



HOW TO ENGAGE YOUR MILLENNIALS

by

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These days, in most law firms, your associate classes are composed of all, or mostly all Millennials, or those individuals born in the two decades after 1982. Both research and common sense tell us that we have a problem: Millennials tend to change jobs much more frequently than any previous cohort. This means that they may depart before they are profitable for a law firm, and they're less likely to be as committed while they're there.

How can you get Millennials to stay longer and be more committed while they're at your firm? The answer is to boost the level of their psychological engagement.

I've written before about "[engagement](#)" – the desirable mindset that characterizes employees who "go the extra mile," look forward to work, "good-mouth" their firm and their colleagues, and are generally good corporate citizens and highly motivated workers. Gallup research consistently shows us that less than one in three workers in the U.S. are "engaged." We have very little hard data from law firms, but based on my many conversations with law firm leaders, it's almost certainly lower than the national average.

Why does this matter in your law firm? Elevated engagement produces many payoffs, such as:

- **Longer tenure:** Engaged lawyers stay at the firm longer. This means they are more likely to stay with your firm past their economic break-even point, i.e., the point at which the net cumulative revenue they produce exceeds the net cumulative cost that you incur hiring and training them.
- **They work harder:** Engaged lawyers work harder, think about work when they're away from the office, and go the extra mile.
- **They're more motivated:** Engaged lawyers don't need to be "incentivized" – they do the work because they want to.
- **They're more conscientious:** Engaged lawyers are more likely to think "firm first," to reach out to help others, and to be good role models for younger members of the firm.
- **They're more satisfied:** Engaged lawyers have higher levels of job satisfaction. Should they eventually leave, the odds are good that they will become goodwill ambassadors down the road.

How do you increase engagement in Millennials? Some firms have tried superficial fixes – e.g., on the assumption that Millennials like technology, firms increase their spend on whiz-bang devices, devote more resources to using social media, or, on the assumption that Millennials like work-life balance, introduce more flexible rules that allow more lifestyle choices. There's nothing wrong with these interventions – they may actually be seen positively by Millennials – but it's important to understand the psychological principles at work here. Once you do, you'll see that there are some deeper and more durable steps that you can take.

Let me put these practices in context: Back in 1959, a psychologist named Frederick Herzberg developed the "Two-Factor Theory of Motivation"; it's been validated in hundreds of studies over the years and is still considered good psychology today. Herzberg proposed that workplace motivation is a function of two things – the first he called "hygienes," and the second he called "motivators." Hygienes are things that employees want, and when they don't have them, they become unhappy with their job. Hygienes typically include things like having a nice work environment, having the right tools to do your job, being paid fairly, receiving reasonable perks, etc. Notice that they're all extrinsic, i.e., external to the psychology of the individual. The items that I referred to above as "superficial fixes" would all constitute "hygienes" under Herzberg's theory.

His theory says that while a hygiene can cause dissatisfaction when it is missing, the opposite is not true – that is, when you give someone the basic hygienes, it doesn't affirmatively motivate them. It merely prevents dissatisfaction.

Conversely, "motivators" affirmatively motivate people, but their absence is not necessarily *de*-motivating. It's just that without them, there is little reason for an employee to become engaged. What fits into the "motivators" category? All of the principles and practices that we're about to discuss. You'll notice that they're all *intrinsic*, and all evoke a positive emotional experience in an ongoing way.

THE MILLENNIAL ATTITUDE

Let me introduce you to these principles by first offering an important foundational idea: The attitudes that Millennials share – about technology, about lifestyle, about how committed they are to work, about how long they plan to stay at their job, about their work ethic, about the amount of feedback they need, etc. – are largely *learned* attitudes. Shared experiences with their peers, saturation messages from the media during their

formative years, and societal role models have all contributed to the attitudes that we see in Millennials today. Such learned attitudes can be quite durable, but there is one thing that can override them: Evoking hardwired, innate human needs that all people respond to. And that's what the process of building psychological engagement really is about – implementing principles and instituting practices that evoke deeply held desires that are innate in all of us, and anchoring those practices into the culture of your workplace. And, to use Herzberg's nomenclature, all of these principles qualify as "motivators."

There are five such principles and practices that you can use to build engagement of *all* your lawyers (in fact, of all your law firm personnel) and in the process, you will not only increase their tenure and commitment, but you will build greater morale and a more collaborative workforce. Here are the principles:

1. **Autonomy/Self-Determination:** People like to have the feeling that they have some latitude to make choices, and that they have some amount of discretion in how they do their work.
2. **Meaning & Purpose:** People want to know that their work matters, that it makes some sort of impact, or is even inspiring. And if that impact helps society, an institution, or other people in some way, it generally matters even more. In addition, people also thrive when they see steady evidence of regular progress towards a meaningful goal.
3. **Social Connection:** This is a complicated one because it embraces at least three separate lines of research: (i) People want to collaborate and team up with others in pursuit of a common goal; (ii) People want an opportunity to have camaraderie and to form friendships in the workplace; and, (iii) People want to be "included" and feel a sense of belonging, acceptance, and to be part of something larger than themselves. Lawyers tend to overlook this entire category as a motivational tool, especially (ii) and (iii).
4. **Competence, Mastery & Achievement (i.e., the work itself):** Young lawyers want to know that someone is not merely "giving me an assignment," but is, at the same time, "*genuinely* interested in helping me to become the best, most proficient lawyer I can be." People thrive when they develop a sense of mastery and competence around something, and then get to use that strength every day. This is amplified when they feel someone in a supervisory role genuinely cares about their development.
5. **Respect & Gratitude:** People blossom when they are treated with respect and gratitude, and they shrivel when they are disrespected, or worse, ignored.

For each of these principles, there are both institutional practices that a law firm can institute, as well as simple but powerful behaviors that an individual supervising lawyer can enact when interacting with the lawyer being supervised.

INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

What can law firms do to create an environment in which engagement flourishes?

Law firm leaders can implement systemic changes that establish these five principles as policies. Keep in mind that these principles are all based on solid scientific research, not my personal opinion. There are many such possible changes – here are five simple examples to get you started:

1. **Autonomy/Self-Determination:** In designing any program – from a training program to a timekeeping system to a process for submitting claims for reimbursements – be sure to give some thought to how much discretion your associates have when they participate in that program. Even adding modest tweaks that give them simple choices can increase their subjective sense of autonomy. People like to have choices; they don't like being boxed in or micromanaged. Another way to evoke this principle is to invite associates to provide input into the design of such programs.

2. **Meaning & Purpose:** Does the firm have a meaningful mission statement? Does it have a statement of values? Does it live up to its values? Does it have a pro bono program? Have you created a culture in which it's the norm for a partner to explain the context of an assignment to an associate (so associates can see the impact their efforts will have)? Have you established any regular events that allow associates to see firsthand the positive impact of their work product in the client's business? All of these can add a sense of meaning.
3. **Social Connection:** Have you created a culture of collaboration? Does your comp system reward or discourage teamwork? Do any of your workplace policies inhibit the formation of friendships, fraternizing, or informal relationship-building? Do you have a formal orientation program for new associates and for laterals (partner or associate)? Does the program intentionally include steps to convey a sense of inclusion to participants? Do you train your partners to role-model an "inclusive" mindset when they interact with associates? Do you convene frequent face-to-face retreats, especially of smaller working groups such as practice groups or client teams?
4. **Competence, Mastery & Achievement:** Do your leaders role-model an attitude of "development"? Do you train your supervisory attorneys in the basic principles of how to engage associates? Do your training programs help your associates identify their strengths? [Note: There are several excellent tests that measure strengths, including the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Gallup), the VIA Inventory of Strengths, and the R2 (formerly Realise2) from CAPP in the UK.] Do you encourage supervising attorneys to try to identify the strengths of each individual associate and to give associates as much opportunity to use their key strength(s) on a regular basis?
5. **Respect & Gratitude:** This is all about (i) attitude (respect) and (ii) the *genuine* use of two simple phrases – "Please" and "Thank you."

INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES

What can the supervising lawyer do to build engaged associates? (The key here is the "supervisory relationship." Gallup's research makes a very strong case that people are "hired by companies, and quit a supervisor." Each of these behaviors can be easily taught to lawyers in supervisory roles, and they're simple enough that you can put them into practice immediately.) Here are five very simple actions you can take:

1. **Autonomy:** Don't micromanage associates. Always try to give them some form of choice in as many ways as you can.
2. **Meaning & Purpose:** When you give an associate an assignment, always provide enough context so associates see the potential meaning and impact of their contribution.
3. **Social Connection:** First, be sure you don't impede the formation of friendships. Try to foster and encourage social connections, and make small but noticeable efforts to genuinely help associates feel included. Additionally, supervisors should be role models for collaborative work rather than engaging in self-aggrandizing or isolating approaches to working with others.
4. **Competence, Mastery & Achievement:** In assigning work, pay attention to your attitude – in addition to using the associate to get work done for your client, are you also genuinely paying attention to the developmental needs of the associate and helping that associate increase his or her mastery of the skills needed in practicing law? Are you genuinely interested in seeing the associate develop and become more skilled?

And are you actively helping to provide *regular* authentic evidence to that associate of their progress towards mastery? Have you given any thought to this question: What skill or talent does this associate do just about better than anyone else? Is there a way to encourage the regular use of that skill?

5. **Respect & Gratitude:** My advice for supervising lawyers on this element is identical to my advice to firm leaders – adopt “an attitude of gratitude,” and liberally (and genuinely) use “Please” and “Thank you.”

Notice that I’ve used the words “authentic” and “genuine” repeatedly in the preceding summary. All five of these suggestions will fail miserably if done in a mechanical way. The key is to genuinely mean it. It’s all about attitude. This may sound simple to say, but it’s a big lift when trying to teach highly skeptical lawyers to think differently. The good news: The science is strong, these behaviors really *do* make a difference, and the stakes for failing to engage your Millennial associates are quite high, so even the most skeptical lawyers may feel the tug of rationality.

If you are a leader in a law firm, you have two broad tasks. First, apply these “individual” interventions to yourself whenever you find yourself in a supervisory role, guiding, developing, or mentoring younger lawyers. Second, be an advocate to implement the “institutional” versions of the five principles that I’ve described above within your firm. The combination of an individual and institutional effort will yield huge payoffs, not just in more engaged and longer-tenured Millennials, but in your own personal job satisfaction.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Larry Richard is the founder and principal consultant at LawyerBrain LLC. A former trial lawyer, he also holds a Ph.D. in psychology and is considered the leading expert in the psychology of lawyers. His blog, *What Makes Lawyers Tick*, is read by law firm leaders across the AmLaw 100. You can find him at www.lawyerbrain.com.

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