



MANAGEMENT BY COACHING

MANAGING THE ANXIOUS GENERATION

Much has been written about the challenges of managing Millennials but little has been said about the higher than average anxiety levels experienced by this generation and it's impact on the business.

Krista was 27 and the most recent hire in the organization's rapidly expanding sales department. She was smart, energetic, and determined to succeed. The management team was convinced she had a brilliant future in sales. Six months into the job, Krista was falling short of expectations. She wasn't meeting her goal for weekly prospecting calls. Her desk and calendar were disorganized and she struggled to comply with company procedures. Her assistant, a valued and long-term company employee, was begging to be reassigned to another sales professional.

The sales manager was completely baffled. Krista had interviewed so well. Her scores on the pre-employment testing showed a strong aptitude for sales. She was definitely putting in the hours and appeared focused on her work. One-on-one conversations with Krista revealed little beyond her desire to succeed.

More than just worry

What the sales manager couldn't see, and Krista was afraid to admit, was that she suffered from anxiety. Her anxiety wasn't the normal level of worry, nervousness or unease most people experience. Krista's anxiety was a persistent and excessive uneasiness and apprehension that nagged her throughout the day and significantly impacted her ability to do her job.

Much has been written about the challenges of managing Millennials



(people born between 1978 and 1999). But little has been said about the higher than average anxiety levels experienced by this generation and its impact on job performance.

Anxiety among young people is at an 80-year high. According to a study conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), Millennials have the highest level of stress of any living generation and are the least able to manage it. Not surprisingly, Millennials are almost twice as likely as baby boomers to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

Why the increase

There is no clear answer why anxiety levels are so high among Millennials but there are a variety of theories as to the reasons.

Some blame helicopter parenting. A study in the Journal of Child and Family Studies found that college students who experienced helicopter parenting reported higher levels of depression and use of antidepressants. The research suggests that helicopter parenting interferes with the development of autonomy and competence leaving Millennials at a loss to think for themselves and negotiate many of the problems of daily living.

Others see a decrease in frustration tolerance as a significant factor. Millennials are the first generation raised in the technology era of instant gratification. This has led to a decrease in what psychologists term as frustration tolerance. This is how people handle upsetting situations, allow for ambiguity and learn to navigate life challenges like breakups, failure and disappointment. When people lack sufficient frustration tolerance, moderate sadness can lead to increased anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies in those who lack adequate coping mechanisms.

Millennials are typically programmed to succeed. On track for becoming the most educated generation in history, Millennials have a high sense of self-worth and high expectations of themselves. With this comes an intense pressure to be exceptional and do something that is fulfilling and worthwhile. When these high expectations come face-to-face with the reality of many entry-level positions and a lackluster job market, it can be devastating.

To compound the problem, Millennials are relentless in comparing themselves to their peers. When they think they are not measuring up, they can be extremely hard on themselves. This

disappointment and fear of falling behind can increase anxiety.

The impact of anxiety at work

The direct cost to business is significant. People who suffer from anxiety are three to five times more likely to use healthcare services and six times more likely to be hospitalized for psychiatric ailments. Interestingly, they also miss more days at work. A cross-generational study conducted by Bensinger Dupont, a provider of employee assistance programs, revealed that Millennials are more inclined than other generations to call in sick or take the day off just because they are feeling anxious.

The indirect costs to business are far greater. The number one impact of anxiety on the job is “presenteeism” meaning that employees are present on the job, they just don’t perform at their full capacity. Their preoccupation with fear is a barrier to concentrating and making decisions and ultimately productivity. It can lead them to avoid certain tasks, miss opportunities and turn down high visibility assignments. People with anxiety often have difficulty in relationships with colleagues and clients.

In Krista’s case, her anxiety was extreme. Her constant worrying was impacting every aspect of her job. Her fear of failing made it almost impossible for her to make prospecting calls. On those rare occasions when she forced her way through the fear, she was so nervous and tentative that her calls seldom resulted in a lead. Her lack of results fueled her fear of making the next call. When she finally got a prospect to work on, her anxiety about having the perfect proposal led her to be relentless with her assistant and the agency’s marketing staff. When she lost a new business pitch, she would spend weeks replaying it in her mind, fixating on what went wrong.

What to do when job performance begins to suffer

The first step is trying to get a handle on whether anxiety is at the root of the performance problem. This can be tough because to the untrained person, the signs aren’t always obvious. If you’d like to learn more about the warning signs, email me and request a free copy of *“10 Signs Your Employee May Suffer From An Anxiety Disorder.”*

Second, it’s important to consider whether the person is experiencing normal anxiety or

something more serious. According to the Mayo Clinic, there are four indications a problem may be a more serious one: 1) The person's reaction to the stressful situation is more intense and lasts for a longer period of time, 2) Their response is disproportionate to the situation, 3) They worry about everything all the time, and 4) They have significant difficulty relaxing, feeling calm, and taking time away from their worries.

If the problem appears to be more serious, encourage the person to consider whether this is an issue for them and if they might benefit from professional help. Beyond this, there is little you can do as a manager or colleague to help. You will exhaust yourself trying.

On the other hand, there is a lot you can do to help manage the typical anxiety levels Millennials experience in the workplace:

- **Give honest feedback and do it often** – Neuroscientists have found that highly anxious people have intense neural reactions to uncertainty. For them, the state of not knowing where they stand generates even more anxiety than knowing they are failing. Don't wait for the 6-month or annual review. Make feedback part of your regular conversations. A coaching style that inspires and encourages will be far

more effective than a taskmaster who controls and corrects.

- **Lead, but don't micro-manage** – Millennials prefer to be coached or mentored – not managed. They've been managed their entire lives from play-dates and organized sports to what college courses to take and crave the opportunity to make their own decisions. They want leaders who will listen to their ideas, support their professional development and pay close attention to their accomplishments.

- **Challenge but don't overwhelm** – The constant flow of information into today's business world can be overwhelming especially when you're new in your career and still trying to get a handle on the fundamentals. As experienced professionals it's easy to forget what that feels like. Help Millennials cope by making sure they always understand their priorities and the "why" behind the work they do.

- **Maintain a policy that supports disconnecting from work** – Millennials are anxious to be viewed as dedicated to their jobs. Of all working generations, they rank highest when it comes to seeing themselves as "work martyrs." They are the most apt to worry about

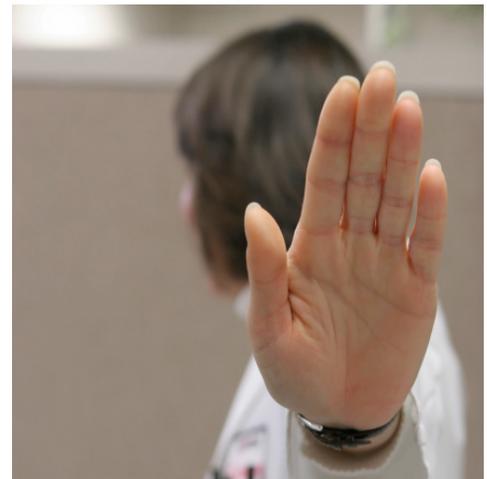
being replaced and the least likely to use their vacation time. While they are committed to their work, they're more likely than other generations to become irritated and anxious when work intrudes into their personal lives. According to a PwC study, 71% of Millennial employees (compared to 63% of non-Millennial employees) said that work demands interfering with their personal lives was unacceptable.

When working with Millennials pay close attention to their individual work/life balance issues. Make sure they're taking time to recharge and that you're not sending mixed signals about time off. Companies often say "take your vacation time," "spend time with your family," yet still expect people to be checking email and responding to important requests. In too many companies today, it's a sign of your dedication to be sending emails at 5 AM or on a Sunday afternoon. Conscientious people are afraid to unplug and miss something, which makes it difficult for them to recharge.

- **Use special projects as a learning experience** – Millennials are impatient when it comes to job advancement. They want a chance to test their ideas, prove their value and develop their skills. Special projects give them a way to

experiment, fail and start again. This can help build the resilience that many Millennials lack. It also gives them a way to keep growing when the timing may not be right for advancement.

- **Balance your teams** – Anxiety loves company. Science shows that intergroup anxiety increases the anxious behavior of individuals within the group and will kill productivity. To the extent you can, make sure your teams are a blend of personalities. For example, people who are calm, confident and comfortable with ambiguity can help balance more anxious personalities. Conversely, people who tend to be more anxious can help the optimists think through what can go wrong.



A Force to Be Reckoned With

Millennials are the largest demographic in the workplace and

increasingly they're joining the management ranks. There is compelling evidence that Millennials are experiencing markedly higher rates of anxiety than previous generations. Work is a major trigger. Helping these employees grow,

succeed, and stay with your organization will require new skills as well as some adjustments in how we think and structure our work environment.

Kimberly Paterson, Certified Executive Coach and Certified Energy Leadership Coach, is President of CIM. She is the author of Millennials in Wonderland: Coaching Millennials With Mental Health Challenges.

Copyright© 2017 CIM, Inc.