obama.

Therefore, the issue isn’t so much who these young executives are or what they believe. The challenge is that there is an unprecedented shift in generational mindset, leaving a fundamental gap in experience, behavior, language, communication skills, and standards. Filling this gap to better the workplace is a shared responsibility between the Millennials, their managers, their peers, and their teams.

The Manager's Challenge

Executives and managers have a lot on their plate. Between driving business results, meetings, presentations, and helping their teams be as effective as they can, dealing with the added weight of bridging the communications gap with younger team members can be too much to handle. After all, there are only so many hours in the day.

In addition, Millennials are now also becoming managers, and unfortunately have been ill-equipped to handle the shift from individual contributor to people leader. Between figuring out how they should split their time, what operating mechanisms to put in place to best manage their teams, how to give and receive feedback effectively, how to resolve conflict, and how to operationalize the alignment of cross-functional priorities, there are many new skills for them to acquire in order to be most effective in their new role. This rarely happens organically or overnight. It shines a spotlight on the need for guidance and mentoring, and the ability to reach out to an impartial and safe resource to bring up and resolve these challenges.

The Evite[®] success story

Victor Cho is the CEO of Evite. A seasoned executive, advisor and speaker, he's had a number of leadership roles at premier companies, such as Microsoft and Intuit. When faced with the challenge of evolving the Evite organization to meet the company's business challenges, Victor quickly realized that outside help would be beneficial. *"We needed to evolve our talent's capabilities in order to move the company forward", says Cho. "We have a great team, but its youth meant that there were some leadership gaps we needed to fill. The business priorities required our staff's undivided attention, so I reached out to Olivier at HPO Coach to assist us in helping our young executives reach their full potential."*

So what did we do at Evite that had such a positive impact on the C-level executives, managers, and individual contributors? How can the engagement of an external coach help an organization move forward without letting dysfunction get in the way of business growth? What is it about using a coach that opens the door to authentic conversations, uncovering deep-rooted issues, and addressing questions that often go unanswered?

Here are **five dimensions** in which an external coach can profoundly and positively impact your organization:

1. Boost collaboration and effectiveness by building baseline Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and improving communication skills

Emotional Intelligence training is a gift to any organization. On the one hand, it helps teams function more effectively and with less friction in the short term. On the other hand, a higher EQ helps employees increase their future career success.

Several studies show that EQ will be one of the top ten job skills by 2020⁴. A majority of HR and hiring managers value EQ over IQ; they are more likely to promote high EQ people; and would not likely hire someone with a high IQ but low EQ combination⁵. Studies also show that financial success comes from 15% technical skills and 85% emotional intelligence⁶.

Millennials do not remember a world without the Internet. Their communication skills may be underdeveloped given the fragmented nature of digital communications today. They interact almost exclusively through a screen, with their preferred methods being email, text, and social media updates.. These channels do not lend themselves to truly inquire about another person's intent, understand their motivation, or resolve conflict – all of which are required to reduce friction, move fast, and be successful with a productive “one team” mentality.

While some believe that EQ is an innate skill, there are many tools and techniques at a coach's disposal to help increase an organization's EQ level. Here are just a few we leveraged at Evite:

- Ladder of inference
- Skillful inquiry vs. advocacy
- Training to recognize and develop four key areas of EQ:
 - Self-awareness
 - Self-management
 - Social awareness
 - Relationship management
- Framing
- Triggers (in self and others)
- Conflict management styles and how to adapt accordingly
- A framework to manage cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses

2. Provide a safe resource to talk (a.k.a. the “office couch”)

A safe place and resource to open up is the first step in tackling issues and struggles that would otherwise be left unsaid.

Over the course of our careers, most of us have found ourselves having to deal with uncomfortable conversations. Whether it's calling out disruptive behavior, approaching your manager about your performance or potential promotion, providing constructive feedback, building newly required skills, dealing with work/life balance issues, or resolving conflict (situational or latent.)

We've been trained, oftentimes since elementary school, that having the right answers and being first in line gets rewarded, hence that such behaviors are indicators of success. Therefore, it is not surprising that many people hold the perception that admitting to a deficiency or asking for help could have a potentially negative impact on their career. As a result, important opportunities for an employee's growth are not uncovered.

People are often uncomfortable going to peers or managers (and certainly direct reports) for advice. While it should be viewed as self-awareness, doing so can also be construed as a weakness. As pointed out in Patrick Lencioni's “Five Dysfunctions of a Team,” few make progress – much less succeed – alone. The underlying dynamics, which are rarely addressed in a healthy way, cause teams to be less effective than they could be. This hurts individual development, team output, and ultimately company success.

“During my sessions with Olivier, I always felt our conversations were truly confidential, and I felt safe to talk about the “real” issues.”, says Kristy Gharabally, Director of Business Development and Corporate Communications at Evite. “With Olivier, there was never a need to sugarcoat or spin information. He has a true talent for digging into an organization and identifying opportunities for growth.”

Having access to an external coach makes it much safer to bare it all. Professionals are more likely to admit vulnerabilities with an objective and neutral party, whose only purpose is to help them become better than they were yesterday. These open and authentic conversations become teachable moments as well as opportunities to role model behavior, guide individuals in terms of developing their EQ, and learn how to better handle situations that could be a source of disruption and stress.

3. Synthesize macro themes from across an organization

Unlike individual managers who are typically limited to a functional or vertical view, an external coach has a unique, company-wide overview of the dynamics across the entire organization. While coaching teams and/or individual team members, the coach gathers and processes many data points across the board. While confidentiality is paramount to build trust, there are two exceptions to the confidentiality rule: (1) when given explicit permission to act on an insight (this typically involves facilitating a conversation between parties) or (2) if the shared insight shared is repeated across multiple conversations with other employees. In that case the issue should be brought forward and addressed without disclosing the identity of the sources.)

The ability to synthesize information into broader trends, flow disruptions, or VOE themes (Voice Of the Employee), allows the coach to escalate and address issues that reach far beyond the individual employee. Doing so usually has a dramatic and scalable positive impact on the organization, either through conflict resolution or targeted leadership development training.

A variety of approaches are used to gather information. For instance, when assessing cross-team dynamics, each team is asked to score the quality of their relationships with other teams. The score in itself is not what’s important, but potential discrepancies are. They help identify perception gaps, which are an opportunity to dig deeper and identify root causes.

4. Create scale by giving the mentees the power to coach on their own

Scale is a critical lever for companies. It is often pursued in the context of Marketing, IT, or Sales. But scale is equally important, if not more, when it comes to your company’s most valuable asset: its talent.

Intelligence Group studies of Millennials have found that “79% of them would want their boss to serve more as a coach or mentor.” Managers with coaching skills, who are good listeners, value collaboration, take time to build 1:1 relationships, and are clear about

their expectations, can bring the best out of their younger employees. This also means that, as they become manager themselves, Millennials are putting additional emphasis on being able to coach their teams, which in the end is a necessity rather than a nice skill to have.

Mentoring and coaching skills do not always come naturally. They require work and a desire to grow. Lauren Antonelli, a younger professional (yet long-tenured Evite employee) who has risen through the ranks to become the company's Head of Product, had this to say about using an external coach: *"I had many conversations with Olivier. Initially, it was primarily to help me grow. What happened in the process, was that by watching him coach me and others, I learned from him and picked up skills that are now part of my DNA."* Antonelli adds, *"The best feeling is when young women from across the organization now come to me for advice and coaching. I've become a mentor to several of them."*

As a coach, I want to "work myself out of a job". My most important success metric is that eventually a client no longer needs me. That means that I've done my job well. My goal is to develop leaders and mentors, and pivot an organization into a self-sustaining leadership growth engine.

5. Be a resource that coaches both up and down

As Noel Tichy observed⁸, a company is best served and most successful when it creates an environment where building leaders at all levels of the organization is integrated into the corporate culture. This also means that many of the necessary improvements to move younger executives to the next level, require a change in approach and mindset of the senior executive team (the VPs and the "C-Suite".)

"Olivier works with all levels of the organization, from front-line employees, to managers, to functional leaders", says Cho. "But in order to truly effect change, he has to coach up the chain as well. For me and my executive team, it's important to work with a coach who can relate to our business realities, while bringing a level of empathy and people focus that make his guidance relevant, and take into account our desire to balance employee, customer and shareholder goals."

Having experienced the corporate world first-hand, I bring an additional dimension to my coaching: a deep understanding of business dynamics, strategic priorities, pressures, trade-offs and the critical thinking that is required of CxOs. I'm not an academic. For over two decades, I have lived and breathed business goals, annual planning, P&L, KPIs, team management, politics, board interactions and more. I myself had to transition from being an individual contributor to managing teams. I myself dealt with hiring, layoffs, and leadership training, at start-ups and established/matrixed global companies alike. My point is that, in order to successfully coach senior executives, it is important to speak their language, understand their challenges – and that best comes from experience, not from a book or a seminar.

About HPO Coach: *A seasoned Silicon Valley executive and former CMO, Olivier is the owner of [HPO Coach, LLC](http://www.HPOcoach.com) (www.HPOcoach.com), an executive coaching and leadership training practice located in Fremont, CA. He has helped countless companies and teams grow into High Performing Organizations, as well as assisted individuals grow their skills and navigate career changes effectively. With over 1,000 hours of coaching Millennials, Olivier brings a proven approach to helping companies optimize their growing workforce of young executives.*

About Evite: *With over 32 million registered users, Evite (www.evite.com) is the leading digital invitation and social event planning brand. Evite's free, easy-to-use invitation designs kick off 6 million parties and gatherings every year. With 20,000 invitations sent every hour, and party-planning tools that handle hundreds of millions of RSVPs annually, Evite is responsible for more celebrations than any other online brand. Launched in 1998, Evite is headquartered in Los Angeles and is a wholly-owned operating business of Liberty Interactive Corporation (NASDAQ: LINTA). Evite and the Evite logo are trademarks of Evite, Inc.*

References:

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