



# Supervision and “The Millennials”: Collaborating to Bridge the Generation Gap

**Frank Delano**

“A new breed of worker is coming soon that is about to attack everything you hold sacred” screamed an advertisement for the CBS-TV news show *60 Minutes*. In that show Morley Safer said “Organizations will be facing a new generation that will want to stroll in to work around noon with their flip flops and iPods on Monday and still want to be CEO by Thursday” (2007). That was nearly eight years ago but the hysteria around the impact the Millennial Generation (for the purpose of this article those 18-30 years old) will have on our workforce and how they can be best supervised continues to flourish. The *60 Minutes* show was talking generically but Child and Youth Care is not immune from

the concern. I was recently asked to do a presentation on the topic for a 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of a CYC program in Canada. I am told very excited sign-ups from the CYC field zoomed in by the end of the first day of advertising. It is also interesting to note the Executive Director sent me an article on Millennials that spoke to the different societal culture from which Millennials are coming (Klass and Lindenberger, 2015) that was provocative and fascinating. Where did he get the article? His Millennial daughter gave it to him in hopes it would help him get through these tough times!

There is not yet much written on this topic in our field. Davidson (2009) did ex-



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amine the generational differences in regards to how CYC practitioners might view boundaries. But most of what I found spoke more to the generational differences that connect to the adult/youth dynamic and not the supervisory relationship. In that vein Whittaker points out there are generational differences in the idea of “worth”, highlighting one of the many values differences that can exist between generations (Whittaker, McCormick, O’Connor, and Tebben, 2004). Finding ways to bridge this kind of generation gap is a quickly emerging issue and one that supervisors and agencies should begin to examine more closely.

There has always been anxiety about new generations entering a workforce, so why are Millennials so different? Some of the general characteristics of this new generation that I have heard discussed in a number of different arenas are:

The main reason they stay in a job for the first three years is loyalty/respect for their supervisor. The main reason they leave is dissatisfaction with a supervisor (Klass and Lindenberger, 2015).

- They tend to value the concept of “paying your dues” or “playing the game” less than previous generations.
- They tend to value job security less than previous generations and value employment flexibility more.
- They generally have a different view of a “work/life” balance placing much more emphasis on protecting their personal life.

- They are the most diverse generation in history.
- “Every kid should get a trophy.” Many Millennials have grown up thinking “You can’t fail”...many times having been rewarded for participation and not necessarily achievement
- Some Millennials are coming out of a university culture of “trigger warnings”, hypersensitivity to offending, “micro-aggressions” being sanctioned, etc. (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015).
- Millennials have had a lot of experience “multi-tasking”.
- Millennials tend to have a different view of “loyalty”. They tend to place less value on loyalty to an organization and more value towards involvement to make things better.

### **Oh, No! Here comes one of those Gosh-Darn Millennials!!**

This above list paints a very daunting picture of what differences are coming along with this generation. They have also led to many stereotypes that create anxiety for those supervising Millennials. Apropos of this, at a social gathering with some senior management people and supervisors at a Texas Child and Youth Care conference recently I raised the question of supervising Millennials. The first comment of an excellent and thoughtful discussion, complete with rolling eyes, was “Oh no, those gosh-darn Millennials!” Some of main stereotypes are:

- They feel they are just so entitled!
- They always seem so distracted.
- They are so self-absorbed.
- They think *everyone* should get a trophy – just for existing!
- Their work ethic is just not the same.
- They don't have any attention span.
- They won't stay long. They have very little sense of "duty", or loyalty to the organization.
- They are always on those phones!

Of course there is always some truth to stereotypes and I must admit I have even seen some of these in younger Child and Youth Care workers recently. Many times in discussions with supervisors and agency senior people the conversation tends to elicit many of the above as big concerns. I confess I have sometimes found myself tempted to buy into the gloom and doom they were predicting for the future. But, then I asked myself some questions: Who are the people that seem to be the best participants in most of my trainings? Who asks some of the most thoughtfully provocative and creative questions? Who stimulates my creative juices the most in the trainings? Who are the ones most likely to approach me after a training to ask questions, or to tell me how much they appreciated feeling their opinions seemed to be valued. Why, it is those same gosh-darn Millennials! As a way to try to think through the disconnect with this and what has been the large frustration I have been hearing about Millennials from so many supervisors, I decided to ask some Millennials what

they wanted from supervision. Here are the eight replies I received:

"I want to be valued. I don't want to feel I am merely a means to a number. My input is unique and I want it valued as such." (Krystina)

"We enter the workforce as children whose brains have been overstimulated by technology, so my brain is constantly going. What I need is to be motivated by my work, feel empowered by my supervisor to trust that I am capable to get the job done well. I am full of ideas and want to be seen as a key part of the team and not second class in my career." (Saira)

- "Sometimes you just have to tell us what to do. Be sure the expectations are clear." (Lais)
- "I want a supervisor who will help me, not just hire me to their advantage. I want to be valued and have a mentor." (Larissa)
- "It is important to have mutual respect and clear communication about expectations. Also, if I do something that is not correct I want to know so I can make it better." (Jija)
- "I want to see my supervisor have a passion for the work we do. I want to have her as a role model." (Leticia)
- "Supervisors should not lower their standards/ expectations for Millennials. Supervisors should instead sharpen their supervision skills to meet Millennials where they are and then help them grow personally and professionally which in turn helps to better



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the organization as a whole.”  
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- “When I have a worker who is going ok and not causing me any problems that bothers me more than those giving me problems. OK is not good enough when working with kids and I go home and wonder what else I can do to connect with them better to motivate them. I don’t think we should settle for less than excellent.” (Melissa, Millennial Supervisor)

### Strategies going forward

Of course, it is a very small sample, but the disconnect of my experiences with Millennials, along with the quotes above from the prevailing stereotypes and growing concern about how negatively this will impact the workforce, speaks to a need for much critical-thinking discussion going forward. As a way to add to that thinking and discussion I suggest the following strategies for supervisors and agencies to consider going forward:

Supervisors and agencies should re-think their hiring practices and philosophies. Thought should be given to less emphasis on recruiting for long term employment and more for shorter periods of time as well as ways to recruit to Millennials’ strengths and interests.

Millennials prefer to work in teams. Look for ways to involve Millennials on committees and stress the value of their contributions.

- Supervisors should enhance and focus on their “coaching skills” and repertoire as a supervisor — including on the spot coaching.
- Supervisors should make attempts to get to know Millennials “as a person”. What are their likes, dislikes, strengths, doubts, beliefs?
- Supervisors should discuss and be clear about what expected boundaries are in the supervisory relationship, for example social media, protocols, etc.
- Try to tell or show Millennials what to do less. Give them the desired outcome and let them figure it out. This would be in the spirit of delegating outcome, not process (keeping a balance with earned trust and “safety”).
- Supervisors should be particularly careful not to complain or “whine” about senior management, “the system”, etc. There should be consistent attempts to help Millennials understand the bigger picture and learn strategies to best negotiate frustrations with the larger world.
- Supervisors should be clear about how Millennials will be evaluated and how that is measured.
- Programs should make efforts to have more “social” type atmosphere and events.
- Explore and consider the idea of flexible schedules.
- Consider the idea of Millennial Affinity Groups.
- Consider discussion groups that encourage creative thinking across the generations.

- Give thought to the idea of “reverse mentoring” situations, where Millennials can teach others skills and share ideas.
- Define things like “self-care” together. A Millennial may have a very different understanding of this than you do.
- Be specific about what is clearly out of bounds and unacceptable then discuss why. Don’t assume it is known.
- Provide Millennials more training in the “soft skills” (communication skills, protocols, etc.) of the workplace, critical thinking, and other areas that will help assimilation into the agency culture.
- Provide supervisors’ trainings that focus on cross-generational issues and communication.
- Start preparing for “Generation Z”!

The values, culture and traditions of the Child and Youth Care field that I have come to cherish so much make me very optimistic that we will negotiate this process extremely well. The quality of leadership in the CYC field, as well as the quality of the younger CYC workers I am experiencing, should position us to be trend setters in creative ideas and strategies that will hopefully benefit the societal workforce as a whole moving forward.

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