# USING GENERATION THEORY TO CREATE EFFECTIVE WORKPLACE TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR MILLENNIALS

# Using Generation Theory to Create Effective Workplace Training Programs for Millennials

Generation Theory proposes that the values and attitudes of a generation are based on the reactions of the excesses and failures of the previous generation and the concurrent historical events (e.g. wars, new technologies or economic crashes) that radically alter social psyche. The Millennial Generation, born between 1982 and 2001, bring to the workplace a unique set of characteristics that go against current structures and forms. To attract and keep this generation, organizations will need to rethink their current workplace-training programs. Millennials are highly talented, confident, goal-orientated achievers. This means that effective training programs need to:

1. Continually define and emphasize the rationality and application of the learning
2. Secure clarity in course structure, assignments, and expectations
3. Design for student initiative, choice and collaboration
4. Remove stress from the learning process

In 1992, William Strauss and Neil Howe proposed that U.S. history could be described as recurring generational cycle of approximately 80 years in length[1]. The cycle is divided into four 20-year periods they term **Turnings** that coincide with a phase of life (Exhibit 1.). They proposed that the values and attitudes of generations are shaped by the events they encounter as children and young adults (e.g. wars or economic crashes). At the heart of Strauss & Howe's ideas is an oscillation between Crises and Awakening Turnings. These are the defining eras in which generational cohorts are affected by historic events that radically alter the very essence of the social fabric. While amplitudes can vary, the length of the cycle is fairly uniform.
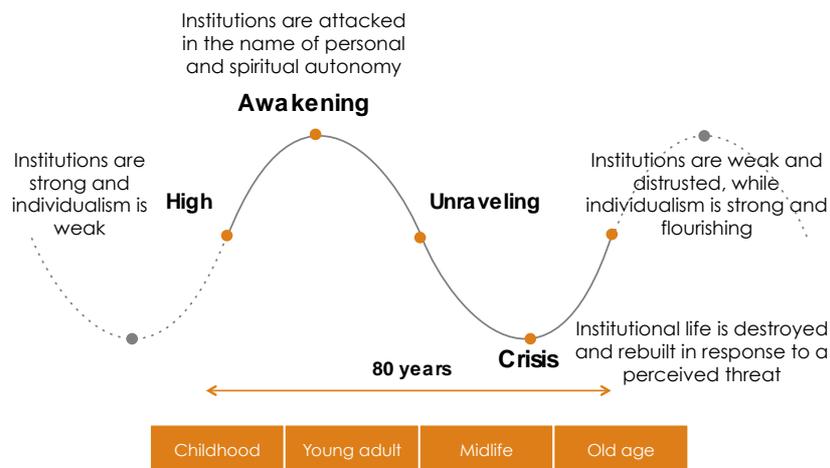


Exhibit 1. Generation Theory proposes that re-occurring Turnings that last about 20 years can describe history

In later years Generation Theory has been applied to Anglo Saxon history for the past 500 years and to other countries.[2] Academic criticisms of the theory have mainly focused on the lack of hard empirical data. Regardless, since its introduction, Generation Theory is now widely accepted in business development and is ubiquitous for designing marketing strategies and customer segmentation. The theory has also made significant inroads in the design of K-12 curricula. Universities and workplace training programs are still struggling to incorporate the basic tenets of the theory into their

design.[3] This is mainly due to a large expansion of secondary education infrastructure (i.e. schools, campuses and even course material) for previous generations (Baby Boomers and the Generation X) and a large workforce that feels threatened by change.

## Social Generations and Archetypes

A **Social Generation** is the aggregate of all people born over a span of roughly 20 years or about the length of one phase of life: Childhood, Young Adulthood, Midlife, and Old Age. **Generational Archetypes (Prophet, Nomad, Hero or Artist)**[4] are based on the significant events that have impacted a society during their Childhood and Young Adulthood. It is important to note that generations do not always have precise start and end dates. There can be a fair amount of "overlap" between two generations, producing a "cusp" between the successive generational groups.

**Prophet Generations:** are born during a High Turning (post Crisis). It is a time of rejuvenated community life and consensus around new social orders. They are indulged as children and come to age as self-absorbed young crusaders of an Awakening. In mid-life they focus on morals and principles and guide society as elders during a Crisis. Their principle endowment is one of vision and values. The children born after World War II until JFK's assassination (1945-1963) are a Prophet Generation and are termed "Baby Boomers".



**Nomad Generations:** are born during an Awakening Turning. It is a time of social upheaval where the Prophet Generation is attacking social and institutional structures. They are brought up within an atmosphere with little control. They come to age as an alienated or as a "lost generation". In mid-life they involve into pragmatic leaders during a time of a Crisis Turning. As elders they are considered resilient. Their principle endowment is one of survival and honor. The children born during the Hippie Generation to about the time Ronald Reagan became President (1964-1981), are a Nomad Generation and are termed "Generation X".



**Hero Generations:** are born in a period of unraveling where there is great skepticism to existing institutions and the laxity of the previous generation. They are brought up within a highly protective environment where structure and order are considered important.  They come to age during a Crisis Turning. They are optimistic, independent, but also able to succeed in teams. They emerge from the Crisis Turning as energetic mid-lifers; confident in the social structures they helped built. As elders they are attacked by younger generations during an Awakening as powerful and supporting the status quo. There principle endowment is one of community and affluence. The children born during the 80's and up to 9/11 are a Hero Generation and are termed "Millennials".



 **Artist Generations:** are born during a crisis. They are reared in a highly protective environment where parents and society are shielding them from societal dangers. This is also a time when individual rights are curtailed in favor of strong institutions and personal sacrifice. They come to age as conformist supporting the institutions of a post-crisis era. In mid-life they are structured and process orientated and as elders they are emphatic and consensus orientated.  There principle endowment is one of consensus and order. The generation born after 9/11 is an Artist Generation and are termed "Homelanders".

In the following table the various Generational Archetypes are presented along the subsequent traits and values they develop as they grow older.

| Turning: | High | Awakening | Unraveling | Crisis |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Description:** | Institutions are strong and individualism is weak | Institutions are attacked in the name of personal and spiritual autonomy | Institutions are weak and distrusted, while individualism is strong and flourishing | Institutional life is destroyed and rebuilt in response to a perceived threat |
| **Generational archetypes** | **Prophet** | **Nomads** | **Heroes** | **Artists** |
| **Childhood (0-20)** | Increasingly indulged children in response to Crisis | Under-protected children | Protected | Overly protected; suffocated |
| **Young adulthood (21-40)** | • Self-absorbed<br>• Young Crusaders of an awakening | Alienated | Team-oriented young optimists during a Crisis | Socialized and conformist of a post-Crisis world |
| **Midlife (41-60)** | Espouse morals and principles | Pragmatic leaders during a crisis | • Energetic<br>• Overly-confident | Process orientated |
| **Old Age (61-80)** | Wise elders to guide through a crisis | Resilient post-Crisis elders | Powerful leaders attacked by another Awakening | Thoughtful |
| **Current Generation** | **Baby Boomers** | **Generation X** | **Millennials** | **Homeland** |
| **Approximate time period** | 1946-1963 | 1964-1981 | 1982-2001 | 2002- |

| Key generational events | • The Cold War<br>• Peace, love and rock-n-roll<br>• The moon landing<br>• Television | • AIDS<br>• PCs<br>• End of the Cold War<br>• The long bull | • Smartphones<br>• 9/11<br>• Lehman Brothers<br>• War on Terror | • No growth |

## Understanding Millennials

Millennials are a product of the perceived laxness of the Sixties and Seventies. Many are the last effort of highly educated, over-achieving Baby Boomers to have children. A protective environment characterizes their upbringing where they were instilled with a sense of confidence and security. Millennials grew up in a pressure-cooker environment; their parents worked hard, they were expected to excel in school. Academic achievement was prioritized. Millennials therefore respond best to external motivators and are highly rationalistic, making long-range plans and thinking carefully about their choices. Today, even as they live with or near their parents, Millennials maintain high hopes for their future in the face of record-high youth unemployment.

Millennials are now rapidly entering the workforce, and their training is now a significant focus of many HR organizations. Based on Generational Theory, Wilson & Gerber (2008) proposed

### MILLENNIAL TRAITS AS PROPOSED BY STRAUSS AND HOWES (2001)

**Special**: In contrast to the 70's "a new found love of children" was signaled in part by the last-chance efforts of highly educated Boomer couples to conceive. For example, birthrates for women over forty greatly increased between 1981 and 1997.

**Sheltered**: While current media expose youth to pretty much everything, parents and society have focused on protecting them from harm than any generation in history. There are now significantly more regulations that now guard children and adolescents.

**Confident**: Young adults are happy; or so polls indicate. They are optimistic about their future prospects, particularly their economic standing. 9/11 the War on Terrorism and the interlocking economic and financial crises, would suggest this optimism is not reconcilable and should be fading. However, recent studies show that younger Millennials remain persistently optimistic about their own individual futures.

**Team-orientated**: Millennials have long worked in groups and are skilled in collaborative effort as seen in classroom emphasis on group learning and social networking. Millennials have therefore developing strong team instincts and tighter peer bonds.

**Achieving**: While Baby Boomers are seen as ambitious, they are more internally driven, than Millennials. Millennials are highly rationalistic, making long-range plans and thinking carefully about "college financing, degrees, salaries and employment. While they are willing to put in the effort, school and employment is not something from which they expect enlightenment or personal transformation. "Work hard, play hard" is their view on life.

**Pressured**: Millennials were raised by hard-working parents in an economy designed for highly skilled labor. Millennials grew up with intense competition for grades and securing the best jobs. At the same time their workforce entry coincided with the economic crash of 2008. They understand that competition with others is necessary. They are convinced that success is the natural outcome of effort. On the other hand, studies in the US have shown that Millennials have higher stress rates and anxiety levels than adults.

**Conventional**: Family is important to Millennials. The economic downturn, the price of higher education and the difficulty in finding jobs means that "childhood" is extended. Born in a divorce culture they are aware of the fragility of the family and embrace measures that promise

that the collegiate teaching of Millennials requires adaptation based on their values and attitudes[5].  They concluded that the Millennial Generation has seven distinguishing traits: *Special, Sheltered, Confident, Team Oriented, Achieving, Pressured, and Conventional*. These traits make this generation unique and particularly different from Generation X: who could be described as independent and survival oriented.

## Creating Effective Workplace Training Programs for Millennials

After describing the key characteristic of the Millennial Generation, Wilson and Gerber then suggested four key fundamentals for developing successful Millennial college education curricula. These fundamentals are now applied to workplace training and development programs.

1. Continually define and emphasize the rationality and application of the learning
2. Secure clarity in course structure, assignments, and expectations
3. Design for student initiative, choice and collaboration
4. Remove stress from the learning process

### 1. Continually define and emphasize the rationality and application of the learning

Millennials have parents who nurtured them and structured their lives. Their education was characterized by structure and process where learning goals were explicitly defined. At the same time they were raised in a consumer economy where they were empowered



**Applies to facts or ideas acquired by study, investigation, observation, or experience**

**The ability to use one's knowledge effectively and readily in execution or performance**

to make their own choices and to question norms and authority. How then do we take these rather conflicting characteristics and secure relevance and training programs that actually engage Millennials?

Transparency and applicability is the key. Here it is important to differentiate between Knowledge and Skills (see exhibit 2.) Millennials believe that knowledge is a commodity and that the difficulty is on how it is to be used and applied (i.e. skill). Millennials are the "I'll get it done if you tell me what do and why Generation". This means they want know what is expected of them and the rationality behind the thinking. The existence of a Role-Skill Matrix secures the structure that Millennials want and identifies the relevant skills that need to have. Self-assessments, the gap analysis between existing and required skills for the job, defines the skill development priorities and secures buy-in. Relevance, is achieved by incorporating a low degree of formal knowledge to a high degree of workplace application in program design.

### 2. Secure clarity in course structure, assignments, and grading expectations;

In response to the laxity of Generation X education, Millennials went through schools and universities with highly structured course curricula, where expectations where explicitly outlined. Important factors here are objectives-driven learning environments and the ubiquity of end-of-course testing (EOC). Thus, with considerable justification, Millennials expect the same predictable structure from workplace training.

### 3. Design for student initiative, choice and collaboration

Millennials are highly rational and focused. This means they will only engage when they see a direct relevance to their development. Therefore, optimal course structures need to have strong elements of student initiative, choice and collaboration.

By allowing Millennials to define key curricula parameters, such as learning priorities and pace, we allow them to define their own meaning into the course. It also acknowledges the fact that they bring strong "strong resumes" and are *Special*. Student initiative capitalizes on *Achievement* and *Confidence* characteristics and Millennials distaste for doing "busy work" that shows no relevance to personal goals. In order for student initiative to be successful, skill assessments on the onset of the course are essential. This allows Millennials to define the correct learning priorities and provide a basis for measuring improvement.

Millennials' education was characterized by a high degree of structure and process where learning goals were explicitly defined. At the same time Millennials expect a huge array of choice; this even applies to their preferences for gathering information and how they learn. A single source of learning, e.g. textbooks, is seen as irrelevant, and they prefer online and social learning. Therefore course design, at the minimum, should be online where specific learning objectives are explicitly defined.

Group exercises, are a common in workplace training since it supports skill development of well-functioning teams, such as respect for colleagues, deference to team leaders, and task-orientation. Millennials view smaller teams of two or three as optimal, since they avoid logistical problems and the "free rider" phenomenon of non-contributing members. Millennials are *Team Orientated* and inclination towards social networking offers numerous pedagogical opportunities. Therefore course design should be built on a social platform that supports collaboration and spontaneous group development.

### 4. Remove stress from the learning process

Millennials are *Pressured* and *Achievers*; these are the ingredients for stress. More importantly, the demands in the workplace have greatly increased, both in terms of pace, responsibility and cognitive knowledge.[6] Applying Wilson & Gerber (2008) proposals to workplace training to reduce stress would mean that optimal workplace training programs should:

1. Decrease the amount of content and focus on application to workplace environments
2. Use modules, flexible deadlines, preplanned workload reductions and self-checking mechanisms

*"Pushed to study hard, avoid personal risks, and take full advantage of the collective opportunities adults are offering them, Millennials feel a 'trophy kid' pressure to excel"*
Strauss and Howe (2002)

*"Anxiety is the most common cause of childhood psychological distress in North America,"* she writes. *"Among teens, studies have shown a strong link between stress and depression, often based on the pressure to succeed"*
Robbins (2006)[8]

3. Develop course elements that either mimic the structure of video games or include actual gaming exercises.

Modularity addresses an additional Millennial characteristic; their *Distractibility*. Many Millennials have an ADHD diagnosis and the numbers are rising.[7] Numerous commentators have linked this condition to the media-saturated world of the Millennial. Unquestionably, many Millennials self-identify as having attention problems and modular approaches, which shorten and frame educational experiences, offer real help.

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**Howard B. Ross; Associate Partner, Chart Learning Solutions AB**
Dr. Ross has over 20 years of consulting and business development experience. Most recently he has focused on how IT and digital technologies are impacting organizational structures, business ecosystems, competence development, and growing and nurturing talent.

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