

Millennials and Mentoring

Why I'm Calling Out "Bullpucky!" on Generational Differences and Professional Development

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A commentary on the current generational hype about millennials in the workforce, especially regarding mentoring programs. Mentoring programs have been targeted as needing to change because of the perception that the millennial cohort is very different from other age cohorts, and this author sets out to prove otherwise. Communication and compatibility between the mentor and mentee are indicators in whether that relationship is successful or unsuccessful. Also discussed is a mentoring program, which has recently been expanded at the Pennsylvania State University Libraries.

In my experience, most assumptions about the millennial label are faulty, especially with respect to professional development and support. There is no shortage of webpages talking about millennials, also known as "Generation Y," in which experts in the field of generational cohorts cannot even agree on which dates the label should be applied. While most may agree that the age cohort can be defined as those born between 1980 and 2000, even this is disputed (EchoBoom, 2010; Generation Y, 1993; Hoover, 2009; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Strauss & Howe, 1991). As I was born in 1983, I tend to fall into the millennial cohort, however it may be defined.

Lately, millennials are portrayed "as entitled whiners who have been spoiled by parents who overstoked their self-esteem, teachers who granted undeserved A's and sports coaches who bestowed trophies on any player who showed up" (Warner, 2010). *Time* magazine even went so far as to run a cover story by Joel Stein (2013) about "The Me Me Me Generation." These articles suggest that there is something far more narcissistic and lazy about contemporary youth than older generations. Closer examination reveals that these articles are relying on the pseudoscience of generational cohorts—which, in some opinions, has as much scientific rigor as horoscopes or reading tea leaves (Granger, 2011). This reliance on faulty assumptions about generational cohorts can cause many overgeneralizations about young professionals. Countless articles appear to be obsessive attempts at exempting older

generations from the same issues that they themselves faced in their own youth. Millennials have been trashed in the media and even within my own profession of librarianship, and as a millennial, I am putting my foot down and saying “generational differences are BULLPUCKY and I’m not going to take it anymore!”

Millennials are being categorized by Stein (2013) as different than other generations because they are “narcissistic,” “materialistic,” “selfish,” and “lazy” in addition to having a “technology addiction” (p. 27). These types of generalizations about millennials made Elspeth Reeve (2013) at the *Atlantic Wire* declare, “It’s like doing a study of toddlers and declaring those born since 2010 are *Generation Sociopath: Kids these days will pull your hair, pee on walls, throw full bowls of cereal without even thinking of the consequences.*” Additionally, Matt Bors (2013) stated in a cartoon on CNN that “the only thing more lazy than a 20-something is the generational slander that takes place anew every two decades or so to fill column inches and create a new demographic to market to,” suggesting that the only reason these generational cohorts exist at all is for selling magazines and generating webpage traffic. However, if we as a society stop despairing over the younger generations, we realize that *all* generations have been disparaged by their elders. Older generations tell familiar stories, scoffing at the younger ones with phrases like “back in my day...” and “kids these days....” Sound familiar?

Considerable research exists about millennials, including how these people fit into the workplace, how we should be educating them, what they like and dislike, and so forth. The book *Generation Me* by Jean Twenge (2006) speaks of a narcissistic quality among millennials and has been heavily cited. However, it has been shown in research by Roberts, Edmonds, and Grijalva (2010) that the narcissism that Twenge spoke of is actually related to developmental changes and not generational ones. “Every generation of young people is substantially more narcissistic than their elders, not because of cultural changes, but because of age-related developmental trends” (p. 100). Their research delves into these trends and shows that across one’s lifespan, a person’s narcissism decreases an entire standard deviation. Developmentally and psychologically speaking, all young people are narcissistic, and the reason that older people do not realize this is because one gets less narcissistic with age. Roberts et al. go on to discuss that “the fact that one can find complaints about the younger generation being more narcissistic going back to Hesiod helps make the point that every generation is Generation Me. That is, until they grow up” (p. 101) which, coincidentally, millennials are doing in the workplace right now.

The faulty and misunderstood assumptions about millennials lead many companies and institutions to assume that they must somehow creatively change current and widely accepted practices in order to reach out across generational differences. Bell (2013) posited that millennials are not looking for help from senior members of their institutions. Specifically, he mentions how millennials might not want to be a part of a mentoring program, so administrators might want to consider other options for them. Further, he suggests that peer-mentoring and speed-mentoring could be possible replacements for a formal mentoring program.

These kinds of generalizations tend to be suspect, especially when they are being used as convenient excuses to change what is currently in practice. Do not misunderstand me: I am entirely for change. I am a millennial, after all. Additionally, librarianship is a field that has become reliant upon the technology that millennials have grown-up with and has indeed transformed with that technology over time. It would seem that one needs to be familiar with change if one wants to be successful, but why change mentoring programs when they have been proven to work? Changing an established mentoring program that provides one-on-one support from a senior colleague to peer-mentoring, speed-mentoring, or reverse-mentoring is not going to fix the perceived problems of generational differences. Perhaps these kinds of mentoring programs can be used to complement current long-term programs. Nevertheless, I do not think that these programs can replace the indispensable one-on-one support senior colleagues can provide to the newly hired.

Of course millennials, like previous generations, look to senior colleagues for mentors. It would be foolish not to! It is also completely typical for a newly hired millennial colleague to befriend others in their age cohort. But

this occurs with any new hire, regardless of age. How exactly is peer-mentoring to work when, by definition, we have all been hired at the same time with the same experience? While millennials can share experiences because they are of a generational cohort, these relationships do not provide the same perspective as someone who has been in the organization for years. This elder perspective is crucial for a new librarian, especially at large institutions like Pennsylvania State University or within state and national organizations. New to the field, these librarians will need the guidance of older professionals who know the vocation, the organizations, and the library. Why would we spurn their advice?

Further, the assumption that millennials' social relationships resemble Twitter and Facebook statuses, and then claiming that mentoring should operate more like their social network relationships, is bullpucky. Online presence is only one of a multitude of ways people keep in contact with each other. My experiences as a millennial tell me that we are complex because we are human, and this complexity provides us with rich social networks, ranging from the brief and informal to the long-lasting relationships that will span a career, or even a lifetime. Bell's statement (2013) that we might "avoid deep, close, personal one-on-one mentoring" seems to be ignoring human nature. We are actively seeking deep and personal relationships, formally and informally. Everyone needs strong personal relationships in their lives, and if a formal mentoring relationship can turn into a personal one, both parties win. Why would anyone avoid deep, close, personal relationships with a mentor? Personality, rather than age group, would seem to be a deciding factor. In addition, most professionals will have a higher number of informal mentors to formal ones because they will meet many people over the course of their careers. We have all had more than one person we go to for career advice. It is almost a given that some of them are bound to become mentors. If these informal mentors were more suited to you, it is because you were the one who chose them.

Most formal mentoring relationships will only succeed when clear goals exist for the relationship, such as promotion, tenure, or other professional involvement. The expanded mentoring program within the University Libraries at Penn State attempts to do just that. The goals of this program have been two-fold: to welcome and provide guidance to new librarian faculty hires not on the tenure-track, and to prepare them to successfully attain a tenure-track position, either within the institution or outside of it. This program is an extension of the tenure-track mentoring program that has been in place for many years, which includes an assigned mentor and guidance along the six-year tenure track. Moreover, there has been some discussion about expanding current mentoring initiatives to include staff members.

Much has been written about what works in a successful mentoring program, as well as how to have successful mentor-mentee relationships. A quick search of the literature for the phrase "successful mentor mentee relationships" returned numerous results. What is clear across many of these pages, books, and articles, is that regardless of profession, communication is important on both sides of this relationship. This includes factors such as being open to communication, providing professional and personal support, getting to know each other, being honest and tactful, defining expectations about the relationship, maintaining contact and actively participating in the relationship, and being reliable and consistent (American Massage Therapy Association, 2013; Metros & Yang, 2006; Smallwood & Tolley-Stokes, 2012; Zerzan, Hess, Schur, Phillips, & Rigotti, 2009). Moreover, it is clear that this communication must go both ways. A mentor has to be open to the relationship, but so does the mentee. Age labels do not seem to matter when it comes to this relationship, but rather communication through these perceived differences.

For newly hired faculty librarians at Penn State, it can be difficult and daunting to see how one fits into a complex organization with more than 130 librarians across the state. Worries arise about how one can be successful or secure a tenure-track position if he/she has not been given guidance on how to get there. While we can develop informal relationships with our colleagues, the expanded mentoring program within the University Libraries provides a platform for a more formal relationship. This formal relationship allows for both parties to become

comfortable communicating with each other. It also allows for the development of talent and the sharing of knowledge and skills. Strategically, having a formal mentoring program is a way to continue the excellent leadership, collaboration, and professional practice for which Penn State University Libraries is renowned.

Not only has the Penn State University Libraries been extremely supportive of me and my career goals, my newly assigned mentor has been with me along my journey, checking in on me, keeping tabs on both my personal life and professional progress. It is this formal relationship that has given me the courage to expand professionally, with the goal of reaching for a tenure-track position and taking a more active leadership role within both the university and the Pennsylvania Library Association. I would argue that this is why mentor-mentee relationships can be successful. One has to put the time and communication into making the relationship last. Checking in on your mentee only twice a year can be a prescription for mentorship breakdown. If you are a mentor but are too busy to check in on your mentee, failure is a probable result. However, this relationship goes both ways. A mentee needs to make time, reach out, and feel welcomed by the mentor. If the mentee gets the feeling that the mentor is too busy to bother answering questions or otherwise assist him/her, the mentee is not going to go to the assigned mentor for help when it is needed. Both parties need to be able to put the time and effort into making the relationship work. Blaming a failed mentoring relationship on the fact that the mentee is a millennial strikes me as just another example of bullpucky.

It is important to keep in mind that mentor-mentee relationships may fizzle out over time. In fact, if there are clear goals for the relationship, this is bound to happen. For non-tenured librarians, the mentoring relationship may end after a few years, either after the newly hired faculty member is more comfortable with participating in such a large organization or has achieved his/her professional goals. As another example, if one is assigned a mentor within a national organization, the mentor-mentee relationship will probably end when the mentee is comfortable seeking out and succeeding in committee assignments, research and publication opportunities, and the like. This would normally occur within the first few years of the new member's initiation into the organization. When the formal relationship ends, it should not be considered a failure, but rather a designed part of the relationship.

Once familiar within an organization, the mentee is introduced to people within the organization. Knowing the right people can be key, after which the mentee can make his/her own decisions about place and activity within the organization. But this usually happens only when an experienced member provides support and guidance. What matters most is that a senior colleague supplied the support early in the librarian's career, whether this relationship is formal or informal. This is not just a millennial thing. It is a professional thing.

In the case of Bell (2013) and many others, the millennial label appears to be a convenient excuse for laziness and complacency from older generations to the current one regarding leadership opportunities. Just because mentoring relationships may fizzle after two years does not mean that those relationships were not useful. Organizations offering mentoring programs are providing their members with professional benefits and leadership opportunities. While these programs may be changing, it does us a disservice to think that because of an arbitrary demographic we are generalizing how a mentoring program works and succeeds.

The millennial label should not be applied lightly. Yes, millennials have grown up with technology and have differing social connections, but this does not mean that a formal mentor is unwelcome. Organized mentoring programs allow new professionals to gain formal guidance in the profession, acceptance from predecessors, and a safe place to discuss career goals. All these can enable success, no matter age or career. Whether these relationships are formal or informal should not matter, and neither should a generational label.

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