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Woman working with a laptop computer while sitting on the grass over a polka dot blanket during a sunny summer day in Fort Greene Park, Brooklyn. **Guillermo Murcia Getty Images**

COMMENTARY**LEADERSHIP**



Millennials

Kon Leong
Feb 11, 2017



The Leadership Insiders network is an online community where the most thoughtful and influential people in business contribute answers to timely questions about careers and leadership. Today's answer to the question, "How can you help millennials feel like they're part of the company?" is written by Kon Leong, CEO of ZL Tech.

"Sheltered." "Entitled." "Self-absorbed." These are oft-repeated descriptors for millennials. Yet, so are "open-minded," "independent," and "optimistic."

Of course, not all of these epithets apply to everyone born in the two decades leading up to the year 2000—as they'll be the first to tell you. (They don't like being put into little boxes, and who does?) Still, managers have bemoaned that millennials are difficult to manage and hard to motivate, and struggle to figure out how to handle them.

Here's what I say: Don't even try.

I'm not saying don't hire millennials. That'd be impossible. Depending on your industry, chances are they make up most of your workforce, or will soon. What I'm saying is don't *manage* them.

Instead, empower them. Don't squeeze them into rigid hierarchical structures. Flatten out your organization chart, and give them the opportunity to define their own roles. Don't try to make them cogs in old machinery. Help them help you replace the old machinery with the new—one where flexibility reigns. And lastly, don't try to motivate them. Tap into their own ambitions and give them the tools to see them through.

But how do you do that and still maintain a productive, structured, and successful company? Here's how:

Flatten out

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At ZL, we are *very* lean when it comes to middle management. We've created specific, objective metrics and

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shoulders or breathing down their necks. It's not perfect—bottlenecks can occur when new innovations need approving, but that's a good thing, as it can head off major mistakes. The point is that our people are empowered to innovate, and innovate we do.

Once we've trained new employees, we give them ownership of their projects rather than just assigning them tasks. This gives millennials the freedom that they often crave to tackle projects creatively. They get to see the full picture of what they're working toward, which allows them to identify areas where processes can be improved. For instance, a few years back, a recent hire was put in charge of a deployment project with a new client. Because she got to see the full deployment process at a high level, she was able to identify inefficiencies that could be fixed by implementing a more streamlined method of project management. If this employee had not

been given ownership of a full project, she may have missed the forest for the trees.

Foster friendships

Find ways to enhance millennials' sense of camaraderie. They're a team-oriented bunch. I hire them together as an "incoming class," so that even though they're from different universities, they come in with a group of peers. They learn the business together, get to know each other, and form a team spirit that endures across the organization. A business full of people who get along while simultaneously challenging and supporting each other fosters a work environment of collaboration.



Value innate curiosity

Millennials want flexibility. They want to try out new roles and develop the characteristics that they value. Once they've been onboarded, it's the beginning, not the end. We allow our people to shift departments and transition to different roles within the company.

For instance, we've had employees shift from product management and other technical departments to business development and marketing roles, because after learning about the technical aspects of our product, they realized they wanted to work on defining our messaging and market placement. In such cases, our structural flexibility ultimately helps the company, because we end up getting someone with a deep understanding of the product using their expertise to influence how it's marketed. We've found that these position changes have provided an integral transfer of knowledge between departments, and have enabled millennials to satisfy their curiosity about different aspects of our business.

Rigid hierarchies will not hold millennials long. Give them leeway to explore their professional interests, and show commitment to them and their growth. But most importantly, don't try to manage and control them. It won't work and it's no fun trying. Just let them do their thing. You'll be glad you did.



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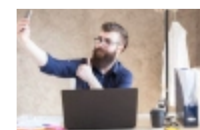
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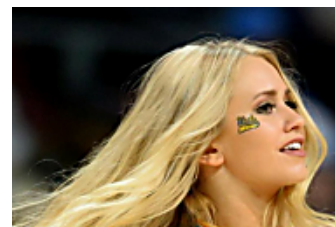
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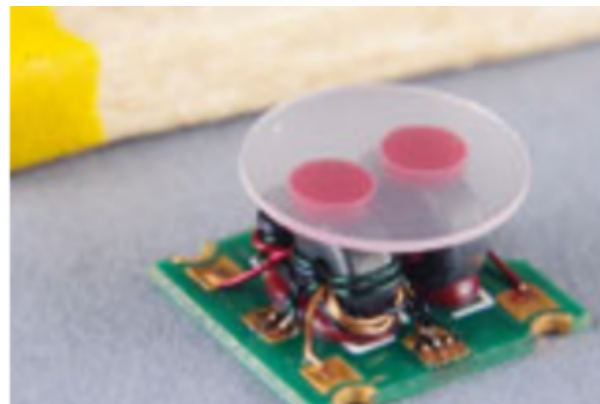
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