

Gen Robert E. Hogaboom Leadership Essay Contest 2018: First Place

# Leading Post-Millennials

Moving into post-modern warfare

by 1stLt Joe Work

**“H**ow would you define the latest generation to enter the Marine Corps?”

This question was posed to a large group of officers and SNCOs at a staff meeting I attended last year. Invariably, professional military education about leadership will eventually devolve into the older generations lamenting the difficulties of dealing with junior members.

*“Selfish. Lazy. Entitled. Spoiled. Self-Obsessed. Technology Addicted.”*

Millennials and post-millennials are consistently branded with these qualities by older generations in both the civilian workforce and the military. Countless books and articles have been written to teach Baby Boomers and Generation X how to deal with their youngest employees, and a quick Google search of “managing millennials” produces over 100,000 results. There are an unlimited number of anecdotes from business and military leaders espousing the severe vulnerabilities and downfalls of the technology-dependent generations. They spend too much time in their rooms. They are less social in the battalion. They spend most of the day attached to their phones. They refuse to put in the work required to be successful. As senior leaders struggle to convey the same love of country and Corps to their youngest warfighters, they are quick to assume that the latest generations are worse Marines because they are inherently different. However, as the Internet age continues to dramatically shift warfare, the Marine Corps depends on the

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successful recruitment and retention of a generation that can meet the elusive challenges of new domains. Although we have spent billions of dollars creating expertise in terrorism, our leadership must look toward the *2018 National Defense Strategy*’s emphasis on “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, as the primary concern in U.S. national security.”<sup>1</sup> Leading post-millennial Marines will require more effort than banning cellphones at formation or blindly restricting social media usage.

## The Millennial Battalion Commander

While most of the professional world continues to grapple with leading millennials in the workplace, the military’s primary recruiting targets are shifting focus to the post-millennials. The time for adaptation to millennials is largely gone because of the youthful requirements and early retirements of the military compared to the civilian workforce. When millennials first arrived on the scene, aging managers struggled to deal with young employees who were seen as too ambitious, technology addicted, and too easily disappointed. The participation-trophy generation has even been accused of being the American

military’s “Achilles’ Heel.”<sup>2</sup> Today, millennials are rapidly approaching 40-years-old, the oldest being born in 1981.<sup>3</sup> More likely than not, the Marine Corps has several millennial sergeants major and lieutenant colonels. As millennials begin to lead at the battalion level, post-millennials are becoming the primary targets for our recruiters in high schools and colleges nationwide. The post-millennials, or Generation Z, will produce a similar myriad of confusion among older leaders who refuse to take the time to empathize with their defining characteristics.

## Generation Z and The Great Recession

According to the Pew Research Center, Generation Z’s oldest members were born in 1997,<sup>4</sup> making them likely too young to remember 9/11. In terms of trends, they have a few key differences from millennials. Generation Z’s members may not have grown up with a mother and father in their first marriage; the nuclear family construct has shifted significantly in the last twenty years. Many of them are products of households with different blends: multiple marriages, same-sex parents, or single parents.<sup>5</sup> As children, the Great Recession significantly impacted them, causing them to be more risk averse than their predecessors. In fact, the Great Recession was likely the most formative event of their lifetime—rather than 9/11 for millennials—and caused many to highly value financial security.<sup>6</sup> However, members of Generation Z were the first to grow up with social media and



**Generations are changing. How we teach and train them will need to change as well.** (Photo by Cpl Tessa Watts.)

smartphones from a young age; many of them had cellphones by the age of thirteen.<sup>7</sup> These digital natives' lives are starkly contrasted with the digital migrants of previous generations.

### Leading Post-Millennials

MCWP 6-11 reserves two large sections, "Adaptability" and "Innovation," for overcoming challenges as leaders of Marines. As our Nation pushes further into post-modern warfare, we will continue to see a surging need for the rapid acquisition of new technologies to keep up with pacing threats. The Internet will continue to proliferate technology and capabilities to countries and groups that were previously out of reach. Cyber effects will enable an expanding number of threat vectors that will require digital natives to engineer innovative solutions. The ability to adapt and innovate quickly will make or break success for many Marine Corps leaders in the future, requiring that "leaders listen to their subordinates and that a two-way communication system is maintained."<sup>8</sup>

Leadership requires the ability to look at a set of traits and find the opportunities to amplify the positive while molding the negative. It is easy to degrade Generation Z for its attachment to phones or lack of attention spans, but genuine leaders will find ways to

guide its development by utilizing its defining characteristics. While there are inarguable negative traits to each generation, leaders at all levels should seek to see how Generation Z's attributes can positively impact the Corps.

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### Cultural Awareness

Generation Z's broader definition of family allows its members to empathize more with people from other cultures and backgrounds. This is compounded by the Internet, which has given them an on-demand portal into alternate belief systems and points of view. They are less susceptible to growing up in a bubble where one way of life and one set of opinions dominate the culture. Social media such as Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube encourage viewers to expand the content they consume into other countries, cultures,

and regions. While Baby Boomers and Generation X learned about Iraq in geography class and on the news, Generation Z can subscribe to YouTube channels of Iraqis explaining their culture, religion, and worldviews firsthand. As warfare in the Middle East continues to shift toward advising and assisting, culture familiarity and awareness will retain utmost importance. In the United States, there has been a 50 percent increase in the multiracial youth population since 2000. As the world continues to blend races and cultures, the average young person will become increasingly more aware of worldviews besides his own.

Leaders can choose to harness Generation Z's advanced cultural awareness to amplify programs such as the Regional, Culture and Language Familiarization Program, which teaches Marines through text-based lessons to "ensure that Marines are globally prepared."<sup>9</sup> The Corps should also consider creating a more interpersonal, technology-based program utilizing social media and personal testimony to educate Marines. While we emphasize that every defining characteristic shrinks in comparison to earning the title of Marine, our battalions should recognize and celebrate our cultural differences. While some older generations have struggled to see past their own religion or ethnicity, leaders of Marines must confront their own cultural and social biases. In order to "ensure that Marines are globally prepared," we must be globally accepting.

### Leveraging Social Media

While there are negative effects to social media usage, the ease and speed of gaining information has created a more learned generation than its predecessors. While post-millennials are often accused of being lazy, they primarily seek speed and reliability in their forms of communication. Post-millennials are most accustomed to receiving communication via social media or messaging platforms. While most senior leaders see the attachment of smartphones as a negative aspect, tactful leaders will understand that each Marine has a constant line of communication on him that can speed



up transitions and shorten the time it takes to spread information. While we remain careful to maintain operational security, social media platforms should be engaged by all levels of command to inform Marines on a fast, wide-spread basis. With a careful understanding of public affairs rules, commands can utilize social media accounts to create better situational awareness for Marines as well as their families. Various units in the Marine Corps succeed at using social media, but its pervasive nature throughout every unit should have each commander considering how to exploit the opportunity.

### Six to Eight Seconds

Post-millennials are quick to decipher whether something warrants their attention. With a vast library of digital media at their fingertips on a daily basis, they have become accustomed to quickly knowing whether a video, television show, or conversation is worth their time and attention. The average Gen-



*Post-millennials are quick to decipher whether something warrants their attention. (Photo by Cpl Ronald Parker.)*



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(U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Justin Bolling)  
"The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement."

eration Z child will see over 200,000 marketing messages by the time he is 15, and his attention spans is lower than the average goldfish at 6–8 seconds.<sup>11</sup> Leaders of young Marines have less than eight seconds to persuade a listening ear. Traditional methods of monologue speeches, such as the hour-long weekend safety brief, will be lost to the youngest ranks on the formation. Teaching the same annual training material in the exact same way as last year will result in most of the room zoning out. These are inefficient uses of time and only serve to erode a Marine's interest in paying attention. Members of Generation Z are able to personalize their entire online experience; they pick and choose exactly what they want to see by following and subscribing to specific content and curators and are quick to filter out the generic mass-marketing messages. Every day, they gain experience recognizing authenticity and originality. If a Marine pulls out his cell phone during a class, he is criticized as disrespectful. However, leaders of Marines should consider the relevance of the content that is supposed to capture their attention. Is it personalized and direct? Does it paint a clear picture of why it matters to each person? Or does it seem generic, like a marketing email? Formations and announcements should be prompt and relevant. Leaders should strive for authenticity in their speech and actions because their Marines will quickly see through any fake attempts at sincerity. Formations serve the important purpose of keeping Marines informed, but more often than not, leaders take advantage of formations by making Marines wait and listen to a variety of announcements that do not apply to the whole group.

Generation Z provides a unique perspective into the new domains of warfare that previous generations are not equipped to understand. Post-modern warfare will require senior leaders to listen to the ideas of junior members, who carry a vastly different perspective of major technological advances that threaten to leave the U.S. military behind. The main challenge for Marine Corps leaders is to adapt to a new generation without losing the traditions and ideals that make the Corps



**Leadership in the near future will require adaptability and innovation inspired by the lowest levels.** (Photo by Sgt Justin Bopp.)

unique. While the Corps should not stray far from its founding principles, leadership in the near future will require adaptability and innovation inspired by the lowest levels. Before we expect our Marines to follow us into any battle, we should ensure that they feel comfortable to come into our offices. Winning battles in the future will depend on our “willingness to deviate from the normal, accepted practices—even from doctrine—if that is what it takes.”<sup>12</sup>

*“How would you define the latest generation to enter the Marine Corps?”*

*“Collective. Diverse. Future Focused. Smart. Realistic. Technology Enabled.”*

#### Notes

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5. Staff, “The American Family Today,” Pew Research Center, (Washington, DC: December 2015).

6. Staff, *Building a Financial Future through the Lens of Generation Z*, (Manassas, VA: Lincoln Financial Group 2016).

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10. Deep Patel, “5 Tips for Marketing to Generation Z,” *The Huffington Post*, (New York, NY: 2017).

11. *MCWP 6-11*.

12. *MCWP 6-11*.

