

# Give the Millennials What They Want — Great Leaders

By Marcia Reynolds | June 8, 2015

“Why can’t she just be happy with the job she has?” It’s a common question managers are asking today—and one I recently received at my leadership development program. I answered it with another question: “What are you doing to help her appreciate her work?”

His response? “I can’t talk to her. Lots of people would love to be in her position, but she keeps pushing. And she needs praise for everything. I’m afraid if I don’t make her happy, she’ll leave. Why can’t she just do what she is supposed to do?”

In one minute, this man characterized the current leadership gap between *what management does* and *what employees want*.

Millennials especially want to be given work that is seen as significant and to be developed for future possibilities in frequent, two-way conversations with their leaders. With decreasing levels of longevity and loyalty in the workforce, it’s clear they’re not getting what they want.

Many people are blaming the gap on the irrational expectations of millennials. But I believe the problem has *always* been there—the millennials are just bringing it to light.

The developer of [Choice Theory](#), William Glasser, said all humans have needs to belong, feel useful and have hope. Yet the nature of hierarchies inhibits spontaneous connection and obscures the significance of individual contributions. In the current unstable, chaotic work environment, having less access to leaders generates cynicism instead of hope.

There is a rising call to change the system, or at least [change leadership styles](#), so people get their human needs met. For decades in my leadership classes, when encouraging people to ask for what they need, they would say, “I could never ask my boss for that.” Now they say, “I keep trying to have meetings with my boss, but he keeps rescheduling. We haven’t had a decent conversation in months.”

The fear of speaking up is falling away. Whereas boomers and Gen Xers tolerated the limitations of hierarchy as they sought to be more productive and successful, millennials would rather leave a job that doesn't meet their intrinsic needs. They don't value improving processes, increasing profit and beating out the competition if they don't feel inspired, included, positively challenged and personally engaged.

For years, management gurus have been saying there is a difference between leaders and managers. [Millennials are finally speaking up](#), attempting to hold leaders accountable for this distinction. And leaders need to listen. In just 10 years, millennials will make up 75 percent of the U.S. and Canadian workforces.

Here are a few things leaders can do today to create more humane workplaces that energize and retain employees:

### **1. Provide developmental opportunities.**

Support continuous development by holding frequent mentoring and coaching conversations, offering tuition reimbursement and in-house resources for learning, and encouraging people to broaden their visions for their future in ways they didn't imagine before. Treat training and coaching as part of the overall business strategy. Don't cut funding for development when facing budget difficulties; help employees learn and grow so they can help meet the marketplace challenges.

### **2. Continually affirm personal value.**

Employees need to know how well they did in relation to the people they touch, including colleagues, customers and their communities. They need to know if they have made a positive impact and that others value their contribution. They will step up when their good work is acknowledged.

### **3. Design collaborative environments.**

Create environments that provide an open flow of communication in all directions. Let people talk freely, whether it's in the hallways or using social media. Give them easy access to tools and resources. See yourself in the middle of a wheel, with employees in motion around you. Inspire more than enforce.

#### **4. Ask for opinions and spread optimism.**

Include employees in decision-making as much as possible. Ask for their ideas and advice. Give them control over the processes and decisions related to their tasks. If they need a more strategic perspective, coach them to see other possibilities instead of just giving them negative feedback and direction. As I found when researching [\*The Discomfort Zone\*](#), employees learn faster when coached to discover what went wrong and what else is possible. Also, when changes have to be made, take time to explain why. Giving reasons for change helps develop employees' business acumen as well as maintain hope.

Leaders need to develop their capacity to listen and their skills in coaching and emotional intelligence. In addition to providing vision, they need to hear and value the voice of the people.