

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Retaining the Millennials:  
How Excessive Praise Produces Failure**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The Millennial generation is the future of law enforcement in America and across the globe. With Millennials having already surpassed Generation X as the largest percentage of the U.S. labor force, law enforcement agencies that are able to hire the best and brightest Millennial officers must modify their training and early supervisory practices to ensure the retention of what will be the future leaders of the profession. The position of the author is that excessive praise of a Millennial officer during training and immediately after their release from training will create an environment that is a recipe for failure, and trainers and supervisors should refrain from excessive praise.

Excessive praise during childhood has created a higher level of narcissism and a sense of entitlement in the Millennials. Continuing this faulty method of feedback during and after training will only contribute to officers that lack empathy, feel they are superior to others, believe they should receive unwarranted promotions or special assignments, and receive more disciplinary action taken against them as a result of a failure to take responsibility for their actions. The Millennial officer must be taught the nuances of the workplace and given a framework in which to operate.

Millennials want to learn, they want a challenge, and they want to be mentored and given guidance. Millennials recognize the fact that they have been told what they wanted to hear and are ready to move forward with the proper leadership. Once the methods of providing feedback have been properly modified, the Millennials can thrive and become the future leaders that law enforcement will need.

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## INTRODUCTION

Police officers are often referred to as a jurisdiction's "finest." While Popik (2004) attributes this moniker to a statement made in 1874 by New York City Police Chief George W. Matsell that he was going to make the New York Police Department the "finest in the world," one could posit that it has now come to mean that only the best and brightest are chosen to be police officers. In selecting the best and brightest to enter and become the future leaders of law enforcement in the United States, recruiters and hiring boards must make most, if not all, of their selections from the most recent generation to begin entering the workforce. In law enforcement today, three different generations represent the greatest percentage of officers: Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960), Generation X (born 1960-1980), and the Millennials (sometimes also referred to as Generation Y). This last generation, the Millennials, was born between 1980 and 2003, depending on the author.

The Millennials are a population of workers similar in size to that of the Baby Boomers, who are now nearing retirement age and leaving the workforce (McCafferty, 2003). At around 92 million workers according to the U.S. Census Bureau (as cited in Alsop, 2008) and three times the size of Generation X, the Millennials have now surpassed Generation X to become the largest group in the U.S. labor force at 53.5% (Pew Research Center, 2015). While much attention has been given to the recruitment and hiring of Millennial officers, the focus moving forward must be on their retention. In order to ensure the retention of Millennials in the profession of law enforcement, trainers and supervisors should refrain from the provision of excessive praise to new officers in training and during their first year released from training.

## POSITION

Although the Millennials represent the largest percentage of the labor force today, in recruiting Millennial police officers, the number of qualified applicants is getting smaller and smaller. A variety of things contribute to this, such as drug usage, criminal history, a lack of physical fitness, and simply a lack of desire to enter the law enforcement field (McCafferty, 2003). This fact makes retention of those applicants that are qualified even more important. The Millennials were raised in an era that promoted different values than any other generation. Their generation has been referred to as a narcissistic “Me Me Me Generation” by *Time* magazine (as cited in “Study says too much praise,” 2015). Millennials are often thought of as being lazy, needing instant gratification, disloyal, selfish, and spoiled (Hobart, 2008). Self-esteem is a desirable trait, in that the person has a high sense of self-worth and confidence in their own abilities, but do not hold themselves above other people (Self-esteem [Def.1], n.d.). Narcissistic people, on the other hand, combine an excessive sense of self-worth with the sense that they are better than other people. What is thought of as narcissism by some trainers and supervisors lacking understanding of the Millennial generation may simply be a high level of self-esteem; however, studies have shown that excessive praise can lead to narcissistic behavior (“Study says too much praise,” 2015), a fact that needs to be recognized by law enforcement trainers and supervisors and responded to appropriately.

According to a study conducted by San Diego State University’s Dr. Jean Twenge (as cited by Aspen Education Group, n.d.), of 16,400 students taking the Narcissistic Personality Inventory between 1982 and 2006, the number that scored

above average was nearly double in 2006 (at 65%) than in 1982. With a generation such as the Millennials already showing higher signs of narcissistic tendencies, social learning theory indicates that this behavior may be learned through being treated in a way that leads them to believe they are more deserving than others (“Study says too much praise,” 2015). Narcissistic people lack empathy (Aspen Education Group, n.d.), which is a personality trait that is contrary to what is desirable in law enforcement today. Over valuation and excessive praise of a person and their abilities is more likely to create the narcissistic personality trait in that person, according to a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (as cited in “Study says too much praise,” 2015).

In addition to creating a narcissistic personality, excessive praise may lead to, or perpetuate, the belief that because of their perceived superior abilities, the Millennial officer should be more quickly placed in higher level or more advanced positions. Part of the entitled Millennial mindset already contains the belief that they deserve a rapid career advancement schedule (Alsop, 2008). According to Dr. Antoine D. Moss (as cited by Conner, 2014), Millennials have been told since they were children that they could be whatever they wanted to be. No caveats were given to them regarding that philosophy other than a good education was the only necessity. The Millennial generation was raised in an era of “unprecedented levels of positive reinforcement and positive attention” (Thompson & Gregory, 2012, p. 241). With these levels of reinforcement, high levels of performance were not what achieved recognition, simply participating was enough to receive praise.

The Millennial generation's sense of entitlement stems in part from the fact that they have been protected from criticism and disappointment from the time they were small children. In a survey conducted by CareerBuilder.com (as cited in Alsop, 2008), more than 85% of hiring managers believe Millennials have the strongest sense of entitlement, with 56% of Millennials expecting to receive a promotion within one year. According to Buckingham and Buckingham (2012), 40% of Millennials surveyed believed that they should receive work promotions every two years, independent of any achievements or work ethic, and only 9% felt that promotions should be performance based. In contrast to these beliefs commonly held by Millennials, it takes an average of four years to be eligible for the first promotion to a low level supervisory rank in police departments (Wilson, Fan, & Rostker, 2010).

Departures from law enforcement due to disciplinary reasons or a failure to perform are additional reasons that excessive praise is a problem for the Millennial generation. Excessive praise propagates in the Millennial mind that they can do no wrong, which leads to a failure to take responsibility when a mistake is made (Aspen Education Group, n.d.). In law enforcement, the failure to take responsibility for one's actions is a key component that leads to disciplinary action. The public expects that the police in general, and individual officers in particular, will be held accountable for their actions (Stephens, 2011). According to Frost, Gottfredson, and Gottfredson (as cited in Wilson, Fan, & Rostker, 2010) a successful law enforcement career is dependent upon the ability to make the proper decisions with little oversight. When a Millennial believes that their decisions are above reproach, it is likely that a minimal amount of thought or effort will be put into the proper decision making process.

Performance measurements are a key element to how police supervisors and administrators can ascertain the effectiveness of officers, both seasoned and new. Law enforcement agencies in today's society are involved in much more than just responding to calls, including crime prevention, traffic safety, monitoring and preventing social unrest, and building community relationships (Davis, 2012). According to Newsweek (as cited in Alexander & Sysko, 2012, p. 64), many Millennials are of the opinion that simply "showing up" is enough to meet acceptable performance standards. The Millennial generation has been called a generation of slackers by some employers due to their apparent failure to realize the importance of high quality output in addition to simple effort (Alsop, 2008). Excessive praise of a Millennial leads them to believe that they have achieved an acceptable level of performance and they may not put forth any additional effort, regardless of what may actually be involved in effective police performance.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

In managing the Millennial generation, there is a belief that they are, in general, a disloyal group. Some research suggests that Millennials are prone to what is referred to as job-hopping (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). The Pew Research Center reported that 60% of Millennials have already changed jobs at least once, and 60% of employed Millennials found it "very unlikely" that they would remain with the same employer throughout their career (as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2012, p. 239). Millennials are characterized by a prolonged adolescence, leading to job-hopping as they live with their parents for financial support (Alsop, 2008). As a result, some law enforcement trainers and supervisors may believe it is unnecessary to modify training and evaluation



methods for new officers, since only a small percentage will stay with the agency long-term anyway.

Research shows, however, that the Millennial generation does not change jobs any more than previous generations. Data from the 1980's reveals that time in jobs for workers in their 20's is virtually identical to today (Casselman, 2015; Guo, 2014). Census Bureau data reveals that 25-34 year olds are averaging 3.2 years at a job as of 2012, versus 2.7 years at a job for the same demographic in 2002 (Guo, 2014). Law enforcement trainers and supervisors who fail to modify their style of feedback and supervision to meet the needs of the Millennial generation are ignoring the point made by Orrick that "people don't quit jobs, they quit bosses" (as cited in Wilson, 2010, p. 41). Fernandez, Hershatter and Epstein found that Millennials are actually are more engaged at work, have higher contentment levels, and are more loyal than Generation X employees (as cited in Keene & Handrich, 2010).

It is well documented that the Millennials need constant feedback in their job performance (Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009). Millennials have been raised with high praise, constant support, and immediate positive feedback (Buckingham & Buckingham, 2012). This leads many to believe that because the Millennials have been over praised their entire lives, a continuation of that is necessary for them to perform at an acceptable level. Hershatter and Epstein comment that Millennials are needy, constantly seek reassurance, and expect to have their ideas and complaints listened to by supervisors (as cited in Keene & Handrich, 2010).

Understanding and conceding that this need for constant and immediate feedback exists, it does not need to take the form of excessive praise. Many law

enforcement trainers and supervisors are accustomed to providing corrective feedback, which may seem like an attack to many Millennials (Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009). As such, the tendency may be to go too far in the opposite direction with positive feedback to eliminate that assumption of an attack. Leadership combined with clear and specific direction is what is desired by Millennials (Keene & Handrich, 2010). Although they have been raised with excessive praise and have been told that everything they do is amazing, this continued practice will only do damage to the Millennial's ability to succeed in the workplace and will do nothing to improve retention. Millennials are used to being told exactly what they need to do in order to succeed, while at the same time embracing the challenges handed to them. They desire knowledge and will respond to good management and leadership that understands how to meet their needs while meeting the needs of the department as well (Heathfield, n.d.).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

With a lack of interest in law enforcement as a career and a diminished number of qualified applicants, retention of those in the Millennial generation who do enter law enforcement should be of great concern to current law enforcement administrators. Millennials as a whole are not the lazy, disloyal, selfish, and spoiled group that they are often made out to be by previous generations. Narcissistic tendencies and a sense of entitlement are the result of a parenting style that excessively praised Millennial children. Praise must be carefully handed out to a Millennial in order to allow them to build self-esteem from hard work and achievement (Aspen Education Group, n.d.). In order to retain the Millennial officers that will become the future leaders of law enforcement, trainers and supervisors should ensure that the praise that they give

during and after training is measured. Where trainers and supervisors go wrong with Millennials is assuming that they know the basic skills of a work environment. Millennials do not understand the nuances of a hierarchical organization, and by excessively praising them, it is setting them up for failure.

The same generations (Baby Boomers and Generation X) that may decry Millennials as a lost cause in the workplace are responsible for creating them. Narcissism, a sense of entitlement, and a failure to take responsibility for their actions are the results of excessive praise during their upbringing and will only be exacerbated by trainers and supervisors continuing the cycle of excessive praise. Once Millennials are shown how to get past the damage that has been caused, they can be great employees. Millennials entering the workforce have not yet learned the same life lessons that Baby Boomers and those from Generation X learned as children. Millennials want to know the “right” answer because, in their mind, simply putting out the minimum effort to get that answer equals success. They do not yet understand that success comes not just from simple effort, but from high quality output as well.

Millennials are independent, diverse, technologically savvy, ambitious, and intelligent (Hobart, 2008). They have heard what is said about their generation and realize that they have been told what they wanted to hear during their entire upbringing. While Millennials are in training, they must be taught how to achieve their goals in a realistic manner for the agency. They must be provided with a path that includes standards indicating success and a general timeframe for reaching those targets in order to greatly reduce their chances of becoming disappointed and leaving the agency. Millennials are characterized as being job-hoppers, but in actuality they do not change

jobs any more often than previous generations did at their age. If, while they are in training, they are shown a framework for success and taught how to take that path, their response to that knowledge will be the indicator of their potential for longevity and success.

Millennials do need constant feedback, but they do not want feedback that is excessive and meaningless “feel-good” praise. They are a highly educated generation, and they seek leadership and guidance. They want to learn, they want a challenge, and they are willing to be mentored. Millennials desire feedback that builds on their strengths while acknowledging areas that can be improved upon (Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009). Myers and Sadaghiani pointed out that Millennials become committed to trainers and supervisors, and with proper feedback can become loyal, committed, and productive employees (as cited in Keene & Handrich, 2010). In order to ensure the retention of Millennials in the profession of law enforcement, trainers and supervisors should refrain from the provision of excessive praise to new officers in training and during their first year released from training. If trained properly, Millennials will become the future leaders needed and will do amazing things in law enforcement.

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