



Bridging the Generation Divide

Seize opportunities with millennials through engagement and communication.

By Mark Owens

A CCE's *Horizon Initiative* report refers to a “millennial-phobia” sweeping chamber world. The term describes a pervasive fear that the millennial generation will never be involved in chamber activity; that they’ll never pay their dues, literally or figuratively.

The report also says that millennial fear is overblown and chambers have a huge opportunity if they can harness this generation’s community engagement instinct. I subscribe to this way of thinking. Probably that’s not surprising considering that, by definition, I’m a millennial.

Understanding how people from different generations think, work, and interact, can be challenging. Assuming each new generation wants to participate in the same way as previous ones will probably result in frustration. So in the spirit of inter-generational understanding, I’ve spent time over the past 18-months getting to know Dave Cooley, CCE, a former leader of the Greer Chamber of Commerce and an industry legend.

I won’t share his age; but I will tell you that Dave started a company in his hometown of Hendersonville, N.C. in 1946. He was a teenager at the time. He went on to lead the chamber of commerce in Greer, S.C., then went on to chambers in Hendersonville; Greenville, S.C.; Jacksonville, Fla.; Memphis, Tenn.; Dallas; and eventually returned to and retired from the chamber in Memphis. He chaired ACCE in 1973-74 and was among the first people awarded ACCE’s Life Member distinction. In short, he’s has a lifetime of chamber experience.

It’s a privilege to interact with a man who held the role I hold today more than 60 years ago. The more Dave and I have talked, the more it seems to me that each generation is guilty of making generalizations about people of other age categories. Because of fearmongering, my generation is often unfairly perceived as lazy, uninterested, and uninvolved.

“There was always concern that younger folks would not measure up to the older generation’s standards,” Dave shared with me. He added, “Elders have always worked to bring the younger ones along according to their level of interest.”

“According to their level of interest.”

Perhaps this comment best captures the heartburn when it comes to understanding millennials and how that generation thinks, works, interacts, and engages. What has been attributed to laziness or lack of involvement is more likely generational differences in interests and time expectations.

My theory was further supported when Dave said, “There has always been concern that the next generation would not be able to fill leadership positions, but the younger executives have proven the older folks wrong most of the time.” The hubbub today about millennials is merely the product of a generational shift in leadership. As each new generation enters the workforce and climbs the leadership ladder, the preceding generation has concerns and doubts as the torch is passed.



Tips for Engaging Millennials



Share ownership.

There will be greater buy-in when millennials feel valued. When fully invested, millennials are highly motivated and committed. Don't expect millennials to carry on without change for no other reason than "this is the way we've always done it." Rather, expect millennials to challenge the status quo. By working together and sharing guidance, leadership, and expertise, the end result can be great.



Consider schedules and be flexible.

Many millennials expect to be home with their young families or participate in evening social activities. Consider changing the time of your gathering to lunchtime or early morning and you might see greater involvement from millennials unwilling to give up time after the workday.



Redefine socializing.

Social media isn't a passing trend and its use spans generations. Millennials tend to be especially interested in social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. If your organization can't be found on Facebook you're missing a big opportunity to connect with millennials... and others, too.



Avoid age segregation.

Break up age-defined cliques. Foster togetherness by encouraging people of all generations to mix and mingle. Provide platforms for bringing people together to learn from each other. If your young professionals group is stuck in a silo and isn't actively interacting with other members, are you fostering community togetherness or hindering it?



Shake it up.

Before rushing to conclusions next time you encounter low millennial turnout at an event or noticing there are few, if any, young professionals on committees and boards, consider the cause. Personally invite millennials to become more engaged. Ask for their help. Experiment with a new time for your after-hours events.

Dave pointed out that over the years in his career, he witnessed mentors stepping up to provide guidance to the next wave of leadership. And I think Dave really nailed it when he mentioned that millennials have to be asked "how do you want to be involved?" What seems like a simple question often goes unasked and unanswered. Better cross-generation communication can work wonders in changing our perceptions of others.

Referencing millennials in the workforce and my generation's involvement, Dave continued to share his infinite wisdom, saying, "It's probably not attending endless committee meetings. Perhaps it's a short-term or specific project like building a bike trail, cleaning up downtown, or changing entryway signage." Bingo.

In the end, Dave put it best, saying, "Making millennials feel welcome and wanting to stay in a community requires hard, intentional work."

As the most educated generation to date, millennials will comprise 50 percent of the total workforce by 2020. As Dave Cooley experienced in his career, working together can teach us a lot about each other. When passing the torch, seasoned professionals can find comfort in knowing they played a role in mentoring and guiding new leaders.



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