



FlexBulletin #102: Informal Flex + Feedback - Millennial Dream or Oxymoron?

August 17, 2015

From the earliest blogs and profiles on Millennials - and there have been thousands - they were described as the anti-formal generation. Popular images painted them as innovating from Starbucks and boycotting performance reviews. No rigid flex options, no packages of stale annual feedback for them.

Times and preferences change. Millennials are quickly becoming the workplace norm, not the newbies. Many seek advancement rather than "job hopping." This adventurous cohort is forming families in earnest, and with record percentages of dual earner couples. They face challenges that are both considerable and growing.

The formal/informal dichotomy of the work world may describe an early Millennial worldview. But the time has come to revisit these assumptions with a more nuanced view of both scheduling flexibility and constructive performance feedback. Emerging data suggests that this workforce wants both consistent, timely developmental feedback and systematic access to control of their schedules. An insistence on informal may be giving way to a demand for the systematic.

A simple method for Diagnosing and Designing the drivers of your Millennials is described at the end of this bulletin.

+++++

"If you put this new generation in the box of the performance management we've used the last 30 years, you lose them. We're done with the famous annual performance review, where once a year I'm going to share what I think about you. That doesn't make any sense."

-- Pierre Nanterme, CEO, Accenture

"After competitive pay and benefits, the top thing employees say is very important in a potential job is 'being able to work flexibly and still be on track for promotion.' "

-- A recent EY global survey of Millennials

Can annual (but likely stale) feedback be replaced by frequent and productive dialogue?

Grumbling about the many limitations of annual performance reviews has been a constant theme in companies for decades. The phrase "We all love our performance review system" is surely the rarest of utterances.

Despite the varied complaints about performance reviews from decades of Baby Boomer victims - they were cursory, off-point, not constructive, and generally too little too late - The Review has persisted. At least they were regular, predictable and on some occasions, helpful. Eliminating them in many settings would mean little or no manager reflection of any sort on performance.

In our and many other firms' decades of practice, surveys and focus groups, the only practice as loudly criticized as formal reviews was the consistent lack of *informal feedback* given on a regular basis. A common reservation about abandoning annual reviews was that less stale, more actionable informal feedback would not replace it since managers wouldn't know how to give it.

Building the capacity for feedback that matters

Accenture's recent announcement that it would be ending annual reviews for its 330,000 people captured a lot of attention. More important is its intention to replace them with what sounds like a more systematic process of giving informal feedback on an ongoing basis. As CEO Pierre Nanterme put it:

"Performance is an ongoing activity. It's every day, after any client interaction or business interaction or corporate interaction. It's much more fluid. People want to know on an ongoing basis, am I doing right? Am I moving in the right direction? Do you think I'm progressing? Nobody's going to wait for an annual cycle to get that feedback. Now it's all about instant performance management."

Our own extensive focus group research bears out Accenture's assumptions about Millennials. And while we look forward to learning from Accenture's Herculean task of converting its managers to sources of "just-in-time feedback", there is no reason to await their results. We believe that it is long past time for the millions of Millennials, managers and work groups in hundreds of other companies to begin practicing the systematic informal feedback that will either improve or help eliminate formal reviews.

Breaking the deeply engrained "habit" of NOT GIVING FEEDBACK

We are tackling these issues. At the heart of my firm's Mutual Respect Principles and Habits initiatives are two driving behaviors: "We Suspend Assumptions" and "We Provide Feedback Consistently." These positive principles and habits are essential in moving from our feedback-poor environments to the kind of work settings Millennials say they want. They are also essential predicates for the healthy flexibility Millennials insist they need as they start families and wrestle with long commutes. Fair and effective provision and assessment of all forms of flexibility depend on the habits of suspending traditional assumptions about work methods and giving far better than average feedback in diverse settings.

Both practices require serious change in managerial habits. And we use the word "habit" advisedly. As we observed above, poor to non-existent managerial feedback skills is a decades-old complaint. In my years of work with clients, a unanimous 360 review emerges: senior leaders, managers themselves and employees typically agree on some version of "managers here are really challenged when it comes to giving feedback." More disturbing, rarely is this observation followed with a practical plan for change. In fact, the assumption is typically made that this is such deeply engrained behavior that such serious change is unthinkable.

So the habit of not giving feedback persists across the organization. Tackling this issue and creating an environment where frequent, constructive and developmental conversations occur predictably is not a "culture change" created by proclamation. In our projects we liken such change to the sustained organizational campaigns that were required to rid the workplace of another form of toxicity - second-hand smoke.

Blending initiatives to promote quality feedback and flexibility

It is not too great a stretch to summarize a Millennial view of workplaces this way: dysfunctional annual reviews and no timely feedback are hazardous to development; and most forms of flexibility pose career risk. Like second hand smoke in the office 20 years ago, these toxins are pervasive, a given in the workplace, individual and group habits. Nothing short of sustained, comprehensive and intrusive campaigns gave us today's smoke-free conference rooms.

One does not break habits by wishing them away. In an environment where managers have not exercised the "feedback muscle" for many years, it will seem awkward at best to do so. Memos, lectures, videos and exhortations can't and don't eliminate old habits; and they surely don't lay down new ones. Habit modification is required. Committing to regular feedback as *predictable behavior* is essential to guidance without reviews and flexibility without penalty.

Let me close with an observation from our multi-company focus group study of more than 200 Millennials in 2009. After hearing their strong views on flexibility and feedback, we noted that their critique resembled what we had heard from Boomers for two decades. We often discussed whether over time they too would adjust to the "smoky workplace." In its bold decision to clear its climate of annual reviews, Accenture may stand alone - or it may reveal the tip of the iceberg. After all, many Millennial focus group participants predicted that their generation would make change happen - and soon. Perhaps we are beginning to see the smoke clear.

+++++

*We welcome your comments on this **Bulletin**.
When you write, please email me at: paulrupertdc@cs.com*

Millennial Diagnose-and-Design Groups



If ever there was an era of one-size-fits-all, it is over. Millennials want:

- Greater Control over their schedules - not flex menus
- Enhanced leave and PTO - for dads and volunteers
- Developmental feedback - systematically, not annually
- An end to Annual Reviews

To be useful and cost-effective, solutions must be customized. For a decade our team has been conducting conference call-based design groups that yield unique and engaging outcomes. Call us to discuss a process that is targeted, convenient, affordable - and retains your best and brightest.

It's time to kiss the cookie cutter good-bye!

Best regards,
Paul Rupert

Rupert & Company
Chevy Chase, MD
301-873-8489
PaulRupertDC@CS.com

*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in business-beneficial flexibility.*

© 2015 Rupert & Company. All Rights Reserved