



## Managing and Motivating Employees in Their Twenties

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by Michael Fertik | **Comments (64)**



I've been lucky to work with some awesome employees in their twenties. While that formative decade is long and dynamic for each person; in a companion post I've offered some observations on the differences between Generation Z and Generation After-Lehman ([http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/11/the\\_kids\\_are\\_all\\_right\\_why\\_new.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/11/the_kids_are_all_right_why_new.html)) ; there are some consistencies in how best to manage and motivate excellent twenty-somethings.

Younger people are especially hungry both to learn and to receive affirmation that they are doing a good job. I've found the best ones are generally much more motivated by incremental education and acknowledgement than they are by a modest bump in salary. Of course, the same qualities that make younger colleagues so responsive to the education and praise you offer may also make them susceptible to negative feedback loops, so be mindful of the context into which you toss them.

The best managers of younger employees are people who would otherwise love teaching for a living. They prize helping others grow and tend to overexplain their reasoning for decisions. Rather than assuming that twenty-somethings possess enough experience or perspective to read between the lines of their choices, these managers take an extra few minutes to lay out pros and cons and diagram their rationale. Three short minutes of explanation usually make excellent junior employees excited, since they feel the immediate benefits of gaining insight into decision-making processes. It also makes them better at working for you and your company, because it teaches them how you think.

Really excellent managers of really excellent young people also set up regular teaching sessions for them on different parts of the business. Top companies (<http://careers.geblogs.com/meet-the-omlps/>) do rotation programs for promising younger talent (<http://www.allbusiness.com/trends-events/audits/15398673-1.html>) . It's hard to support systematized rotation in small companies. But small companies can set up mini-workshops to expose highly promising younger employees to different parts of the company. Early investment of this kind yields payoff fast.

Here are some other good ways to motivate and teach young employees:

**Throw them into the deep end on their first day.** Excellent managers of younger people give them decision-making authority on at least one mission immediately. One very successful Silicon Valley founder is reported to make everyone in his company "CEO" of something (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/business/31corner.html>) . That's the right idea. If they don't know how to do it, tell them to figure it out. The corollary here is that you can't tolerate learned helplessness. Even very talented younger employees; maybe especially the ones who have the peculiar disadvantages of hailing from privilege; may be tempted to ask you questions they can answer themselves. Make them sort it out for themselves. If you don't, they won't improve. And if letting them solve it on their own feels like too big a risk for you, reconsider assigning the project in the first place. There's always another mission that can be a better fit. As the necessary last step, once they have completed the objective, give clear feedback immediately. Post-mortems are critical accelerators of their learning process.

**Publicly reward junior team members who are doing a great job.** No brainer, right? The traditional way is to stand up in front of your group, explain what the superstar of the moment has been doing well, and thank her. Another good but rarely used method is to ask her in front of others what she thinks of an idea, especially when the debate has chiefly been among senior people. The question itself will be confirmation of her growth within the company, and it will raise her status in the eyes of her peers. She'll probably rise to the occasion and say something useful.

**Ask frequent questions.** When you're walking around the office, or standing at your desk, ask your junior colleague "what's the dumbest thing we're working on?" The fact that you're asking that kind of question will carry impact on its own. It will show that you invite and insist on truth-telling and on hearing bad news. It will stimulate younger employees to think for themselves and affirm their contribution of ideas. Sometimes the answer will also make you realize that something the company is working on is actually quite dumb and a waste of money. And sometimes the answer will surprise you in a different way: the employee may think that something he or she is doing is dumb when, once understood in context, it is actually quite useful to the business. When you hear this kind of answer, consider it a great learning for yourself: something has remained unexplained for the team. Use this chance to situate the "dumb" project in the broader picture of the organization's mission. You'll help clear up confusion and motivate the employee who thought part of his or her job wasn't worthwhile.

**Younger employees are often shyer than their older counterparts, so invite interaction not just with yourself, but with others throughout the company.** It's a motivator as well as a catalyst for developing cross-functional intelligence. A simple tip for a manager is to stand while you're at your desk. In addition to being good for your health (<http://blogs.hbr.org/your-health-at-work/2010/08/the-many-benefits-of-standing.html>), removing friction from "getting up" to walk around, and making you and your work ethic more visible, it makes you much more approachable during the day. I've noticed that traffic to my cube, particularly among younger employees has increased by roughly 50% since I started standing at my desk last year. Similarly, use company events to grease the wheels of intermingling. When you hold company-wide events, get a few of your more sociable employees (salespeople are often the right vanguard) to introduce different team members and get conversations going. It will be a big relief for younger team members, and it will start the juices of future collaboration flowing.

**Give them personal attention.** A simple and little-used approach that goes a long way is to call them on their birthdays. That's it. Just call and say "happy birthday, glad to be working with you, hope you have a great celebration." They'll be glad you remembered, you'll feel good about it, and it's a sweet thing to do.

**Do not make the rookie mistake of creating false reasons for praise.** Younger people have contempt for what they perceive as political baloney. Fake it, and they'll know, and they won't trust it when you really mean it.

**Emphasize long-term rewards, and set an example.** Rather than living up to their oft-reported reputation (<http://www.portfolio.com/views/blogs/daily-brief/2010/05/10/study-confirms-worst-fears-about-generation-y-workers/>) of being entitled ingrates (<http://www.newsweek.com/2009/04/17/generation-me.html>), I've found that the best employees in their twenties — perhaps particularly in the wash of the Great Recession — admire those who focus on longer-term rewards. (See my other post on this here. ([http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/10/dont\\_give\\_cash\\_performance\\_bon.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/10/dont_give_cash_performance_bon.html))) This is especially true of those who aspire to run their own businesses one day. You don't need to buy them copies of Marcus Aurelius (<http://www.amazon.com/Meditations-Penguin-Classics-Marcus-Aurelius/dp/0140441409>). Nor do you need to live like a monk. But let them see that you are resisting some forms of short-term pay or comfort, and you'll get them fired up to do the same.

**Set very short-term projects.** Young employees have short attention spans. Blame digital nativity, social media, the Cartoon Network, or whatever else. But it's true and real, and you need to adapt as a manager. A good approach is to set weekly cycles so that every employee knows on Sunday night what she must tackle by Friday EOD. In some cases, set daily goals. You'll find it remarkable how productive a short attention span twenty-something can be. They'll pretty much fill the time they have to get the job done. Setting quick and predictable turnarounds will create high velocity rhythms and a happy, productive-feeling younger workforce.

**Fire those who are not performing.** Younger people are disproportionately affected by seeing others slide by in their jobs. Seasoned colleagues may read between the lines as to why a slacker is being kept around. Younger people often haven't developed those nuanced lenses yet. Excellent junior colleagues too often, too quickly, and too strongly come to resent their less competent peers and the boss who keeps them. Middling quality junior colleagues too often begin to emulate the bad ones who aren't fired.

**For the same reason, fire toxic employees immediately, especially if they have any interaction with younger people.**

One toxic colleague can destroy an organization. Younger employees often haven't developed the ability to wall off the toxin.

**Beware of setting up A+ 22-year-olds with 28-year-old managers.** Too many late-twenties managers are threatened by super-smart colleagues in their early twenties.

**And finally, wear authority lightly.** They take it more seriously than you think. Rookie managers of younger people can easily mistake informal body language and sometimes insouciant communications style for disrespect. Don't. It's just leftover adolescent crap mixed with professional immaturity and generational sloppiness. They are following your leadership much more closely than it might at first appear.

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