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Mentoring and Motivating Millennials and Post-Millennials at the Unit and Sub-Unit Levels

by Timothy S. Stackhouse

Introduction

To ensure Unit and Sub-Unit chains of command of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are prepared to lead an evolving mindset of the modern generation of soldiers, leadership must first understand the definitions, social attributes, and expectations of the Millennial and Post-Millennial cohorts. In doing so, soldiers of this generation and their chains of command will grow a relationship based upon trust and reliability, as well as foster the core ethos and values that create a Canadian soldier. Due to the proximity of the generational definitions of Millennial and Post-Millennial, the *former* will be used in this article to refer to both cohorts. As Post-Millennials are newly entering the workforce, research on this cohort is currently limited.

As outlined in Canada's most recent (2017) defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE), the CAF has accepted a greater position in supporting Canadian soldiers and their families. In the policy, the government of Canada has established that families, diversity, inclusion, and training opportunities are among the priorities of the modern soldier (p. 12 of SSE). This policy, along with other CAF policies related to gender and diversity, include *Operation Honour* (National Defence, 2019) and *CAF Diversity Strategy* (National Defence, 2019). Despite their important role in the development of a safe workplace, discussion with respect to racism is not covered, and these factors are vital principles of today's generation. Adapting to the concerns of Millennials is fundamental, not only for the CAF writ large, but also for its Units and Sub-Units. Subject matter authority's Eversole, Venneberg, and Crowder (2012) note that in today's workforce faces, for the first time ever, four generational cohorts are employed in the same workplace together (as cited in Carpenter & de Charon, 2014, p. 68).



Discussion

The following definitions differentiate each generational cohort relevant to/in accordance with their years of birth: Baby Boomer: 1946–1964; Generation X: 1965–1980; Millennial: 1981–2000; and Post-Millennial: 2001–present (cited in Wright, 2015, p. 2). It is important to note that research has argued about the exact definition of each generational cohort. Likewise, there is not a definitive border between each group. As such, it is understandable that a Millennial, born in the early-1980s would have similar viewpoints and expectations as a member of Generation X, born in the late-1970s, as opposed to a fellow Millennial born in the late-1990s. For this reason, this discussion will focus primarily on the Millennials born in the 1990s onward, as this group is most representative of the newer generation of soldiers.

Research into the Millennial cohort has established many attributes of this generation, which are essential for those in managerial positions to understand. What motivates Millennials within the workplace, what keeps Millennials engaged, and what encourages them to be retained, includes:

- motivation frequently comes from praise, recognition, and reward; they want to be noticed for their work and achievements;
- workplace flexibility is desired, as is the want for work-life balance, training and development opportunities, as well as diversity;

- while orientation and probationary period is understandable, there is an expectation to excel quickly through the ranks;
- there is a desire for competitive pay and benefits, with fewer rules;
- frequent contact with their leadership, allowing the sense of belonging is important; and wanting more free time, and for their work to feel meaningful (cited in Carpenter & de Charon, 2014).

Further, Millennials may have different personality traits, which must be considered by leadership (Carpenter & de Charon, 2014). It is important to note that these traits are generational, and reprimand is not the appropriate course of action, rather, Millennials:

- are more fearless and tend to be blunter than previous generations;
- have expectations that mentors will approach them, not vice versa, and also expect the organization to feed them the ability to reach the next level; despite this, not one mentor or teacher is suitable, but rather, the idea of seeking different perspectives is common;
- expect leaders should dedicate more one-on-one career planning and succession planning at an earlier stage;

- are uncomfortable feeling towards conflict, stereotyping, judging, or complaints; as such, stereotyping employees as Millennials may cause hesitance for openness and honesty (Carpenter & de Charon, 2014, p. 74).

Additionally, when working with Millennials, there is a requirement for increased and more significant feedback sessions, based on honesty and sincerity, delivered in real-time, to establish an honest and trustworthy relationship with leadership (cited at Gerrior, 2016, p. 10). Concerns have been raised about leadership losing touch with this generation of employees, noting such traits as micromanaging, negativity, condescending, inconsistency, cynicism, and disorganization (Gerrior, 2016, p. 9). On the other hand, establishing clear expectations and targets will allow a full understanding of work requirements.

Some attention has been given to the specific needs of Millennial soldiers. For example, subject matter O'Donnell noted the view of the Millennial soldier to include (p. 9):

- the desire to understand the history, culture, and norms of the organization, as well as *why* this history exists; a positive attribute to the negatively portrayed, *Generation Y (Why)*;
- the desire to learn from experience comes from the experience, not from titles or appointment.
- Further, Drago (2006, p. 10) added the following characteristics of Millennials, which those in military leadership positions need to understand:

- strong sense of community, combined with listing tolerance and acceptance as core values;
- team players, with adaptability and innovation;
- extremely confident, loyal, and committed.

Recommendations

Many of the attributes of Millennials mentioned above have already influenced the CAF to consider and implement certain policy changes. Increased flexibility and relaxed work environments are already discussed or in place, including things such as changes to hair length and style, facial hair growth, as well as the acceptable use of cannabis. Other possible future changes include the implementation of telecommuting and work-term flexibility through *The Journey* (National Defence, 2018). Also, as expressed in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (p. 12), increased funding and resources are now made available to service families, allowing soldiers to better focus on the mission. Many of the leadership styles that correspond with a Millennial's viewpoint are achievable through intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, both of which are styles currently encouraged for use within the CAF leadership (Browne & Walker, 2008, p. 419; National Defence, 2007, p. 45).

The Journey acknowledged the need for improvement in the goals to encourage career retention for CAF personnel, and outlined six goals to promote wellness of personnel and their families, while ensuring a smooth transition along their career through to retirement and beyond. It must be noted that these goals remain in the planning stages, and thus have not been implemented in entirety across the CAF:



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1. reform all aspects of personnel generation, from Attraction and Selection to Recruit Intake Processing and Training;
2. modernize employment model and seek to incentivize service in innovative ways as we provide a more flexible and adaptive career path;
3. improve support to military families;
4. optimize the health and wellness of CAF members;
5. reinvent transition to better support all members of the CAF as they return to duty following illness or injury, transition to the care of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), or transition to post-military life;
6. collaborate on Veterans initiatives to ensure that all members of the CAF experience a positive sense of enduring affiliation. (National Defence, 2018)

There remain several potential options for the Unit and Sub-Unit levels to suit the needs and desires of the Millennial and Post-Millennial generations who currently serve in the CAF. Based on the above descriptions and ideas of these cohorts, the following recommendations may be considered for use within Units and Sub-Units:

Unit/Sub-Unit Level Career Management

While soldiers are able to discuss career progression with the Regimental Sergeant-Major (RSM), career planning can be enhanced for the soldier by providing higher-level progression interviews every six months. Currently, the immediate supervisor (usually 'one-up') conducts these interviews quarterly. However, allowing the soldier to meet with a Company Sergeant-Major (CSM) every six months, would allow for higher-level discussion of progression, desires and interests. This could allow significant opportunity for the soldier to proceed down the path of their interest or provide the necessary training to help support career progression.

Increased Job Variations

To support Millennial characteristics, increased job variations during a 6 – 12-month rotation could promote motivation, enhanced skills, and training opportunities, while fostering interests and desires. Once/if a soldier finds their niche of interest, they will be better able to excel therein. Allowing the opportunity for soldiers to work in different specialties on a 6-month basis will also decrease boredom, while enabling greater and increased feedback ability throughout the year.

Telecommuting/Daily Routine

To influence flexibility, parameters, and goals can be established, allowing soldiers to work on specific projects from home. For example, DNDLearn (the CAF's online learning tool) requirements for individual soldier readiness can be achieved at home, with a set expectation that a certain achievement will be met by a given week's-end. Also, the daily routine may include earlier dismissal to allow soldiers to return home to complete the online learning. Several technology services are already available

to promote communication between home and the workplace, such as *Skype for Business*, *Zoom*, *Webex*, and other such video chat sources.

Low-Level Peer Mentorship Program

While the expectation is for immediate supervisors to train and develop subordinates, there is seldom an official mentorship program in place. Allowing a corporal increased supervision over a private will not only promote the corporal's leadership ability, but will allow the private to receive timely feedback regarding performance. Ensuring progress reviews are done immediately after a task will allow feedback to be provided when it can have the greatest impact, and coming from a peer of one rank higher may have an even greater impact. This holds true for the development and execution of an action plan.

Training

Far too often, there is a frantic push to ensure all soldiers are complete regarding individual readiness. A rewards system may motivate soldiers to ensure they aspire to attain complete readiness status, promoting teamwork and recognition (with a competitive edge). This can be as simple as a certificate with empty spots, in which a stamp is obtained upon completion of each specific area required. An additional option is group completion for many of the online courses. Rather than ordering each soldier to complete the required course, the course can be conducted in a group setting, instructed by a subject-matter expert.

Town Hall Frequency

Soldiers feel empowered when the opportunity exists for them to voice concerns and to 'pitch' ideas to the higher leadership. Quarterly sessions should be held within different levels of leadership to engage in facilitated collaborative discussion of where things *are*, and where things *are going*. Although this discussion may include a difference of views, it may also allow a thorough explanation in a direct line of communication, limiting the chances of miscommunication, and contribute to increased shared understanding of operations.

Embrace Diversity

The CAF has made considerable waves embracing diversity at the National level. Supporting such campaigns as Black History Month, Aboriginal Awareness Week, International Women's Day, and Pride, to name a few, promotes diversity and community. Such diversity can easily be shared at the Unit level by genuinely delivering a community network within the workplace by celebrating multiculturalism. Offering a day or week-long celebration of sharing food, song, dance, and culture will allow all members of the Unit the opportunity to belong. In addition, it is essential that greater awareness for racial diversity is important to ensure a safe place, free of racism and racial discrimination. The conversation about systemic racism and microaggression must begin at the lowest level of rank and within initial military indoctrination, with continued training and discussion at the Unit and Sub-unit levels.

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Conclusion

The CAF influences change from a ‘top-down’ approach when it comes to altering the course of previous norms. In order to modernize and embrace a new generation of the soldier, Units must also lead the change. Creating new customs, traditions, and norms will allow today’s soldier to feel invested in the Corps, and to feel valued within the workplace. Millennials value family, and upon joining the CAF, their Unit is their family. To fully engage with the Millennial generation, Units must ensure new soldiers feel safe, comfortable, and welcomed. When our soldiers feel comfortable, they will feel as though they are valuable a part of the team; if they are a part of the team, the team will be successful.

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