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Teaming with Young Guns

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It's tough to attract and retain great employees — at any level and of any age. With unemployment low, skilled employees often have their pick of positions. The combined effects of digitization and pervasive social networking equip potential employees with insights into an organization's inner workings before they even apply. Many websites and blogs, such as [Glassdoor](#) and [Vault](#), publish unvarnished, anonymous insights on the nature of a company's work, as well as its policies, benefits, and culture. Certain industries and specific firms are able to dominate the war for talent, easily snapping up the best and brightest. But even at those golden firms, keeping high-potential employees is increasingly difficult.

The challenge is particularly acute when it comes to finding and keeping the cohort that has become the largest component of the workforce: millennials. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), there are 53.5 million people in the U.S. who were born between 1981 and 1997. And they arrive at the office with a specific set of attributes and goals. They expect to glide up the corporate ladder, place a higher priority on engaging in fulfilling work, and have significantly shorter attention spans than employees of prior generations. If and when it becomes apparent to a millennial that one of these expectations will not be met, she is quick to look elsewhere. According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), in 2014, the median tenure for workers age 25 to 34 years in the U.S. was just over three years. In his book *The First 90 Days*, [Michael D. Watkins](#), a professor at IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland, argues that companies don't start to make money on

new employees until after they've been employed for 6.2 months. That leaves less than 2.5 years, on average, to get the best out of millennial hires.

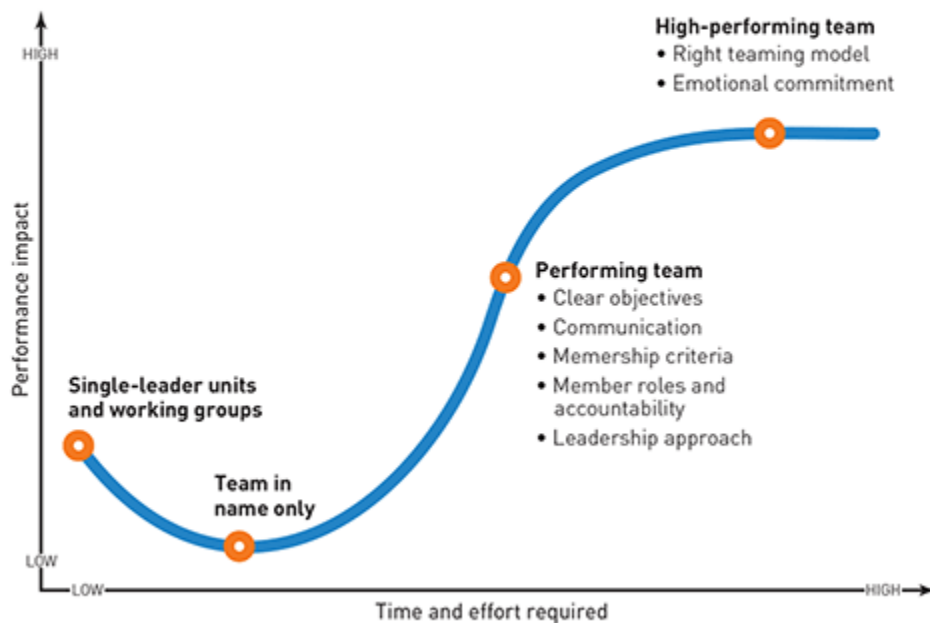
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Companies are addressing these issues by rethinking their recruiting and people strategies, both by offering rotational programs to appeal to highly qualified candidates and by boosting pay and offering an impressive array of perks. But there is a far simpler and more pragmatic solution that individual managers can try that may have more success than bonuses and free snacks. It's all about teams.

Working as a team is a concept that is much used but rarely defined. Here's a useful definition: As depicted in the exhibit below, a "performing team" is a group of people that typically have a common purpose and have clear performance goals, mutual accountability, complementary skills, and, importantly, shared leadership roles. The highest-performing teams also adjust their teaming models depending on the situation, have a strong emotional commitment to the team's purpose, and are invested in one another's success.

Exhibit: Team performance curve

Companies that can organize teams effectively realize significant improvements in performance.



Source: Strategy&



Focusing on the following three attributes of effective teaming can help companies appeal to younger workers:

- **Shared Leadership.** Shared leadership roles means that leadership switches seamlessly from one member of the team to another, depending on the situation. Everyone, from the summer intern through the managing director, has the opportunity to lead at specific points in time. This makes for an exciting work environment and gives younger workers, many of whom expect to scale the corporate ladder quickly, an opportunity to contribute and lead just like their managers do. Who needs early promotion when you already are calling the shots? Additionally, the opportunity to lead the team ensures that millennials are visible in the organization, which enables them more easily to display progress. For high performers, shared leadership roles may actually result in faster promotion.

You may have heard the buzz about [holacracy](#). Companies like Zappos and Medium have embraced this innovative way of organizing, which removes managers in organizations entirely and replaces them with layers of circles. But we are not advocating the end of managers. Instead, we believe that managers can and should hand off elements of their roles to subordinates, giving team members the opportunity to lead in areas where they have expertise. The manager simultaneously should act as a facilitator — easing the leadership transition from one member of the team to another — and as a key leader who understands the team’s motivations and how to help each team member grow and develop.

Leaders can instill shared leadership on their teams by setting expectations that leadership will shift based on the team’s focus. When the team needs to work together to troubleshoot a technical issue, rather than calling and leading a working session herself, the leader should empower the expert on the team to own the issue, schedule the meeting, guide the discussion, and manage the next steps that result from the meeting. If the team’s current way of working is drastically different from this approach, it may take some time and practice before everyone feels comfortable.

- **Strong emotional commitment.** Millennials are seeking fulfillment from their work, and fulfillment comes from an emotional commitment to the organization, team, or individual’s purpose. It may seem that instilling an emotional commitment is easy when your organization is bringing clean water to undeveloped regions of India, or producing an app that delights its hundreds of millions of users. But years of research make clear that leaders of *all* organizations can draw upon their employees’ emotional commitment by instilling a sense of shared purpose.

On a visit to the NASA space center in the early 1960s, the story goes, President Kennedy spoke to a man sweeping up in one of the buildings. “What’s your job here?” asked Kennedy. “Well, Mr. President,” the janitor replied, “I’m helping to put a man on the moon.” Apocryphal or not, the story reminds us that there is almost always a way to connect to meaningful elements of our work.

Leaders can aid this process by connecting with their team’s purpose on their own. As they set the mission, leaders must explain, repeatedly, why the team’s purpose is important. Leaders also should take pains to understand the motivations of each team member so they can identify the components of the purpose that will light a spark — it

will be different for different people. Finally, they should help the team learn to connect smaller tasks to the bigger picture in order to embed the purpose in tasks, goals, and projects.

- **Be flexible.** High-performing teams adjust teaming models depending on the situation. In his early work, our colleague [Jon Katzenbach](#) argued that teams should be used strategically depending on the situation. Team structures and ways of working should vary depending on the nature of the project or assignment and the time horizon involved. In an emergency or when decisions need to be made quickly, it might make more sense to work as a single-leader unit. At other times, a working group, established for information sharing, is more suitable. Having a variety of working arrangements will appeal to millennials, who tend to have shortened attentions spans and appreciate a more dynamic environment at work.

At Strategy&, our work is largely project-based, and we work with a variety of colleagues from diverse backgrounds for relatively short periods of time. As a result, and to maximize the effectiveness of our teams, we instituted a process called Project Closed Loop. It consists of a series of conversations throughout the project life cycle that help teams set expectations and align on group and individual goals. We use these meetings to decide how we will work together effectively. For each situation we anticipate, we discuss which teaming structures we will use. The result is a predictably dynamic work environment that stays interesting without becoming confusing or chaotic.

Millennials have an abundance of talent to offer organizations as they move through the ranks in the workforce. They are capable, technologically savvy, and have the desire to derive significant meaning from their work. Managers must play a key role in harnessing and directing that energy — and a deliberate, fit-for-purpose teaming environment can be a powerful tool. Companies that embed this way of working into the teams in their organization will attract new talent and create an environment in which the most promising employees want to make meaningful contributions. In time, they also will drive better business outcomes.