

Leading Millennials

An Approach That Works

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Our Air Force is full of millennials. The military “pyramid” force structure means that there will always be considerably more young people than old, and the millennial generation (roughly defined as those born from 1980 to 2000) has filled our ranks, especially the most numerous ranks of staff sergeant and captain. It will not be long before the oldest of them become senior leaders, but they will have left their mark on the military services long before then. In fact, as a group, they wield widespread influence today, making some senior leaders very uncomfortable.

A recent article in the US Naval Institute's *Proceedings Magazine* takes the measure of millennials, and it is not pretty. Millennials question authority, are unwilling to wait their turn, exhibit signs of laziness, use technology to bypass the chain of command, and routinely let customs and courtesies slip. The article concludes that millennials must be “course-corrected” if they are to be assimilated into the culture and traditions of the military.¹

We have just recently left the 8th Fighter Wing in Korea, where we were honored to serve as the wing's commander and vice-commander, respectively. During an intense year, we worked and lived with millennials in the Wolf Pack, gaining experience and insights in leading them and observing their capabilities firsthand. We continue to have the

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privilege of leading and working with millennials. Perhaps most important—and a bit scary—is the fact that both of us have children who are millennials!

Although we acknowledge that the standard criticisms leveled against millennials contain grains of truth, we disagree with their overall tone. Like any generation, millennials have strengths and weaknesses, but we believe that their strengths far outnumber their weaknesses. Moreover, if we are truly committed to “strategic agility” in our force, we must harness the creative power, enthusiasm for service, and teamwork they bring to our institution.

Whenever representatives of a new generation flood into an institution, they inevitably shape it according to their beliefs, values, and norms. Our job as leaders on the front of this wave is to adapt our institution—and our approach to leadership—so that we can benefit from the change that will occur anyway. We need to ride the wave of energy and creativity—not be swamped by it. The following includes some observations and suggestions on how to do that.

First, we need to acknowledge the millennials' value to our force. Our millennial Airmen are as technically competent as any who have gone before them. They have become the true experts on operating and maintaining our weapons systems. They are the best in the world, and we should not take this fact for granted. We created tough training regimens for them, and they have made the sacrifices necessary not only to survive those programs but also to thrive as operators in air, space, and cyberspace. We cannot defend our country without them.

Second, we need to stop questioning the millennial commitment to “service before self.” At a time when the probability of being sent to dangerous places remains high, the possibility of being killed is real, and the war weariness of the American people is palpable, millennials still answer the call to serve. The war in Afghanistan alone has produced numerous millennials who have received the Medal of Honor, Purple Heart, Silver Star, and Distinguished Flying Cross. If we have any chance of leaving Afghanistan better than we found it, millennials

will do most of the heavy lifting. As in our generation, some millennials are self-centered and narcissistic, but as a whole, we find that their generation is as committed to service as any before it.

In fact, millennials crave opportunities to serve, and in many cases, they want to involve themselves in service outside work. At Kunsan Air Base, South Korea, our Airmen volunteered their precious time repeatedly, serving at the local orphanage and teaching English to our Korean neighbors. When we proposed a wingwide service project on the day prior to Thanksgiving, our millennials did most of the organizing and leading for efforts such as preparing food for the hungry, visiting the elderly, and cleaning the local schools, parks, and playgrounds.

Third, we need to understand millennials' view of authority, reinforcing the positive and shaping their views only when necessary. We believe that millennials' general distrust of institutions is a good thing. Why? Because many of our institutions are deeply flawed as they attempt to adjust to the complex and rapidly changing world around them. The Air Force is no exception. We should remember that Galileo went to prison, critics openly scoffed at Robert Goddard, and institutions resistant to new ideas court-martialed Billy Mitchell. In the same way, we are a force susceptible to groupthink. We can inoculate ourselves against this tendency by bringing millennials into the conversation early and often. Given an invitation, they will not hesitate to share their opinions.

Unlike us, millennials grew up in a world where communication technology made the world "flat." During their youth, the average person could gain access to information previously restricted to those "in the know." Furthermore, advances in social media made it possible to talk directly to almost anyone, including people in authority. Consequently, many millennials don't think twice about engaging senior leaders directly on issues, and they don't understand why their leaders can't give them rapid and personal feedback.

This approach can make those of us with a more traditional sense of authority uneasy. We certainly do not want to devalue the chain of

command, yet in this area we might do well to let their generation shape us in some ways. Specifically, we need to harness their desire to interact with their leaders while simultaneously taking advantage of their competence and creativity. In our case, we found that bringing them in early to the brainstorming phase yielded fantastic results, especially as we tackled problems that had no answers from books. Our technique was simple and repeatable. We gathered key millennial leaders from throughout the wing into an ad hoc idea-generating team, provided broad guidance and intent, gave them a deadline, and let them brainstorm, both together in the group and as individuals. In most cases, we then allowed them to organize and execute many of the concepts they created. This approach produced excellent results. More on this later.

Customs and courtesies always present challenges, but we believe that millennials are not especially different from previous generations, and in any case, the problem stems primarily from leadership. Only rarely did we observe a millennial Airman who would not respond positively to respectful correction. The key lay in providing that correction on the spot so that standards and expectations remained high. Recent graduates from basic military training had no issues with customs and courtesies. If they adopted bad habits, they learned them on our watch.

Finally, millennials want to know “why.” As stated earlier, they share a distrust of institutions. These Airmen can execute orders as well as anyone, but when the reasons behind the directives are not apparent, millennials want a dialogue with their leaders. We decided to use this desire as an opening to develop the next generation of leaders. As time allowed, we tried to explain the logic behind policies and instructions. Sometimes, this approach took on the feel of a classroom setting, sharpening our leadership—especially our ability to communicate and teach—and stretching our millennials’ minds. In the end, we decided that we wanted our subordinates to know “why” because when things changed, they would find themselves better equipped to adapt accord-

ing to our intent. In short, we attempted to build a culture with an important norm: “respect the leader but challenge the approach.”

No wing or base is perfect, but Kunsan Air Base is better off because of the leadership, creativity, and old-fashioned hard work put in by millennials. Here are just a few examples of their accomplishments:

1. We had only a short time to organize our Sexual Assault Awareness Day, scheduled for the middle of the command changeover season at Kunsan. We brought together a leadership team composed mostly of millennials, and we told them to “do something different.” They did. In less than two weeks, they organized an incredible day of training, including a groundbreaking survey, a “silent walk” commemorating victims of sexual assault, and live training that used actors portraying uncomfortable situations. Their ideas kicked off a wave of creativity concerning the problem of sexual assault, and Kunsan eventually won an Air Force-level award for innovation in this area.
2. As the only place where US and Korean combat air forces are stationed together, Kunsan is unique on the Korean peninsula. We decided that we would be the model of how US and Korean airmen should work, live, and, if necessary, fight together. Our millennial pilots developed an exchange effort with their counterparts in the Republic of Korea Air Force, which included formal and informal exchanges that occurred almost weekly. These sessions led to the development of professional and personal relationships with our Korean partners that they can build on for decades to come.
3. After the success of our Sexual Assault Awareness Day, we challenged our millennials to come up with new ways to talk about this subject. We intentionally did not dictate how they should do so. The result floored us. Two advertising campaigns—one video series and one set of posters—took advantage of the millennials’ energy and passion on this issue. The “Signs” video series consisted of Airmen holding up signs about sexual assault (they

wrote the messages themselves). The set of posters also included millennial Airmen in dramatic lighting, staring at the camera with a single word such as “think” or “respect” displayed prominently on the poster. In our opinion, these campaigns had the effect of communicating to the base the idea that “our generation is not going to let this happen anymore.” Perfect.

Not everything was rosy. At times we had to make “course corrections.” The following examples might help others who are dealing with similar issues:

1. We had to confront a case of cyberbullying. Specifically, Airmen in a particular career field created an invitation-only website to post malicious and untrue accusations about other Airmen (this practice was not limited to Kunsan but extended across the Air Force). Although most participants on the site were millennials, they were clearly following the lead of older Airmen who, frankly, lacked integrity. This situation not only gave our squadron commander a chance to model good leadership but also gave us an opportunity to have a tough talk about cyberbullying. The outcome was that one of the younger millennials who had posted on the site developed a presentation on cyberbullying that she presented to the rest of the squadron.
2. We dealt with a case of vandalism that involved the overturning of numerous large flower pots that lined the road approaching the main gate. The wing commander personally called for those responsible to turn themselves in and make it right with the local community. Kunsan enjoys incredible support from local Koreans, and we did not want to jeopardize this relationship. Within hours, the Airmen responsible confessed their involvement. When the squadron members heard about this, they decided to go into the community to repair the damage, clean the streets, and personally ask residents if they could do anything to preserve our special relationship. Millennials led this effort.

In the end, we are responsible for creating an environment where our Airmen can be successful. To do so, of course, means that we must attend to the basics, such as offering clear direction, sufficient resources, and realistic expectations. We also think that we must establish a setting where we can leverage the characteristics that make millennials unique. Even though this means that we have to adjust as leaders and move away from our comfort zone, we view this discomfort as an investment with high potential for major payoffs. None of us is as smart as all of us, and as we try to tackle today's wicked problems, we want the millennials on our side. ✪

Note

1. Cdr Darcie Cunningham, "Now Hear This—Millennials Bring a New Mentality: Does It Fit?," *Proceedings Magazine* 140/8/1,338 (August 2014), <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2014-08/now-hear-millennials-bring-new-mentality-does-it-fit>.



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