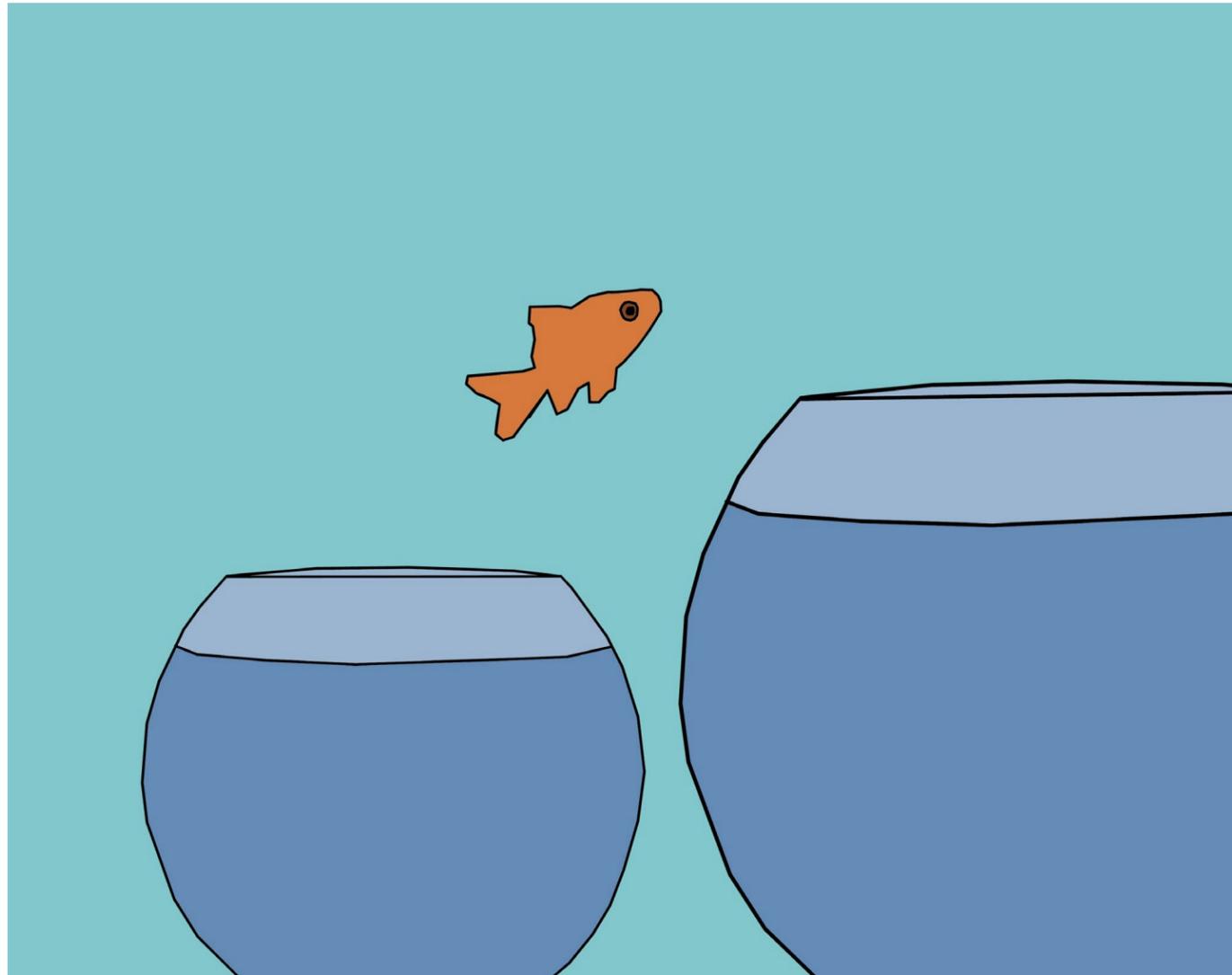


# BUILDING HEALTHCARE'S NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS



If you listen to the water-cooler chatter these days, baby boomers are living with some broad generalizations about millennials. Descriptors include: social-media obsessed, impatient, narcissistic, and lacking stick-to-itiveness. They want to have fun, travel, and rain on our parade because they know better.

After working on a project that allowed me to probe the experiences and aspirations of twenty-nine millennials, I now challenge these views and hope a better understanding will allow us to “set the table” for our next generation of leaders. As with all generalizations, we can always find some case that supports the story, but the overall take is misguided and incomplete.

*At My Pace: Twenty Somethings Finding Their Way* is the result of this project in which men and women in their twenties (the end of the millennial era) wrote candid pieces that revealed their coming of age and the lessons absorbed along the way. Those essays, along with a survey they took, shed light on their inner workings.

An accurate understanding of millennials will help us to cultivate the next generation of leaders. To that end, I address three

questions which are instructive. Namely:

- How do twenty-somethings like to learn?
- How do twenty-somethings like to execute?
- What motivates twenty-somethings to achieve?

Continuous learning, striving to beat goals, and reluctance to easily accept “no” are good traits for leaders in training.

## HOW TWENTY-SOMETHINGS LIKE TO LEARN

Twenty-somethings place a high value on learning, though their preferred methods differ from most baby boomers. Having grown up in a gig economy, millennials believe that building their personal brand will keep them competitive and employed. Adding new skills is an important part of the equation.

My survey data shows millennials prefer to learn through *doing* (rated 9.2 on a scale of 1 to 10, low to high), but *the internet* and *learning through peers* (both rated 7.9) play pivotal roles. *Managers* as a source of learning were still important (7.7) but were viewed as too busy and more focused on organizational battles. *Coursework* was near the bottom (6.6 rating) and viewed as table stakes.

Respondents explained that peers are particularly valuable because they provide first-hand experience, along with more time and empathy. Simply put, “The information sticks better,” said one contributor.

These preferences should be incorporated into building an organization’s learning culture. Action-centered projects (“learning by doing”), and collaborative learning should feature prominently. Managers will morph to being more of an enabler than a provider of knowledge.

## HOW TWENTY-SOMETHINGS LIKE TO EXECUTE

Baby boomers grew up in an environment of “marching orders” where we assumed managers knew best. We executed to plan and worked our way up the ladder. Millennials don’t assume we know best, and the ladder is wobbly at best.

Before executing anything, twenty-somethings want context and understanding, so they consider how best to meet identified goals. I coined the expression “anchored with room to roam” meaning, “Help me feel rooted by explaining the objectives, and then give me freedom to act.”

This can be problematic for baby boomers. How much room is needed? Do we get to weigh in? Personalizing the work product is important, but so is making sure the organization’s needs are being met. It is a delicate dance.

How does “anchored with room to roam” work in a tightly regulated industry such as healthcare? My conversations with healthcare professionals confirmed the latitude to personalize work is equally sought there.

A social worker described managing someone who was suicidal. The hospital’s protocol is to get the patient straight to the ER, which she did, but she added, “My style, my tone, the way I explained things and delivered the patient reflected me.” Her conclusion? “I can do it my way and stay within protocol.” Similarly, a nurse practitioner tending to high-risk asthma patients explained how she is using her personal experience to rethink a protocol for refilling prescriptions. She wants a tighter limit on the number of refills allowed, which she believes will result in patients calling more frequently to engage. “While it might create additional work, it is also better medicine,” she says. She is now working with the hospital to adjust the protocol.

A pediatric intern offered a slightly different perspective. “Within the hospital, we practice evidence-based medicine so there is no room for personalization,” he commented. “However, I get to express myself when it comes to healthcare advocacy. As a pediatrician, I engage the community in various forums because early intervention is so important.” He gives talks at local libraries and schools. “For me, becoming a physician was about making a difference. My role as advocate allows me to,” he explains.

Cultivating the next generation of leaders will require us to loosen the reigns as contributors add their personal stamp to increase ownership and meaning in the job.

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## WHAT MOTIVATES TWENTY-SOMETHINGS

Whether precipitated by the transparency of social media, or a malaise about society today, twenty-somethings care deeply about *mission* and *people* when it comes to their work. This is confirmed by stories and survey data. *Mission and people* both rated 8.8 in importance, whereas *compensation* and *fun* rated 6.5 and 6.3 respectively. These preferences are good news for healthcare organizations whose mission has always been about improving people's lives. Many of us were propelled into healthcare because of our idealism, so the leap from us to them shouldn't be that hard.

Yet as we prepare to pass the baton, there is trepidation because we know the next generation will lead differently. How will they lead, and how can we help? Maybe we start by recognizing generational differences. Can we embrace "room to roam" with its potential to add creativity to problem solving? Can we restructure our learning environment with more peer contribution? Can we work together to define an organization's mission in a way that feels authentic and purposeful to a millennial's ears? Most importantly, can we do the hard work of building a strong bridge of communication between generations?

Millennials will learn from us in their own way and time, but we can also learn from them. Embracing change and keeping our ears and our mind open will help pave the way as we grow our new leaders.

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