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The Baseless Fear of Mentoring Millennials
by Zelda Jones
Second Edition

The Baseless Fear of Mentoring Millennials[1]

Zelda Jones

Abstract

Baby Boomers are trickling into retirement while Millennials are surging into the work force. At the current pace it is almost certain the paths of these two disparate groups will cross in the work force. Boomers, including Project Managers, must now begin the task of passing down their vast knowledge and comprehension of their discipline to the upcoming generations.

This paper investigates the complex mentoring role the Baby Boomer Project Managers will assume when Millennials are assigned to their project. Proposed tactics for effective two way communication will be explored based on the extensive differences and surprising similarities between the Boomers and the Millennials.

Included in the paper are case studies of project management mentoring which illustrate both traditional and reverse mentoring. Some of the most productive and innovative Millennials are contrasted against Baby Boomers whose achievements set the stage for many advances being made today.

*Keywords***:** Baby Boomer Project Manager, Baby Boomer mentor, reverse mentoring, generational communication gap, tech-savvy Millennial, Millennial-aged worker, no-collar worker, geek culture, geek culture professionalism, digital generation, digital dialect, Baby Boomer/Millennial communication, aging work force

The Fear of Mentoring

Newton's law of motion (or inertia) states: An object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an *unbalanced force*. Surviving in today's workforce is difficult enough, but add Newton's *unbalanced force* – mentoring – to the equation, and the likelihood of volunteer participation in a mentoring program becomes slightly less than zero. Mentoring anyone, much less someone who is outside our comfort zones (age, gender,

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[1] *Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the 9th* Annual University of Texas at Dallas Project Management Symposium *in August 2015. It is republished here with permission of the author and conference organizers.*

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background, etc.) can strike fear into the hearts of even the most capable and willing people.

People *are* afraid of mentoring. These are actual quotes from people who were asked if they would mentor a new employee:

- *"Who are these people, and what do they want?"*

    o 'These people' are ones who don't have the experience or knowledge to complete a certain undertaking. They need a mentor who can demystify the process in question, a mentor who will help them navigate through the unknown. They need a mentor for support and feedback when they take those first few steps towards their goal. Most of all, they need an honest critic with insight and expertise they can turn to for guidance.

- *"I've never mentored anyone before, and I don't even know how to begin."*

    o 'Mentor' used as a noun refers to an experienced and trusted adviser; 'mentor' used as a verb means to advise or train. Certainly at one time or another we have all had the opportunity to offer advice to someone. To begin mentoring is as simple as answering a question or showing someone how to get from point A to point B. More formalized mentoring will most likely start with a meeting to determine a set of goals and to formulate a plan for reaching those goals.

- *"Look, I'm going to retire in 6 months. I don't have time."*

    o Mentoring has no set time frame. The mentoring relationship can last decades or be as quick as providing a few sentences to help someone get started on a task. While duration is a major consideration, mentoring should be focused on the need of the person seeking guidance rather than on a time frame.

- *"My personality isn't right for mentoring."*

    o The most important personality trait required for mentoring is to have an open mind. Other valuable traits and skills are based on ability and willingness to communicate information and advice with objectivity and fairness. A mentoring team with two different personality types are generally more productive than when both the mentor and mentee have the same personality type. The contrasting personalities will open the

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door for lively discussions which allows creativity to develop and ideas to flourish. Often the mentor finds that through the mentoring process they are acquiring new abilities such as supervisory and leadership skills.

The old-school method of mentoring requires formal meetings, written plans, stated goals and expectations and final measurements to determine if the mentoring was successful.   Old-school mentoring methods won't work when trying to mentor the coffee-fueled, instant-on Millennial-aged worker.   And, old-school mentoring wouldn't even be a consideration for the Millennial who is setting out to mentor a Baby Boomer.

The Generations

The **Baby Boomers** are the most likely candidates for mentoring the Millennials. The term 'Baby Boomer' was coined by Sylvia F. Porter in a column in the May 4, 1951 edition of the New York Post, and was based on the 3,750,850 babies born that year. That number represented an increase of 2,357,000 US births over the 1950 total. The disproportionate increase was described as a 'boom'.[i] The Boomers were born post-World War II between the years 1946 and 1963, and are currently 52 to 69 years old. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that there was just under 75 million baby boomers in 2014 or about one-quarter of the US population.[ii]

The name '**Millennials**' was conceived by authors William Strauss and Neil Howe in their book, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, which identifies this generation by their link to the year 2000. 'Generation Y' had been used by *Ad Age* as a placeholder to describe this group in the early '90's and eventually gave way to the term Millennials.[iii]   There is no consistent birth year range for the Millennials, but most commentators agree that the best representation are the years from 1984 to 2004. At present Millennials are aged between 11 and 31. This year (2015) they will increase in population to 75.3 million to become the largest demographic group[iv] in the US.

There is a generation between the Boomers and Millennials called **Generation X**, or Gen X. Their moniker comes from a Canadian writer by the name of Douglas Coupland who published the novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, in 1991.[v] Their birth years range from roughly 1964 to 1983, and their age range is between 32 and 51. This generation is regularly overshadowed by the more studied and heavily populated Boomer and Millennial generations. Gen X is often referred to as the 'middle child', and interestingly enough, this group exhibits many typical behaviors of the 'classic' middle child syndrome.[vi] Sorry to say, this paper doesn't pay the Gen X'ers much attention either.

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Birth Years	Generation	2014 Population (in millions)
1946 – 1963	Baby Boomers	74.6
1964 - 1983	Gen X (AKA The Middle Child)	66
1984 - 2004	Millennials (formerly Gen Y)	75.3

Table 1 - The date ranges for each generation are subjective depending on what point is being made. The US Bureau of Statistics and the US Census cite different date ranges even though both are responsible for reporting data to the US government.

The Importance of Mentoring

The Boomers are healthier, better educated, and will live longer than any generation before it. Because they have stayed in the workforce longer than any generation, they possess an astounding wealth of knowledge. Even as an aging work force, they will continue to work as long as possible because of their good health, and for some, due to economic and political issues within the US. Since Boomers are taking retirement later than expected Gen X'ers and Millennials have not had the job opportunities previous generations have had.

By 2020 there will be 5 generations in the U.S. work force; half of working Americans will have been born sometime between 1980 and 1996.[vii] With more than 4 million young professionals entering, or trying to enter the US workforce each year, statistics show that Millennials are beginning to dominate the labor markets. Currently, about 80% of US executive management is in the Boomer age bracket. The 2015 Forbes and Elance-oDesk combined study found that 27% of Millennials are already managers, 5% are senior management and 2% are executives.[viii] The Millennials are proving to be a force to be reckoned with.

Mentoring others is an irreplaceable method for passing on skills, knowledge, and wisdom. With approximately 10,000 US Boomers retiring every day a growing resource and knowledge gap is being created.[ix] Mentoring has recently become a much sought after activity in the work force because it offers immediate real-life on-the-job training by industry specific experts. While the subject-matter-expert Boomers are poised to take on the mentoring role, Millennials are expected to reverse-mentor their older colleagues who may not have adequate or up to date skills, especially in technology.

Some Boomers are bewildered when they find themselves reporting to a Millennial, and Millennials often feel as if they are working with their parents. To effectively

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communicate with one another common ground between the two groups must be found and developed in order to bridge this generational communication gap.

Bridging the Communication Gap

Are Boomers and Millennials so very different? Boomers immediately grasped the concept of automating data back in the early 1960's. They set out to build commercial and personal computing devices that would support an automated experience. Millennials took that knowledge decades later and ran at hypersonic speeds towards automating their own experiences. For example, Millennial Mark Zuckerberg (born May 14, 1984) would have never been able to write the code for Facebook in one night *and* after drinking all evening[x], if it had not been for the exponential advancements in application technology such as the graphical user interface (GUI) created by Boomer Bill Gates (born October 28, 1955) of Microsoft.

If Boomer Bill and Millennial Mark sat down to have a chat, they would find that they have quite a bit in common. Both were raised in upper middle class homes, both wrote programs in BASIC when they were between the ages of 10 and 13, and each dropped out of Harvard around their sophomore year. Boomer Bill became a billionaire in 1987 at age 31. Some twenty years later in 2007, at the tender age of 23, Millennial Mark became a billionaire. [*Food for thought: between Boomer Bill and Millennial Mark, who would be the mentor and who would be the mentee?]*

Real-life mentoring is based on the ability to communicate. Sharing common experiences and interests are excellent starting points on which to open the lines of communication. Boomer Chris Anderson (born July 9, 1961) is a writer with an intense interest in physics and quantum mechanics. He created an online community called DIYdrones for those who, like himself, were interested in drones and engineering. The website's blog is a place where people can share their dreams and ideas, and provide encouragement and motivation for each other.[xi]

Millennial Jordi Munoz (born January 17, 1990) was a 19 year-old out-of-work dad-to-be from Mexico who studied aeronautical engineering in high school. He was living in Riverside, CA waiting for his green card to be issued so he could get a job. He began building a drone from the tools he had on hand, and from parts found around the house. He used the sensors from a Nintendo Wii controller and the source code he wrote himself to build the components of a drone. He equipped a remote control helicopter with his home-made logic boards that ran on the code he wrote, and built the first-ever auto piloted drone.

Millennial Munoz recorded a flight sequence of the drone and uploaded it to the DIYdrones site where he was a frequent blogger (even though he was embarrassed by his lack of English and grammar expertise).[xii] Boomer Anderson was so impressed with what he saw in the video that he sent the financially strapped Munoz $500 to fund his

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work on drones. Based on their mutual interests, and without ever having met in person, Anderson and Munoz went into business together in 2011.[xiii] Today their company, 3D Robotics, a $50 million business, is the largest manufacturer of commercial drones in North America.

In the case of Munoz and Anderson, it was Munoz the Millennial who was mentoring Anderson the Boomer. Traditionally the older person is the mentor and the mentee is the younger person. When a younger person mentors an older person, the result is called *reverse-mentoring*. The 14 year-old who teaches her Grandmother how to use social media is a practitioner of reverse-mentoring.

> *Conversation overheard while standing in line at Starbucks:* **Young Girl A***: My grandma sent me an Instagram of her dog.* **Young Girl B***: Your grandmother is on Instagram??* **Young Girl A***: Yeah, isn't she cool? But, not my grandpa*.

5 Oddly Sensible Tips for Communicating with Millennials

1. Never tell a Millennial a story over 3 minutes long. They will lose interest after the first minute and a half, but will stay with you another 60 seconds to see if you have a relevant point. Past the 2.5 minute mark they have finalized their escape plan and have their eye on the nearest exit.

2. If a Millennial is still listening to you after 3 minutes you must be talking about dogs or bacon. Millennials tend to have quirky senses of humor, and they especially love dogs and bacon references.[xiv] Be sure to add a light touch when you communicate with Millennials.

3. Expecting the geek culture professional to read written documentation is unrealistic. They learn better from computer based training and videos like the step-by-step videos found on YouTube. [*This tip applies to Millennials and Boomers alike*.]

4. Millennials have a very short attention span. They are daunted by the prospect of reading a half page email. If you are sending a Millennial an email, be sure to **bold** the most important words. And, make it short. Very short.

5. Millennials are attracted to lists. Listing out information, regardless of content, is a good way to get and hold the attention of a Millennial. Even better, tell them up-front how many items are on the list, and use a disconnected adjective to describe the content. Examples: *4 Witchy Wines to Serve with Tacos*, or *5 Oddly Sensible Tips for Communicating with Millennials*.

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MTV's No Collar Study

MTV conducted an on-line study in January 2012 focused on how Millennials view their career outlook.[xv] Aside from providing documented statistics about the MTV watching Millennial crowd, it inadvertently shows the maturity level (low, as would be expected) of this generation. It would be interesting if MTV re-conducted the study 10 years from now using the same respondents.

The key statistics below are from the study conducted by MTV:

Statement	Millennials Agree	Boomers Agree
Should be allowed to make their own hours at work	81%	69%
Should be allowed to wear jeans to work (at least sometimes)	79%	60%
Want their workplace to be social and fun	89%	60%
Need specific directions from their boss to do their best work	61%	30%
Think their boss could learn a lot from them	76%	50%
Need 'me' time at work	70%	30%
Would like to have a mentor	75%	
Think their company is lucky to have them as an employee	92%	
Want regular feedback from their boss	80%	
Think they deserve to be recognized more for their work	80%	
Think their mastery of technology makes them faster than their older coworkers	85%	
Think they should be mentoring older co-workers on technology	66%	

Table 2 Some questions included Boomer responses; those responses are included here as they appeared in the MTV study.

A vast majority of Millennials were raised to view their parents more as peers than as authority figures. According to Urban Dictionary, this type of parent is known as a 'peer-ent'. Consequently, Millennials tend to have no respect for the office hierarchy. They want, and to some extent, *expect* meaningful relationships with their supervisors. They've mostly played on a leveled playing field during their lifetime; in the workforce they believe that they should have the same benefits as a 25 year veteran.

Millennials are true children of the digital generation where near instantaneous feedback is the norm. They expect approval for even the most routine work. But, they are perfectly happy with an e mail simply stating 'Thanks', or even a text with a smiley face. The language they're most familiar with is a new-age version of hieroglyphics represented by a series of tiny pictures known as emoticons or emoji's, essentially a digital dialect. Example: 🇺🇸😴💰 = The American Dream

Generally speaking, a Millennial values comfort over propriety even in the traditional office work place. They view cargo shorts and sandals as appropriate attire for the office. Mark Zuckerberg wore a hoodie, jeans, and sneakers to the IPO investor meeting for Facebook. His conservative counterparts on the financial side wore suits and ties, and presumably wingtips. Did the way Millennial Mark dressed make any difference in the IPO offering? No, Facebook ended up making between 16-19B$ on the IPO.[xvi]
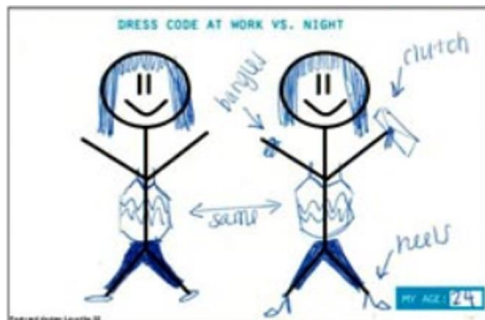
The MTV study asked the respondents to draw in their work attire and their nighttime attire. In this drawing by a 24 year old, the work clothes and night clothes are the same but accessories and high-heels have been added. Many drew the same clothes for both work and night.

Case Studies

Case Study 1

A resource on my project, 'Mary', sits about 15 feet from me. She is in her mid to late 20's, and seems to have good communication with others around the office. Last week Mary and I had a meeting with the customer.

I can see the back of Mary's head, and know that she is typing. My IM indicator goes off. It's Mary asking me if I've talked with the customer today. I get up and walk over to her (thinking we'd have a conversation) and say, 'No'. She says 'OK', but doesn't look at me, doesn't even move, really. I go back to my desk, and the IM indicator goes off again. It's Mary asking if I expect to hear from the customer today. I go back over to Mary's desk and say, 'No'. She says, 'OK', but still doesn't look at me, and still doesn't really move. I wait a few minutes, then I send Mary an IM:

> Me: Did you need something from the customer?
>
> Mary: I wanted to know if the widget I gave Bob last week was ok. I was hoping for some feedback

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Me: Why don't you call Bob and ask him?

Mary: I don't feel comfortable calling

Me: Why?

Mary: Because I never know how to end the conversation. I wish they had IM

Me: Do you feel the same way about talking to me?

Mary: Sometimes

Mary: Well, most of the time

Millennials are the most 'connected' humans on the planet, yet communicating one-on-one is scary for them. They have not developed the soft skills required to understand the subtle undercurrents that control interactions. It's easier for Mary to communicate as part of a group, and far easier to get the information she needs by typing a few questions.

Case Study 2

'Noah' is a 29 year old manager for a telecommunications company. He has 7 direct reports, 4 of whom are Boomers, and 3 are Millennials. This is his first management position.

In an interview with Noah he said that he offended one of his reports by calling him a 'Boomer'. Noah thought he was being 'uber-respectful' by making a generational reference to the person's accomplishments and longevity. He thought it was almost like calling someone Mr. out of respect. Noah also said that two of the Boomers call him 'kid but in a kind of joking way'. He goes along with it because he 'can't see what point it would make to ask them to stop'.

Noah says it's hard to provide direction to the Boomers because they know so much about the business. He says they 'totally know the ropes'. The only help he can provide to the Boomers is to have his other reports, all Millennials, share technology tips. On the other hand, the Boomers are teaching the Millennials 'everything' about their jobs.

He said one of the best days at the office for him was when he heard a Boomer and a Millennial laughing together while working through a problem. That shared laugh told Noah that 'humanity will find a way to survive'. But the day someone brought in breakfast tacos when he had a slight hangover was a close second.

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Conclusion

As a mentor you don't have to know all the answers. Part of the journey is working together to discover the answer or approach. In the same vein, don't over-mentor so that there are no discoveries to make. As a mentor part of your responsibility is to promote the power of communication and discovery. If you happen to be called on to mentor a Millennial, or someone whose culture is different than yours, value the other's perspective and learn from it. Not all mentoring attempts will be successful. Learning how to fail is as important as learning how to succeed.

Above all else, be open minded and patient.

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About the Author

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Zelda Jones wants to live in a world where every driver on the road is courteous, business meetings are mesmerizing, and Millennials are willing to communicate without a digital device.

As a Baby Boomer Project Manager Zelda has the pleasure of sharing many of her work days with Millennials. She concedes that the millennial experience can sometimes be, well… exasperating. The communication techniques she knew back in 'the day' no longer apply. And, to add insult to the 'old school' injury, expecting a Millennial to get information by reading a stack of documentation is a tragically misguided expectation. What's a Boomer to do?

Zelda has over 20 years of project management experience and earned her PMP in 2006. She is a 9 time presenter at the UTD Project Management Symposium. She has authored/co-authored 17 publications including international works. In trying to keep up with current Millennial trends, she can be found on Instagram tagging items with a 'Like' or an occasional 'AYKM' and making other brief comments using her alter ego jones.zelda. Contact her by email at Zelda.Jones@tylertech.com