

MILLENNIALS WORKING IN HEALTHCARE: SOLVING THE LEADERSHIP DILEMMA

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Much has been written about attracting Millennials to healthcare and retaining that talent.

But healthcare is already ahead of the game in term of attracting members of this mission-focused generation: not only is it a growing sector, the fundamental mission of healthcare is a natural fit with Millennials' desire to make a positive impact through their work. In other areas, however, the traditional healthcare organization's structure and culture may need some real re-thinking as Millennials take over its ranks, including leadership positions. This article, part 2 of the two-part series, explores the impact Millennials are having on healthcare organizations, zeroing in on how healthcare organizations can improve performance when they adjust traditional practices to meet the new expectations.

What's changed?

As the Pew Research Center reports, Millennials became the largest generation in the U.S. workforce in early 2015¹ and they are expected to compose 75% of the workforce by 2030². The new employee mix complicates both employee satisfaction and team decision-making. For instance, according to a Deloitte survey, 63% of 7500 Millennials surveyed worldwide say that their "leadership skills are not being developed" in their job.³ Now, even if that feeling can be caricatured as self-importance, the fact that these respondents want to develop their leadership is a golden opportunity for the hospitals who hire them.

Millennials' demand for respect as equal leaders, or even just potential leaders, may seem like an audacious barrier to the type of teamwork found in clinical settings, one that thrives on defined roles and follows a hierarchy based on length and type of training. (Notably, these roles are reinforced through regulations dictating who can legally perform which medical procedures.) But most clinicians will also recognize the feeling of team flow, a state of high-performance innovation and execution experienced in team settings. Drawing on experience in a variety of high-pressure and high-diversity settings, I have concluded that this flow can be replicated, not just lucked into from time to time.

Flow is of course beneficial not just on the frontlines of healthcare but also in hospital administration and board settings, where formal leaders from diverse departments and units bring their unique viewpoints and opinions to bear on major operational decisions. Such groups require trust to function optimally, and the same method for creating that trust can be used to nurture and leverage Millennial talent: namely, the practice of leading and being led simultaneously.

A flexible model of leadership

The most basic form of leading and following simultaneously is when a team's leaders are fully present, bringing with them conviction and curiosity in the same moment: they show up and say what they think, but they also demonstrate genuine curiosity

about others' viewpoints, particularly when those viewpoints differ from their own. Note that this practice is different than expressing conviction at one point in the conversation and curiosity at another; simultaneous leadership means expressing curious conviction as a single action. This presence and dynamic curiosity encourage contributions from all team members, and conveys the expectation that everyone can and will contribute genuinely to the conversation, meeting, or project at hand. This practice responds to Millennials' deep preference for authenticity as well as their relative lack of deference for traditional authority.

Studies like Deloitte's have shown that Millennials are not used to modulating their knowledge or opinions in deference to more-experienced colleagues or even bosses. This can wreak havoc in traditional organizations. Simultaneous leadership provides a structure for such challenges to hierarchy, so that it is not just a free-for-all. The practice also makes space for formal leaders to state, clearly and unapologetically, when the situation calls for a final decision from the top.

Solving 3 challenges with one leadership practice

The capacity to lead and follow simultaneously—making room for leadership from all team members without relinquishing the right to make a final decision—addresses three Millennial-driven challenges in healthcare:

- 1) It honors Millennials' need to be respected as leaders, even before they have "earned it" according to more traditional measures; but it also
- 2) Still allows formal leaders to claim the authority to make critical decisions, avoiding the specter of endless deliberation, missed opportunities, or a loss of power. (It improves that very deliberation, in fact, by having each participant show up and share his or her viewpoint without clinging to it.)
- 3) Lastly, it addresses the leadership development gap identified by that 63% of Millennials, weaving leadership development into every team interaction and spreading it organically as more and more people learn to lead and be led simultaneously.

Conclusion

New leadership practices have been developed around the recognition that authority and responsibility become less concentrated as information circulates more freely. These practices equip leaders to harness Millennial preferences to adjust organization culture toward genuine engagement, flow, accountability, and better outcomes.

- 1 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/11/millennials-surpass-gen-xers-as-the-largest-generation-in-u-s-labor-force/>
- 2 <https://www.wired.com/insights/2013/08/the-rise-of-the-millennial-workforce/>
- 3 <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>