



Book Review: Millennials and Conflict in the Workplace: Understand the Unique Traits of the Now Generation by Cynthia Pearce LeMay

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ABSTRACT

Cynthia Pearce LeMay in *Millennials and Conflict in the Workplace* shows how Millennials differ from preceding generations in their values and approach to conflict resolution, providing useful information for the practicing Ombuds when working with this generation.

LeMay uses both qualitative measures (interviews and focus groups with approximately 50 people, Millennials and Non-Millennials) and quantitative measures (using data from 11,000 test-takers of the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) over a 13-year span), attempting to answer 3 questions:

- How do Millennials manage conflict in the workplace?
- What are the dominant conflict styles of Millennials, Generation Xers (Gen Xers) and Baby Boomers?
- How do conflict styles of Millennials compare with Gen Xers of the same age?

KEYWORDS

Millennials, Conflict, Intergenerational Relations, Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument, Ombuds

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SETTING THE STAGE

In *Millennials and Conflict in the Workplace*, Cynthia LeMay explores how Millennials manage conflict in the workplace, the dominant conflict styles of the different generations and how the conflict styles of Millennials differ with Gen Xers at the same age. Several of her findings may be useful to the ombuds in their work with different generations.

Millennials are the largest generational cohort in the United States, and since 2016 have been the largest group in the workplace. LeMay reports that in 2019, the US workforce consisted of 65 million Millennials, 56 million Gen Xers and 36 million Boomers. Understanding the present-day work force demands understanding the role and impact of Millennials.

To understand how the generations are defined, Baby Boomers were born between 1946-1964, Gen Xers 1965-1981, Millennials 1982-2000 and Gen Z 2001 onward.

LeMay posits that each generation is shaped by events that occur during their formative years, noting that for Millennials these events include 9/11, the 2008 financial collapse, the rise of social media and “helicopter” parenting. Education was a bigger priority than previously; 39% of Millennials are college educated (67% attended some college), compared to 29% of Gen Xers and 25% of Boomers. College tuition became significantly more expensive during this period, leaving more Millennials with larger educational debt than previous generations. Thus, Millennials are more educated (associated with more critical thinking) and have more debt than preceding generations. These critical thinking skills may shed light on why Millennials have a reputation for asking “why”. They need to understand the rationale behind being asked to do specific work.

LeMay notes that “helicopter” parenting does not end at age 18. She quotes a study which found 40% of parents gather prospective employer information for their children, 31% submit their child’s resume and 26% are involved in promoting them for a position. She reports that several large companies provide recruiting information specifically for parents and even invite parents to visit the workplace. These forces all play a role in shaping the Millennial generation.

THE RESEARCH

LeMay uses two main research tools. First, interviews and focus groups were conducted with about 50 individuals with discussions continuing until “no further information was forthcoming”. Unfortunately, LeMay does not identify who conducted the interviews and how the participants were selected.

LeMay presents generational data in 11,000 participants over a 13-year span using the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), identifying 5 conflict responses. Condensed TKI definitions follow:

Competing: High assertiveness/low cooperativeness. Useful in emergency situations. Can silence less assertive individuals.

Compromising: Mid-level assertiveness and cooperativeness. Time efficient. Important principles may be lost.

Accommodating: Low assertiveness/ high cooperativeness. Individuals abandon their own needs to preserve unity.

Avoiding: Low assertiveness/low cooperativeness. Avoiders remove themselves from conflict.

Collaborating: High assertiveness/high cooperativeness. Most time-consuming.

LeMay notes one style is not superior; all have strengths and weaknesses.

There are significant generation differences in Conflict Styles. Boomers tend to have a Collaborating style; Generation Xers more likely have a Competing style. Surprisingly, Millennials

exhibit both Competing and Accommodating styles, conflict styles with opposing traits. The Accommodating style has low assertiveness and high cooperativeness, and the Competing style has high assertiveness and low cooperativeness. LeMay offers no explanation for this. LeMay notes she had expected more Millennials would have an Avoiding style. She posits that the Avoiding style may increase with age. The Millennial cohort was the youngest (the other generations were older at each time point). In 2006, when LeMay first analyses TKI data, the oldest Millennials were only 24. In 2006, the prevalence of Millennials with an Avoiding style was 17% (females (F)) and 9% for males (M). In 2012 these numbers were 23% (F) and 20% (M) and in 2018, 22% (F) and 23% (M), indicating the Avoiding style does indeed become more prevalent in Millennials with age.

The study spans 13 years enabling LeMay to conduct a same-age analysis of Millennials v Gen Xers. The most interesting finding in this analysis is that incidence of the Competing style in Gen X and Millennials begins as comparable, but more Gen Xers tend to use a Competing style by age 33/34.

LeMay presents a tremendous amount of data on conflict styles from the TKI. The large volume of data is, in fact, a weakness of the book. The reader is challenged to extract the most salient findings.

THE TAKE-AWAYS

LeMay has several take-aways. She explores why Millennials may have more job turnover than others. She also explores a decrease in gender differences of confrontational styles and the impact of their technological and social skills on conflict resolution techniques in Millennials. LeMay explores why Millennials have a reputation for quitting. In Chapter 4, “Millennials are born to Scram”. She identifies relevant societal changes (elimination of pensions, increase in portable 401Ks, and higher expectations, perhaps from higher educational achievements and the parenting style with which they were raised). She also notes that Millennials want to know “why” (perhaps due to higher levels of education). An interviewee states, “They want to feel like they’re working on a project and not a task”. She notes that Millennials desire more feedback. The desire for more flexibility can lead to role innovations. Millennials often desire flexible schedules or the ability to work from home.

LeMay delves into gender. She quotes a Boomer, “Millennial women tend to be less emotional... very straightforward. Millennial men tend to be non-confrontational... tend to withdraw quickly”. This difference persisted over time, with a decrease in Competing style for Millennial men over the course of the study (34% to 14%) and increase for women (7 to 10%). Gender differences in the Millennial cohort were found to be less than in other generations.

LeMay also notes Millennials’ technological skills can surpass their social skills. They may withdraw and use social media for support rather than rely on in-person relationships. They have a reputation for being more anxious, and more open about mental health issues. They value work which contributes to a larger cause (most frequently mentioned issues include women’s rights, sexual harassment, LGBTQ+ issues, environment and climate change). Millennials are also more ethnically/ racially diverse than the preceding generations.

WHAT’S IN IT FOR THE OMBUDS

In summary, this book has an overabundance of data but does contain useful information for practicing Ombuds. Understanding how Millennials (the largest generation in the current workforce) deal with conflict is vital as we seek to resolve disputes. Millennials **are** different than preceding generations; some of their traits may be challenging for older generations. Additionally, they have the least difference between genders in terms of conflict resolution style.



While some may find Millennials' need to understand "why" annoying, it is important to acknowledge that this need to understand may be vital to their engagement in the workplace. Millennials may have more difficulty working out conflict face to face and may need additional coaching from the ombuds in these encounters. Millennials tend to desire more on-going feedback and more flexibility at work and their supervisors may need education on the importance of this. Millennials place an importance on values and the importance of their work contributing to larger issues. A deeper understanding of Millennials may help the Ombuds in resolving conflicts in the workplace.



REFERENCES

LeMay, C. P. (2022). Millennials and conflict in the workplace: Understand the unique traits of the now generation. Routledge



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