

## Millennials and Public Relations Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Are They Ready?

Shirley Serini, Ph.D. APR, PRSA Fellow, and Diane S. Krider, Ph.D., APR

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### ABSTRACT

Public Relations professionals are taking an increasingly important role as part of the “C-suite” team. Millennials (born 1982-2000) will need to be ready to assume leadership positions earlier in their careers than any generation before them. The study presented here uses the results of nine focus groups and two depth interviews conducted during the summer of 2014. It explores how current public relations professionals who manage Millennials evaluate them for promotion and the concerns and issues they face as they do so. Many of the qualities of a good leader identified in the leadership literature are inherent in how Millennials have been raised and educated. However, the focus group findings point to several key areas of concern about Millennials engaged in public relations work: personal qualities, communication skills, business acumen, and work ethic. Additionally, there are some concerns about collaboration and social media. Suggestions for future research are presented in the conclusion.

**Keywords:** Millennials, leadership, public relations leadership, Millennials in public relations

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In the rapidly changing 21<sup>st</sup> Century American work force, Millennials have garnered a great deal of attention. They comprise 35% of the work force while Boomers and Gen X were each at 31% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015, pp. 11-22). As Boomers continue to turn 65 at the rate of 10,000 per day and prepare to leave the workplace (Pew Research Center, 2010a, para. 1), Millennials will increasingly dominate. Gen X, which falls between the Boomers and Millennials, is too small to fill the employment gap (Fry, 2015, para. 1). Consequently, Millennials will be needed to fill the leadership ranks much sooner than previous generations.

As with all professions, public relations is grappling with how to adjust to this change. Coinciding with the demographic shift, public relations professionals are taking an increasingly important role as members of the “C-suite” team; however, the traditional career progression leading to public relations leadership positions is in flux. As the need for Millennials to step into leadership positions earlier in their careers continues, Berger and Meng (2014c) note, “...there is little research, no compelling urgency, no systematic plan or approach for strengthening leadership in the field” of public relations (p. 304). This study is important because it contributes to that void.

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The purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) To understand the challenges of this shifting demographic through the observations and experiences of public relations managers; and (2) to explore what public relations professionals are identifying as the leadership potential of Millennials as they evaluate them for promotion. Promotion is viewed here as a preliminary step for identifying and developing leaders.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Millennial Characteristics

The Millennials are the generation of approximately 83 million young adults born between 1982 and 2000 (United States Census Bureau, 2015, para. 1). A generation of striking strengths and weaknesses, researchers have identified many unique characteristics that show a pattern of potential to improve the work environment; at the same time, however, others have identified characteristics that are in opposition to the nature of work as defined by previous generations.

Millennials do have great strengths that have uniquely prepared them for futures in public relations. They have been raised to be leaders: 78% already define themselves as leaders (Pollak, 2015b, para. 3). "They have grown up with a global perspective and access to the World Wide Web...many are supremely confident, mostly because they've been empowered by parents, teachers and coaches to make decisions like leaders for most of their lives" (Pollak, 2014a, para. 1). The strengths of Millennials are well documented and provide an exciting and optimistic outlook for their potential contributions as they embark upon their careers. They include being team-oriented, achieving and conventional (Howe, 2010, pp. 91-92); optimistic, technologically savvy, goal- and achievement-oriented, innovative, collaborative, resourceful, comfortable with diversity, and civic-minded (Raines and Arnsperger, 2010, para. 25). They believe it is a citizen's responsibility to volunteer (Associated Press, 2015, para. 3). They are also "confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change" (Pew Center, 2010a, p. 1). They are self-directed and results-oriented (Dhawan, 2012, p. 235), and "diverse in opinions and fascinated by new technologies" (Holt, Marques, and Way, 2012, p. 82). They are also searching for meaning and have a heavy reliance on social networking" (Lancaster and Stillman, 2010, pp. 6-8). Their intrinsic values include work-life balance, reward, self-expression, attention, achievement, informality, simplicity, and multitasking (Espinoza, Ukleja, and Rusch, 2010, pp. 157-8).

However, researchers have also identified other factors unique to the Millennials that have the potential to widen the gap between generations—especially with Boomers.

Millennials are goal oriented; however, their desire to excel can be intrinsically linked to a change of parenting style. They were raised with a disproportionate amount of self-esteem in tension with the demand to be "the best" by "helicopter" parents who hovered over them and made decisions for them to insure their success (Levine & Dean, 2012, p. 79-80). Alsop (2008) calls them "trophy kids" because they were pressured to be the best, to stay focused on achievement, and to not take risks (p. 59-60). More than 70% of Millennials prefer to collaborate in small groups (Idea Paint, 2013, p. 4). However,

Alsop (2008) argues, this preference is tied to their need for the security of working in groups where no one person is responsible. Their love of teamwork, a strong and unique attribute, can also be a detriment:

...[teamwork] partly accounts for their weakness in taking risks and thinking creatively and independently...[Companies] want employees who are poised to take risks and think creatively on their own to solve thorny problems...With Millennials so averse to ambiguity and risk, many companies worry whether this generation will be up to the challenge (Schawbel, 2013, p. 125).

Although they are the most highly educated generation in history, Stewart (2009) found Millennials to have “deficiencies across the board” including those in “basic skills (reading, writing, and math) and applied skills such as critical thinking and problem solving” (p. 2). Levine and Dean (2012) identified similar concerns including weak basic skills, large knowledge gaps, and a tendency to confuse effort with quality (p. 188). Millennials often lack the “focus, critical analysis, and deeper thinking” needed for higher-level assignments (Alsop, 2008, p. 154). Interestingly, this trend coincides with a decrease in the emphasis on a strong liberal arts education and a movement toward specialization in the workplace.

Unlike previous generations, Millennials are digital natives who have not known life without technology and therefore desire quick access to people and information (Worley, 2011, p. 33). They possess decreased attention spans, show little patience, desire instant gratification, and focus more on goals than on processes for achieving them (Worley, p. 34). In addition, Alsop (2008) found they lack initiative, expect to be told exactly what to do and how to do it, and need constant affirmation.

Work ethics present other pronounced differences. In contrast to their international counterparts, American Millennials are more concerned with their personal needs than with building their careers (Alsop, 2008, p. 20) or being loyal to their employer: They tend to be job hoppers (Pew Research Center, 2010b, p. 47; Meister, 2008, para. 2). Because Millennials tend to be more “open and transparent...[they] become more likely to discuss work activity with a wider range of people in both public and in private,” which raises ethical concerns (Public Relations Society of America Ethics Resource Center, 2013, p. 2).

Finally, a striking difference is their lack of the interpersonal communication skills needed to function in a work environment, particularly at higher levels. They are lacking in business etiquette—skills as simple as how to dine formally or dress appropriately for various occasions (Alsop, 2008, p. 29). Important from a public relations leadership perspective, they are lacking in face-to-face social skills (Levine & Dean, 2012, p. 162-3). Their inability to interact in situations with others who are not like themselves (older generations in particular), and to identify and follow the social norms in an organization presents problems. They tend to be overly familiar with older executives, calling them by their first names and sending casual emails to top executives (Alsop, 2008, p. 29);

Levine & Dean, 2012, p. 187). As Gavatorra (2012) points out, the "...biggest gap between generations [is] effective direct communication skills... [Millennials] have to improve how they effectively connect, interact, engage, and communicate with other people in person" (p. 61).

### **Public Relations Leadership**

Understanding how Millennials differ from previous generations has been and will continue to be of great importance to the practice of public relations. Gen X, the generation between the Millennials and Boomers, is a significantly smaller population than either of the other generations. This imbalance leaves a shortfall of trained Gen X professionals to fill the positions being vacated by the Boomers. Consequently, Millennials have the unprecedented opportunity to assume leadership positions earlier in their careers than their predecessors. This is equally true in public relations positions.

Concurrent with this demographic trend, the public relations profession is undergoing a dramatic change in how their leadership role is being cast. The profession is in the midst of a transition created by what the Arthur Page Society defines as a "disruptive shift" that is "changing the context for business and society" (*The Authentic Enterprise*, 2007, p. 9). Caused by the "convergence of three major forces—the digital network revolution, the reality of globalization and the empowerment of myriad new stakeholders," this shift is creating increasing demands for transparency (p. 9). As a result, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) are turning to their Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) for "leadership in understanding and responding to this new reality" (p. 10). This shift has the potential to "transform our [public relations] profession, open up new and meaningful kinds of responsibility and learning, and create exciting new career paths for communications professionals" (p. 10). These trends contribute to the opportunity Millennials have to significantly change the nature of the public relations profession as well as the leadership within in it.

Grunig (1992) describes excellent leaders as ones who "give people power, minimize 'power politics'" and "provide a vision and direction for the organization" (p. 303). Berger, Meng, Heyman, Harris, and Bain (2014) call for leadership in the public relations field to "be closely examined to help us learn what constitutes excellent leadership in the field and to determine how to create even better leaders for an uncertain future" (p. 278). Research assembled by Berger and Meng (2014b) provides an extensive review of public relations leadership literature (pp. 16-37). They examine definitions and philosophies of leadership, and draw upon the work of Grunig (1992) to propose a definition of leadership based on an "integrated model of excellent leadership in public relations" as a beginning to the process:

Excellent leadership in public relations is a dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produces ethical and effective communication practice. Such practice fuels and guides successful communication teams, helps organizations achieve their goals, and legitimizes organizations in society (Berger and Meng, 2014b, p. 30).

Berger and Meng (2014a) use the metaphor of public relations leaders as “sense makers” to frame their global study of public relations. They present an “integrated model of excellent leadership in public relations” comprised of seven dimensions: “self-dynamics, ethical orientation, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capability, team collaboration, and communication knowledge management...[and] organizational culture and structure” (pp. 4-5).

Aldoory and Toth (2004) found public relations professionals prefer transformational leadership because it takes place in “a constantly changing, turbulent environment” (p. 178). They also found support for situational leadership in “dealing with unique circumstances and environments” (p. 160). Balda and Mora (2011) propose a new leadership model, service leadership, which they define as “relational leadership, providing opportunities for people to learn from and grow with others, be challenged by meaningful work that matches the strengths of the person to their job, and to share and experience life together in accomplishing results” (p.22).

Scholars have produced an extensive list of traits needed to be a successful leader that includes articulateness, confidence, conscientiousness, dependability, diligence, intelligence, open-mindedness, self-assurance, sociability, and trustworthiness, (Antonakis, Cianciolo, and Sternberg, 2003). Grunig, J. E., Grunig, L. A., and Dozier (2002) identified the need for “strategic expertise to manage organizational responses to issues and set goals and objectives, the research expertise to segment publics and evaluate programs, and budgeting expertise” as important leadership attributes (p. 36). Public relations leadership traits identified during the Plank Center Leadership Summit (2013) included trustworthiness and added transparency, the ability to build and inspire teams, the reputation of the CEO, and the need for the CEO to show personal presence. The panel agreed that too often public relations professionals lack an understanding of how business runs, which they saw as an imposing barrier to the C-suite. The Arthur Page Society (2013) identified characteristics that CEOs want in their CCOs as business savvy and proficiency in “three key modes of operation...reactive, interactive and proactive” (p. 40). They defined the “key” attributes of the ideal CCO as having knowledge of the business, extensive communications background, the ability to anticipate how different audiences will react to different events, extensive internal relationships, C-suite credibility, and the ability to be a team player and to educate others in the organization about communications skills.

In their leadership model, Berger et al. (2014) included “business knowledge, team-building capabilities, visionary, relationship-building skills, listening skills, communication knowledge and skills, and critical-thinking capabilities” (p. 275) and added traits mentioned by the public relations executives they interviewed: “authenticity, courage, passion, reflective-thinking skills, patience, visibility, and writing capabilities” (p. 45).

According to the results of the 2014 leadership study conducted by Ketchum, “The good leader formula: Open communication + decisive action + personal presence,” is the formula for today’s “credible leader” (para. 7). Cartwright (2013) adds:

Excellent relationships with employees and expert commentators is an essential...Building and inspiring teams of people who will build the future together, turning complex problems into opportunities, and discerning a clear future through the fog of today will be the mark of tomorrow’s leaders (p. 4).

As today’s top level managers begin examining who will replace them, a number of concerns about the leadership potential of the Millennial generation have arisen. Generation scholars and other authors have been examining the impact of Millennials on the workplace for the last decade, but only recently have organizational leadership issues surrounding them begun to appear. This is particularly true in public relations. Millennials are rapidly becoming the majority in the public relations workplace. They are more educated and academically prepared to enter public relations than any time in history. A successful transition to Millennial leadership is essential.

The purpose of this study was to surface a broad range of issues, concerns, and insights specific to Millennials in public relations and to understand the challenges managers face with this rapidly changing demographic. To understand the impact of this unique generation on the practice of public relations, two research questions were posed:

**RQ1: What observations and challenges are managers experiencing with Millennials in the public relations workplace?**

**RQ2: What characteristics are public relations managers using to identify and cultivate future leaders?**

## **METHODOLOGY**

Focus groups were used for this study with the goal of “producing insights as to how professionals are theorizing their own point of view” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 113). They provide the opportunity for participants to “analyze divergent or contending viewpoints and compare, contrast, and critique each other’s perceptions” (Lindolf and Taylor, 2011, p. 184). Although focus groups can provide insights when studying a phenomenon, they are particularly useful for diagnosing potential problems and learning about how

respondents talk about them (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015, p. 44). Ultimately, they can provide rich descriptions from many participants in a short period.

The data were generated from nine focus groups and two in-depth interviews with professionals who were unable to attend the focus groups. One group was held in each of nine cities in eastern and central United States over the course of four months. Three major metropolitan markets, four mid-sized markets, and two small markets were chosen to provide a variety of market sizes.

Forty-two public relations professionals participated, all but five of whom were members of PRSA. Their responses were combined for a total N=42. Not all respondents chose to answer all demographic questions, so the totals will not equal 42 in all instances. Of the 42 participants, all were 34 years or older and therefore *not* Millennials. Participants included 27 Gen X (1962-1981), 11 Boomers (1946-1961), and one Civic (1925-1945). Eleven worked in corporations, 10 in not-for-profit organizations, 13 in agencies, three in healthcare and one in government. Males numbered seven and females 35, one of whom was African American. Thirty were strategic-level managers, 11 were middle managers, and one was recently retired. All participants were volunteers. Only one minority volunteered to participate.

Some participants were acquainted due to membership in local PRSA chapters. They had the “advantage of a shared history, which makes it easier to start discussions and keep them going” (Lindolf and Taylor, 2011, p. 185). The groups also included participants who were not acquainted, which broadened the range of responses and enriched the discussion. Questions were prepared to stimulate and focus the discussion. The conversations were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed by two coders.

## **DISCUSSION**

The data analysis provided many insights into the challenges professional public relations managers are experiencing with Millennials. In response to RQ1 about observations and challenges, participants provided descriptive observations about Millennials. Four prevailing themes emerged from the discussions: personal qualities, communication skills, business acumen and work ethics. In addition, collaboration and social media ran throughout most categories and will be treated together as a fifth theme. To address RQ2, a discussion of desired leadership characteristics will be presented. Study limitations will conclude the discussion section.

### ***Personal Qualities***

Participants identified personal qualities needed to be successful in public relations and specifically in their organizations. Two themes emerged: a positive attitude and a broad-based knowledge of the organization.

**Positive attitude.** Overall participants found the optimistic nature of Millennials to be “refreshing.” Their sense of fun and work/life balance were bringing new challenges to the workplace, but they were not necessarily viewed as negative. While many felt that everyone benefitted from some of the demands Millennials were making, balancing the needs of the work load with the new dynamic was challenging.

Two areas of concern were identified as weaknesses: handling constructive criticism and taking responsibility for their own actions. Participants shared concerns about how Millennials reacted to criticism by crying, complaining to the manager’s superiors including the CEO, blaming the manager for not telling them how to do it right in the first place, and posting tirades on social media. If something was not right, it was usually someone else’s fault—seldom their own. “They’ll throw other people under the bus” to protect themselves, one participant said, and others in the group agreed.

**Broad-based knowledge.** This theme included how the employee was tuned into the world around them, built on knowledge gained from each experience, possessed the ability to think critically and strategically, and demonstrated a willingness and ability to share knowledge with others.

Millennials’ lack of attention to the world around them was major a concern. Despite having unprecedented access to information, managers said Millennials tend to limit their news sources very narrowly, often to “*infotainment*” sources. Participants discussed Millennials’ lack of understanding about how the news cycle works, of the impact of the broader societal context, and of the importance of understanding history.

Several participants expressed concern about the a-historical nature of Millennials. They found Millennials tend to treat each activity as a separate event as opposed to seeing connections between how it was done last time, how it needs to get done and, ideally, how it can be improved. This lead to a great deal of unnecessary hand-holding time on the manager’s part. They also felt it hampered Millennials’ ability to integrate, synthesize, and create new concepts, to think strategically and critically, and to “find alternate solutions instead of just stopping when they encounter problems.” Participants felt the lack of connection was a result of Millennials’ dependence on the constant availability of information on the internet. The need to do long-term thinking and mental storing of information is not seen as a value to this generation, which is a concern to their mangers.

Several participants identified the tendency of Millennials to question the status quo. Some saw it as annoying and confrontational, but others saw it as a sign of critical thinking and an important characteristic for a potential leader. “They [Millennials] often were able to propose an alternative way of doing it that actually improved the process,” one said. Participants openly admitted they are eager to change processes if there are signs of a substantive analysis of the situation.



As a test of leadership potential, participants said they give Millennials knowledge-sharing opportunities such as leading a training session or reverse-mentoring. Millennials' eagerness to share their specialized knowledge was seen as a sign of maturity and leadership by several participants. "They're watching for opportunities to exploit what they do know...they're being smarter to say 'let me empower you,'" one explained.

### **Communication Skills**

Participants identified basic communication skills as expected and essential—face-to-face (interpersonal, small group, large group) and symbolic (written and visual)—all necessary to move up in the public relations function. However, they also identified them as one of the weakest areas for Millennials. Interpersonal communication, in particular, was a matter of universal concern. "You have to be able to interact with people when working," one participant explained. "An employee's ability to do so determines whether or not you get promoted. It might stop a promotion if clients complain."

Participants shared stories about how adverse to face-to-face and phone communication their Millennial employees are. Several participants expressed the frustration of having an employee text them with a question rather than come to the office to discuss it—even when the office was right next door. Others expressed concerns about Millennials' refusal to call media with a pitch. "I think what's important is the skill of face-to-face and not the electronic thing all the time," another participant said. "It's...risky for one's advancement."

Other concerns focused what they saw as weaknesses in how well a Millennial would represent the organization—how they present themselves, speak, shake hands, and address senior members and clients, what words they choose and clothes they wear, their basic dining, social, and business etiquette skills, and their ability to hold a conversation with clients of all ages. "I don't see them as being well bred," one participant said. "Their presentation skills are going to inhibit their ability to...move up." Many participants told stories to highlight ineffective communication used by Millennials. One story, for example, involved a Millennial coming to a top corporate meeting dressed so inappropriately that she was told to go home and put on a suit.

Communication was identified as critical in the relationship dimension of practicing effective public relations. "Being able to have a conversation with a client and look her in the eye and being able to converse with more clients around the building are important," one participant said. Another said, "I don't know that a lot of them could...go to a business dinner with a client and really make conversation. Several participants cited interpersonal communication as a major issue, describing it as a "struggle" for Millennial employees. "[They] feel very comfortable sharing their feelings, posing potentially difficult questions, and advancing opinions through electronic media. They seem to do so less interpersonally and particularly when communicating with a senior staff member."

Participants did qualify their general observations with reminders that occasionally they get a “shining star.” Some Millennials “seem to carry themselves with a great sense of maturity and composure and really strike a nice balance between business and professional demeanor,” one participant noted. However, positive comments were often peppered with concerns, as another participant demonstrates: “Some Millennials I work with are born leaders because of the way they present themselves. There are some who are probably as smart and as capable, but the way they present themselves is very immature.”

Another area of concern expressed by participants was the importance of that sense of evolving, of understanding the more subtle innuendoes of politics, relationships, and ways to get things done that come with experience and maturity. They found some Millennials were capable of it and others were not.

### ***Business Acumen***

Business acumen is defined here as understanding the “big picture” of the organization as a business. This involved understanding processes and business aspects such as budgeting and reading spread sheets as well as keeping accounts profitable and growing the business. It also meant competently solving problems, structuring teams, tolerating risks, building trusted relationships, being aware of the world around them and communicating in terms that leadership understands. Ultimately it involved prioritizing the good of the organization over self and being concerned about the welfare of the employees and the public good.

There was a general consensus that Millennials dislike and avoid process. “They don’t have that “deep sense of the underbelly of how a business works... administration and billing and timesheets and all the things that seem boring. [They don’t understand that] you’re driving the business forward.” Another participant said, “They think they are too exciting and too hip for that, but if it’s boring and you lack the understanding or the desire to understand, then why would I promote you?”

Participants alluded frequently to the importance of Millennials developing an understanding of the “big picture” to be considered for promotion. Several expressed concerns about Millennials’ myopic tendency to prioritize their own personal good over the good of the organization. “They’re worried about what’s best for them,” one participant stated, “not about the company.” Others expressed concern about the Millennials’ tendency to focus on their immediate team as opposed to the unit or organization. As long as their team was successful, they did not see problems other teams might have as relevant to them. “I’m just concerned that the people who run my company one day will not be interested and concerned about the people under them. I just don’t know that we have a generation coming up that’s thinking about others.”

Several participants stressed the importance of building an internal network. “It’s important to me that they have that network of trust of the people around them,” one participant said. Other participants identified the importance of having an ability to handle challenging relationships internally and externally. “You can impress me by

working through a challenging relationship with somebody who is a senior person in the organization,” one senior participant said. “But [to do so with] somebody you don’t report to—that’s a true stand-out.” He noted doing so was a “primary factor” for promoting some of his people.

Another participant spoke about an organization run by all Millennials. “They had no structure to teach their employees, no file sharing to share information. They completely operated separately. There was no communication across the board. As a result, it took a significant amount of time to reorganize the business and turn a profit. In a company where everyone is under 30, someone “has to figure out who has the strengths to make things work for the business to run,” one said. “Someone has to initiate communication strategies.”

### **Work Ethics**

The way Millennials conceptualize work and their relationship to it played an important role in how participants evaluated the leadership potential of Millennials. These issues involve loyalty, initiative, and drive and ambition.

**Loyalty.** A sense of commitment to the organization also plays an important role in promotion considerations. Promotions affect loyalty: Receiving a title and/or promotion increases commitment and lack of promotions decreases loyalty, according to some participants. Grooming an employee to move up in an organization involves a significant investment of time, money, and trust. Several participants noted that Millennials do not understand the responsibility promotion entails or the benefits of learning in place. “They don’t understand you can hone your skills, you can make better decisions, all without advancing,” a participant said. Another participant illustrated the important role staying in place plays on an individual’s ability to be promoted:

[Their] ability to progress has always been based on...‘I did that job so when do I get to move on to the next job?’ No, do that job until it progresses from being something you can do to something you do through intuition. It needs to become part of your DNA. Just because you’ve done it three times doesn’t mean you’re proficient at it. Do it ten times successfully. There is that ‘I should be unbridled by any sort of incremental career progression’...They don’t see horizons in one company for that long.

**Initiative.** This theme focused on how Millennials initiated both doing and learning to do different tasks, learned “organically” on their own, and focused on personal growth and development. Participants expressed concern about the lack of initiative Millennials display: They did not answer the phone when it rang unless they were told to do so, they asked if they *had* to be at work when meetings were not scheduled, if they completed their assignment they did not offer to help a co-worker with theirs, they came in late yet quit on time even when their tasks were not completed, they checked their personal messages during staff and client meetings, they avoided tasks that were menial or not interesting such as putting paper in an empty printer, and other similar

behaviors. Participants talked about how this generation was much less likely to pick up on subtle cultural clues, and how they had to resort to imposing structure on their employees by creating checklists, assigning specific duties to be done, and articulating rules in offices where the culture had always been the guide. “I have found putting deadlines on them and being upfront with expectations is the only way to push them to be more ambitious,” another said. Participants used words like “myopic, narcissistic, and impatient” to describe Millennials. There are exceptions. One participant, for example, told the story of a Millennial in her organization who rose very quickly to become a senior associate because she *acted* like a senior associate. She was task oriented and took initiative instead of asking what comes next.

**Drive and Ambition.** Unlike their predecessors, Millennials enter the workplace expecting promotion will follow quickly and happen often. Every focus group and both interviewees expressed frustration with the “entitlement” mentality of Millennials. “They’re interested in the title and whatever money comes with it instead of becoming the best that they can be,” one participant said and others agreed. Participants also agreed that the title is more important than the money for many Millennials.

Agency participants in particular noted that agencies tend to be more horizontal than vertical so constant advancement is not possible, yet they realize Millennials are not satisfied if they are not being promoted frequently. “They will reach a point that the only way to succeed is to have my job and I own the agency...I just create new titles to motivate them. Others know they are bogus, but it works,” one participant explained.

“I think there’s this incredible sense of entitlement and in a negative way I think agencies have accommodated it. Agencies have become very informal in their atmosphere and in their culture,” one participant said. That trend, another participant argued, is detrimental to many agencies:

I think [Millennials] are less willing to put in the work that it takes...in our agency we are somewhat breeding a culture of people who aren’t good...And I think we’ve allowed ourselves to accommodate them. They get promoted because they do one thing. We have to find somebody else who does the other thing better.

One participant said he looks “for someone who takes initiative” when he considers promotion. Others added they appreciate employees who are competent in their work, look for opportunities to learn through trainings and educational opportunities, volunteer for responsibilities outside those required, are willing to share knowledge and teach skills, and exhibit other leadership characteristics. As one participant explained:

Specifically I like people who want to do better. ..[For promotion to happen they need to be] thinking more strategically than the day I hired them...I’m expecting them not to just execute the event but to help us think strategically about how to do it better...They’re not just executing the news release that was handed to them, they’re now thinking about [the pitch]...

they've taken what they've learned and they can add another level of sophistication to their thinking.

Participants felt the older Millennials were providing evidence of leadership abilities and are already being promoted into management positions, but as they do there are a number of new concerns. Participants noted that for some it becomes a power trip and others find it hard to deal with peers. "Peers often find it hard to deal with one of their own as a manager—it somehow seems to violate the team ethic," a participant said. They have unrealistic expectations, like the story about a Millennial who thought he no longer had to work when he was promoted—he just had to "oversee everyone else's work." As one participant pointed out, "They don't seem to understand that leadership is more than a position, it is a responsibility to those you lead...by becoming a leader you're taking on more and you're looking out for the welfare of not only your clients but everyone else as well. I worry a lot about them [Millennials] actually handling that. Another participant added, "And not just sitting on high and commanding. I've seen it in a couple of them where we [tell them they are] going to be a supervisor now, and they relish on 'You need to get this to me' (bang with the fist) and 'this is the deadline' (bang with the fist)." Another added, "I see that all the time," and the others agreed.

While there are outstanding Millennials, participants pointed to some pronounced differences in performance linked to work ethic. "I think about the Millennials I've worked with and I have these very extreme instances. I don't have anybody in the middle—a nice, hard-working Millennial." Another participant noted, "We believe there are A's and C's, and there are no B's." The ones who are good, others noted, are worth accommodating in order to keep them.

### **Collaboration and Social Media**

Throughout the discussion, two prevailing themes were often interjected as a qualifier when describing less desirable traits: collaboration and social media expertise, which were viewed as strengths.

The tone of the participants was uplifted when they spoke about the unique collaborative disposition Millennials bring to the workplace. "Public relations is about team work," one said, and another noted that Millennials "excel in the area." They were enthusiastic about Millennials' desire to work in teams and to understand "that it is possible for everybody to be successful without someone having to lose." While most felt it was an admirable, "enviable" trait, some saw teamwork "as a way for weaker team members to hide in plain sight."

Social media expertise also recurred throughout the discussions. While participants recognized Millennial's mastery of social media as a tool, they also expressed concern about the Millennials' lack of understanding about the importance of strategy, accountability, and cost in working with the genre. As one participant explained:

They attach to the medium as opposed to the message...You think they can really get into the social media until they realize that it has to have a

message or match a process. Within six months, except for a few good ones, most of them aren't even interested in it anymore...We're always the ones who understand strategy, who understand which audience the Facebook...Twitter page is reaching and the way to phrase the messages for those channels. That just takes their enthusiasm right out it."

Another participant addressed the issue from the perspective of the client who hires an agency employee to run the specialty in-house: "The client thinks they are getting a fully developed, ready-for-management employee. While the employee may be competent in a specialized area, they may not have an understanding of the big picture or the ability to handle management responsibilities."

### **Desired Characteristics**

The characteristics participants use to identify and cultivate future leaders were also of concern in this study. Participants provided a substantial list of tangible characteristics that included a diverse skill set and specialized skills that include written, visual, and oral competencies. The ability to pitch media and clients, to maintain a detail orientation while still being creative, and to understand how to create and manage social media were important as were the ability to strategize, access data, and conduct research at all levels.

Participants also said they look for those who demonstrate ability, drive, and initiative, and are self-driven and task oriented. The willingness to work harder, take on more, and do menial tasks when necessary were also valued. Seeking and responding thoughtfully to constructive criticism, taking responsibility for their actions, and questioning the status quo with the intent of exploring new solutions and possibilities were assets as is the ability to build credible relationships inside and outside the organization. Being optimistic, collaborative and team oriented, and able to *lead* a team as opposed to micromanaging it were very important as was a willingness to share knowledge. Participants said they also look for people who displayed self-confidence, creativity, and the ability to see connections others do not see and to think outside the box. They also consider keeping work/life in balance, embracing diversity, handling change, and being citizens of the world as important characteristics as well.

### **Limitations**

This is a qualitative study and therefore it cannot be generalized. However, the intent of the study was to surface concerns and observations that can later be tested for generalizations. Since participants were primarily PRSA members, future studies should include more diversity to represent the U.S. public relations labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) suggest that the "key" to working with Millennials will be to interact "with a desire to understand, rather than with the aim of criticizing how Millennials are different" (p. 235). Due to the reality that there are not enough Gen Xers

to fill the leadership positions Boomers are vacating, Millennials are needed to step up sooner than previous generations. Older practitioners are expecting Millennials to have the maturity and knowledge that many of them admit they themselves did not have until later in their careers. Participants also alluded to the importance of that sense of “evolving, of understanding the more subtle innuendoes of politics and relationships” and “ways to get things done that come with experience and maturity.” As one participant observed, “I am not sure I was any better when I first entered public relations. Isn’t it about maturity? Didn’t we have to mature to be in the high-level positions? We are pushing them [Millennials] so quickly.”

Expertise, especially in social media, creates a conundrum for some young professionals. There was an underlying tension in the focus groups between specialization and big picture thinking. Millennials are hired to perform a needed function such as social media production, and, in the process, are marginalized in the organization to that area. Yet focus group participants expressed frustration with their young employees because they are unaware of the larger business-of-the-business framework in which public relations functions. As one participant pointed out, employers want Millennial’s specialized ability to provide content and technical skills for social media but they also expect Millennials to have the ability to manage social media—a skill that requires experience and additional training. Finally, they want Millennials to have the ability to strategize, which becomes another contradiction: Millennials have not been exposed to the “big picture” because they are in a specialized and narrow function, yet strategy requires broader knowledge of the organization.

While Millennials in public relations exhibit many of the general characteristics of their generation as discussed in the literature review, the participants placed the greatest focus on the needs that are uniquely specific to the public relations profession: Public relations professionals must be good communicators on every level: nonverbal, verbal (written and spoken), interpersonal, group, and mass. They must also be groomed in every aspect of their person and capable of being not only skilled in the craft of public relations but also of thinking critically and strategically and being able to build relationships at every level. Because communication, and especially interpersonal communication, is one of the weakest characteristics of Millennials as confirmed in the literature and by the focus groups, and because they will be called upon to lead without the advantage of the long preparation and socialization time of their predecessors, the weight of responsibility falls on both the Millennials and those who manage and mentor them.

Millennials have been raised to be leaders [Pollak, 2014, 2015]. They exhibit many of the characteristics found in both the literature and focus groups. The focus here has been on their weaknesses because that is what the profession most needs to address. There was a general consensus in the groups that this generation does not respond to traditional management. Ironically, Boomers and Gen Xers are both the managers and the parents of the Millennials. As pointed out by Roy Schroer (2008), assistant vice president for recruitment at Union Pacific Corp., “We need to get the Boomers to recognize that they should treat young workers as they handled their children in the

home environment” (as seen in Alsop, p. 46). Millennials have been nurtured, and they respond to nurturing. Some participants even referred to their role as “parental.” Those who understand this phenomenon may have greater success in developing Millennials’ leadership potential. Millennials are unconsciously engaging in reverse mentoring with their current managers: The relationship is symbiotic. Managers are developing their personal leadership skills as they learn to manage Millennials, and together they are becoming leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The leadership model is evolving into a combination of Service Leadership (Balda and Mora, 2011), with its emphasis on relational leadership, and Transformational Leadership. This evolving model needs further research.

The focus in public relations leadership research has been top down and needs to be tempered by bottom up. In addition to their collaborative nature and competence in social media identified in this study, Millennials are educated in public relations, have unlimited knowledge at their fingertips, are bright, optimistic and personable, but they need to strengthen several key areas including those identified here: personal qualities, communication skills, business acumen and work ethics. The workplace has made a number of accommodations (see, for example, Gallicano et al., 2012), and will need to make more. Communication is the common denominator for every organization, and expertise in it is increasingly crucial in the global environment.

Although many of the concerns surfaced here are found in the literature across professions, they have particular importance for the future when applied to public relations: Few professions will have the impact public relations will have, and those who are competent leaders will determine the success of every aspect of life. Millennials in public relations will be leading the way.

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**SHIRLEY SERINI, PH.D. APR, PRSA FELLOW**, is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts at Valdosta State University. **Email:** saserini [AT] valdosta.edu

**DIANE S. KRIDER, PH.D., APR**, is an associate professor in the Department of Communication & Dramatic Arts at Central Michigan University. **Email:** kride1ds [AT] cmich.edu