The Millennial Generation: An Emerging Force of Change

Her Story
Lauren Stiller Rikleen

Career
President, Rikleen Institute for Strategic Leadership. I provide speaking, training, and consulting services on strengthening multigenerational issues; women’s leadership and advancement; and unconscious bias.

Education
Brandeis University, BA, magna cum laude; Boston College Law School, JD.

Best Advice
Be kind to others. Try not to let the craziness of your work-life challenges prevent you from enjoying the journey along the way.

Personal
Married to Sander Rikleen, a litigation partner at Sherin & Lodgen, with two millennial children.

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Similar to the work-life struggles faced by my generation, millennials are confronting the same work-life challenges that have been discussed in law practice for decades. This time, however, there is reason to believe the future may look different. As a generation comprised of both women and men striving to integrate their professional responsibilities and personal and family needs, there may be a real opportunity to activate change.

More than a dozen years ago, I gave a presentation at the MIT Workplace Center, and I had an opportunity to reflect on the state of working parents. I expressed how easy it had always been to connect with other working parents about our mutual work-family challenges, as we all have in common our deep desire to do what is best for our families while performing with excellence at work.

In those 2004 remarks, I also observed that as an equity partner in a law firm I had participated in many partnership elevation discussions, and I had spoken with colleagues in many other firms about the promotion process. I stated: “I often hear the criteria of ‘total commitment’ as a critical quality that an associate needs in order to become a law firm partner. I worry about what ‘total commitment’ means and how this criteria impacts how one can parent and lawyer at the same time.”

This 2004 presentation incorporated what I had learned from a project initiated six years earlier. In 1998, in my role as president of the Boston Bar Association, I had the opportunity to create a task force charged with analyzing the changing nature of law firm practice, the concomitant increase in the demands on lawyers, and the growing intolerance for anything that appears to take time away from a law firm economic model built on a demand for hours billed.

The final report of that task force was groundbreaking for two reasons. It marked the first time a major bar association detailed the financial cost of ongoing attrition. Second, it identified the myth of meritocracy that pervades the law firm success narrative. The task force report noted that the language of meritocracy incorrectly creates a perception that the quality of a person’s work is the only determinant of his or her professional merit. When

1. Lauren Stiller Rikleen, From Here to Flexibility in Law Firms: Can It Be Done? MIT Workplace Center, Spring 2004 Seminar Series.
examined more closely, meritocracy relies on the comfortable idea that merit is defined by the quality of one’s legal skills, responsiveness to client demands, commitment to the firm, and teamwork. These qualities may indeed be components of merit, but they also are correlated with long hours and the sacrifice of personal and family time.

In effect, as the task force report noted, meritocracy has come to mean a lifestyle that regularly pushes all nonwork obligations aside as a symbol of one’s commitment to the law firm.\(^2\) In other words, you are judged well in a deemed meritocracy if—in addition to excellence in your performance—work is seen as your highest priority and the first choice among all other conflicting demands.

Fast forward to today. The legal profession has become even more demanding as the combined forces of globalization and technology fuel seemingly endless demands for accessibility, billable hours, and client development. Although many firms have adopted various policies over the years, such as maternity and paternity leave and alternate work arrangements, few have achieved a stigma-free environment in the implementation of these written opportunities.

Enter the generational shift that has the power to finally bring about the change that has been talked about for decades.

Millennials grew up watching their boomer parents struggle through a rapidly changing economic climate. The children of boomers observed their parents enduring some very difficult changes along their career paths. In many workplaces, hard work was rewarded with layoffs, the request to do more with fewer resources evolved into an expectation, and a hard-driving workplace culture forced early retirements and responded to years of loyalty with diminished retirement benefits. One study reported: “Unlike their Boomer parents, Millennials are not workaholics. They believe in a clearly defined work/life balance, and they expect companies to have policies in place to help them achieve

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this. . . . They are less willing to pay dues, and are unlikely to pursue the delayed gratification of a gradual promotion track.”

Globally consistent data supports the fact that, as a generation, millennials expect to follow a career path that allows them to integrate all aspects of their lives. Work matters, but attention to family and personal needs matter as well.

This outlook is not new. Rather, it mirrors the focus on work-life integration for which women have advocated in the legal profession for decades. The gender-neutral data that has emerged with respect to the newest generation to enter the workforce led me to write You Raised Us, Now Work with Us: Millennials, Career Success, and Building Strong Workplace Teams. Millennials are demonstrating a concern for living a whole life in which multiple priorities can be managed, and that seems to be embedded in their generational DNA.

In today’s workplace, where dual-earner families are the norm, young men and women are pursuing gender flexibility in caretaking and breadwinning roles, as well as a stable family structure. As one professor wrote: “The tensions between changing lives and resistant institutions have created dilemmas for everyone. . . . In the place of fixed, rigid behavioral strategies and mental categories demarcating separate spheres for women and men, gender flexibility involves more equal sharing and more fluid boundaries for organizing and apportioning emotional, social, and economic care.”

Research suggests that millennials reject a definition of success measured by income and long hours. “They see success as including the opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their families. And they are not embarrassed to include among their key priorities the need to exercise and maintain friendships. Further, they will seek workplaces where the growth and development of employees are a strategic focus and where a culture of inclusion and respect is a priority.”

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The research leads to an inescapable conclusion that millennials should not be judged by outdated notions of face time as a proxy for commitment. Moreover, this is a generation that eschews the concept of technology as a tether. Rather, millennials see technology as the tool that can facilitate a redesign of the workplace—one that offers opportunities for attention to family and personal commitments without sacrificing productivity.

 Boomers and gen Xers have every incentive to develop the next generation of future leaders. In so doing, they also have a tremendous opportunity to influence their own legacy. The Boston Bar Association task force report concluded with these words of prediction, warning, and hope: “As we stand on the edge of a new millennium, our decisions with respect to professional commitment and work-family balance will profoundly affect the nature of law firms, the course of the profession, and the lives and families of those of us who choose law as a career. How will we be remembered?”

To my boomer and gen X colleagues, I hope we choose to be remembered for, at long last, fostering a workplace culture that will allow our millennial children to demonstrate their merit through excellence, and where they can serve as admired role models through their unquestioned commitment to all of life’s priorities.