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## To Attract and Retain Millennial Talent, Develop Your Perspective-Taking Skills

W. Lewis Johnson, Ph.D. and Asya Anderson, Ph.D.

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Suppose you have a young employee, Emily, who has been on the job for just a month. She has been working hard on a marketing report, putting in long hours. She has just completed the report and you want to reward her. So you call her into your office, congratulate her, and offer to write a note of commendation for her in the company newsletter. You expect her to be thrilled, but instead she looks disappointed and discouraged. What went wrong?

Clearly some sort of miscommunication occurred. To understand why, look at the situation from Emily's perspective. You may think that a mention in the company newsletter is a big deal, but she doesn't see the value in that. In her view such rewards are meaningless, and reflect badly on both you and the company.

Miscommunications like this happen frequently in the workplace, especially among employees from different generations. They have different expectations around communication and office culture norms. New workers bring habits and communication styles to the workplace that others might find surprising and even unprofessional. Misunderstandings can reinforce negative attitudes, add to frustration and have a big negative effect on employee retention. This increases personnel costs and affects workplace morale.

Much has been written lately about the challenges of motivating, managing and retaining millennials. But many generalizations about millennials are conjecture. As *The Economist* noted recently: "Companies are right to be exercised about the millennial generation... But in their enthusiasm to embrace that generalization, they risk swallowing a lot of snake oil." Instead, solutions should be informed by solid research in social science, to ensure that the problems are properly understood and addressed.

The right way to overcome problems between generations in the workplace is to get past generational stereotypes and address the underlying issues of communication, cooperation, and a positive work culture. Doing this will promote better understanding between people with differing backgrounds and communication styles. This requires effective perspective-taking skills.

Anthropologists, ethnographers, and other social scientists have identified perspective-taking skills as critical for promoting understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds. They can help bridge cultural divides within the workplace, including divides between younger and older workers. They can also help build understanding between employees and customers, resulting in improved customer satisfaction and increased sales.

## What are perspective-taking skills?

Perspective-taking is the ability to understand a situation from the perspective of another person. It is complementary to emotional intelligence but in some ways is more useful. Emotional intelligence might help you recognize that an employee like Emily is disappointed and upset; perspective-taking can help you understand why so you can do something about it.

Anthropologists employ perspective-taking skills when studying other cultures, so that they can understand the culture from the perspective of a member of that culture. Without it one tends to judge another culture by the standards of one's own culture, which usually means judging it negatively.

Perspective taking is also very useful in cross-cultural communication and negotiation. But it is not limited to international settings; it can be applied to any business setting. Just as ethnography, another set of techniques from anthropology, has found their way into the workplace, so should perspective-taking skills. They are particularly useful in understanding differences between generations in the workplace and overcoming them.

As anthropological research makes clear, culture and cultural differences are pervasive. Every group has its own culture, including the company and department that you work for. Each of us is a member of multiple groups, which can influence our behavior and outlook. Moreover, we join different groups over the course of our lives.

### **This is the essence of the workplace challenge that millennial workers face.**

They are adjusting to the culture of the workplace, and of your organization's workplace specifically. At the same time they bring their own perspectives and behavior norms, which may be different from those of established workers.

Perspective-taking skills can help new workers assimilate more easily and help all workers collaborate more effectively. Without them, misunderstandings between workers will inevitably arise and without strong and effective communication skills, they will fester.

Here, in a nutshell, are the main types of cultural differences you should be alert for in a business environment. In the next section we discuss how they arise in cross-generational interactions, and how perspective-taking skills can prevent and overcome misunderstandings.

▫ **Each group has its own behavioral norms, and interpretations of those behaviors.** The group may have strong expectations regarding behavior, which nevertheless are unstated and assumed. Moreover each group a person is a member of may have conflicting expectations. A major area where these issues come up is in business communication. Each generation brings its own habits and norms of communication to the workplace.

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▫ **Each group has its own values, which influence how people within the group interpret behavior and events.** Within an organization there are typically values that everyone is expected to share and uphold. Others are specific to particular subgroups. For example, studies show that many young people entering the workforce value meaningful work and opportunities to develop professionally, and are concerned about work-life balance. These values influence how workers respond to rewards and incentives.

Although these characteristics apply to groups, they also vary among individuals. Your values are not necessarily the same as ours, or Emily's. This makes perspective-taking skills especially important, so we can understand each person's perspective and not make judgments based on general stereotypes.

## Perspective-taking skills in cross-generational communication

Let's now return to the conversation with Emily to see how perspective-taking skills can help get the conversation of the right track.

As you talk with her you observe her body language, and notice how she looks down and averts her gaze. This is an important first step in perspective-taking – noticing cues that may signal a difference in perspective. With body language one has to observe carefully since such reactions are quick and involuntary.

Now that you have noticed a possible misunderstanding, take a step back and look at the situation from Emily's perspective. She is new to the company and may be unfamiliar with its culture and underlying values. So you should follow up by explaining why you want to write her up in the company newsletter. Perhaps you can use your company newsletter to highlight examples of employees who exemplify company values, such as passion for customers. If so, explain this to Emily. She'll come away with a better understanding of company values and their impact on the job. Also, many millennials value contributing and making a difference. You can appeal to that value and mention it in the newsletter.

You should also consider whether there are other rewards you can offer that are better aligned with Emily's values.

Many millennials seek opportunities for professional development, and are concerned about work-life balance. You could appeal to these values by giving Emily an opportunity to present her report to senior management, or by offering her some time off to make up for the long hours she has put in. But either way, don't rely on stereotypes and assume Emily's values are the same as those of every other millennial. Use your perspective-taking skills to understand what Emily values, so you can offer rewards and incentives that will appeal to Emily.

## Training to promote perspective-taking skills

So what can you and your staff do to become more successful in working with millennials?

Start by learning about values and communication habits of the millennial generation. But be sure that the learning materials you draw from are based on solid research in millennial perspectives, and are not simply other people's caricatures of millennials. For instance, read Alelo's white paper that summarizes current research on overcoming cross-generational problems in the workplace.

You should consider training in perspective-taking skills. The Alelo® Workplace Coach assesses learners' perspective-taking skills, and gives them opportunities to practice and develop them. It uses a Virtual Role-Play technique, in which learners play different roles in computer simulations of workplace conversations, without risk of failure from making mistakes. It encourages learners to play both sides in a conversation as a way to become more adept at perspective-taking.

### For further reading

Johnson, W.L. & Anderson, A. (2015). *Overcoming cross-generational problems in the workplace*. White paper available at [alelo.com/workplace](http://alelo.com/workplace).

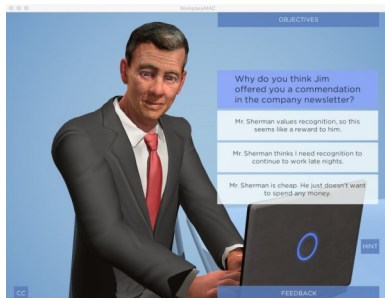
"Myths about millennials: Businesses should beware of dubious generalisations about younger workers." *The Economist*, July 31, 2015.

### About Alelo

Alelo's mission is help employees be more effective where it counts. The company's primary scientists and authors of this white paper are:

**Lewis Johnson, PhD** | CEO. Lewis graduated *summa cum laude* in linguistics from Princeton and received a doctorate from Yale specializing in artificial intelligence in education. Before founding Alelo, he headed a research lab on educational technology at the University of Southern California. Lewis is past president of the International Artificial Intelligence in Education Society, and co-editor of this year's special issue on Culturally Aware Educational Technologies in the International Journal on Artificial Intelligence in Education. He is a baby boomer.

**Asya Anderson, PhD** | Cultural Anthropologist. Asya is an expert in organizational culture with an emphasis on cultivating ethical business practices and negotiating multicultural workforces. Her doctorate from the University of California, Irvine involved working with transnational executives in Singapore and administrators at the United Nations Global Compact. Although sometimes reluctant to admit it, Asya is a millennial.



*The Alelo® Workplace Coach teaches perspective-taking skills.*

Alelo Inc.  
12910 Culver Boulevard  
Suite J  
Los Angeles, California 90066  
+1 310 574-7500  
[inquiries@alelo.com](mailto:inquiries@alelo.com)  
[alelo.com/workplace](http://alelo.com/workplace)