

By Jason Thomas



Photos by Tyler Stewart and Josh Hicks

5 QUESTIONS

Understanding the “Me Generation”

Jason Meriwether dispels stereotypes that label millennials

Lazy. Entitled. Tech-addicted. Pick your stereotype when it comes to the millennial generation. But are they true? Jason Meriwether, 37, vice chancellor for enrollment management and student affairs at Indiana University Southeast, shares his thoughts on what drives millennials — and how you can tap into their strengths.

1 When it comes to communication and engagement, how do you prepare the millennial generation for the workforce?

I think it's introducing them to various ways to communicate. Millennials are not all bad. And they're not lost. But we have to adapt to their communication style and help them recognize that in the workplace there are a number of ways and means to interact, and to apply digital communication tools, to be able to interact globally. It's really getting into, especially through our internships, getting them prepared for the workplace, to think strategically, to ask critical questions, and to be prepared to lead and sustain a position once they finish school.

2 Millennials are often stereotyped as being lazy or entitled when in fact many are working hard to achieve a worthy profession and not just settling for any job. How can those stereotypes be addressed and understood by older generations?

You can begin by looking at their community service and philanthropy. Student groups at many institutions, including IUS, are raising record amounts of money for things like the Riley Children's Hospital in Indianapolis. Interest in philanthropy is a big part of their experience. Millennials have higher rates of serving and community service, desire to study abroad, desire to go out in the community and give, than any prior generation. I think we ignore that because while it may not have a direct impact on revenue in someone's pocket, the impact on the community in terms of economic development is great. We have to measure that and discuss that. For example at IUS, our 130 student organizations have nearly 10,000 community service hours. So you can't ignore the impact that those young

people have. I also think that it's important to see that millennials are digitally engaged in how they communicate. That's beyond this concept of Twitter and Snapchat, but they're bloggers. They tell stories about their life and their interests and their goals. I think if we pay attention to that we see we have a population of people that is excited to work and excited to be engaged, but their communication style is a little different.

It's also looking at some of the rudimentary ways in which we offer services. If you think about market share and who has buying power this is a group that has buying power, influences their parents — who have buying power — and who are shifting into the market where they're going to be at the nexus of making purchases. So the way that they view business is very important. This is an entrepreneurial group. There are ways they see things that are efficient and we just have to be open to it.

3 What's the most important thing to remember when managing millennials in the workplace?

To listen. And that it's OK to have high

expectations. This is a group of young people that have high expectations as well. The third thing is to make sure we're clear about purpose. This is not a generation that accepts, 'do as I say,' without explanation. They want to understand the why. This group is very epistemologically driven. They need to understand why and how and we have to tap into their creativity. If you are a business owner who's made a lot of money and you're used to the baby boomer generation and you say, 'hey go do these things'; you don't ask questions, now a millennial comes in and says, 'explain this to me,' 'tell me about this.' It's intellectual curiosity. It's not defiance. And we have to recognize there's a dichotomy. We sometimes falsely assign curiosity — intellectual curiosity — to become confused as defiance, and it's not that at all.

4 What is the best way to find common ground between millennials and, say, baby boomers?

Conversations. Collaborating on service projects. Collaborating outside of the workplace.

But also when the big idea comes — because this generation is full of ideas — when the big idea arises, have a conversation about it. 'Even if we can't expedite your vision let me explain to you why these are the barriers, these are the things I deal with as a manager, as an owner, seasoned leader or supervisor, these are the barriers that exist.' And the millennial is going to go back and say, 'OK, wow, I wasn't aware of that, thank you for teaching me. Let's process.' And the millennial also has to stop and recognize that generationally in terms of communication styles there's some things that they can learn. They also have to say, 'OK, just because you communicate this way you're not throwing me away.' Millennials are very likely to change jobs all the time because they're looking for a new challenge. Millennials are much more likely to chase opportunities and we see that as unstable. They see it as chasing a challenge and an opportunity.

5 How do you help millennials find their passion and translate that into a meaningful, profitable career?

Millennials are looking to make a life, not just a living. In reality that's really where millennials are in terms of their perspective. Wealth matters a little less to millennials. That doesn't mean they don't want to make money, it doesn't mean they don't want to take care of their families or they're irresponsible, some of these false tags that we apply. It just means that this is a generation reared on purpose. It's fascinating, even looking at the last election, regardless how you feel about the outcome. Millennials were deeply engaged on both sides politically. As this generation grows into power and some run for elected office the divisiveness and the politicized things that we see, I think they'll be abated, as this generation rises. I see them engaging in dialogue in a scholarly way. I think that's why this generation offers a considerable deal of hope that we have to pay attention to.

We see things differently.

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