

4 Ways To Motivate Junior Attorneys To Bring Their Best

By **Stacey Schwartz** (April 3, 2024)

Could the associates you work with be more engaged? I'm guessing the answer is yes.

A recent Gallup article, titled "The New Challenge of Engaging Younger Workers," notes that while post-pandemic engagement trends vary widely across age generations, younger employees feel the most detached from their work and employers.[1]

This means that Generation Z employees — born between 1996 and 2010[2] — tend to feel less involved, committed and enthusiastic about work and the workplace than older generations.



Stacey Schwartz

The legal world is currently in the midst of a generational shift, as Gen Z steadily becomes a larger part of the workforce. Several studies by legal recruiting and advisory firm Major Lindsey & Africa highlighted this shift last year.[3]

The research found that, in addition to competitive compensation packages, Gen Z lawyers, as well as younger millennial lawyers, value purpose-driven work, flexibility and work-life balance.

The prospect of partnership and its financial rewards is not as desirable a carrot as it once was, and more junior lawyers than ever state they no longer aspire to a lengthy career in BigLaw.[4]

Putting the length of their BigLaw tenure aside, what will motivate these lawyers to bring their best while they are there? It starts with understanding their priorities and needs — and attending to them — even amid the pressures and stresses of a busy legal career.

To inspire young millennial and Gen Z lawyers to bring their best, consider these four key actions.

1. Let team members know they matter.

Let's start with the basics. It is well documented that employees, regardless of generation, are more committed, motivated, involved and productive when they feel valued — in other words, when you say or show that you appreciate them.[5]

This is easier said than done. It turns out managers regularly overestimate how much appreciation they convey. They mistakenly assume that reports know how they feel due to a cognitive bias called the illusion of transparency, the human tendency to overestimate the extent to which our feelings and mental states are known to others.[6]

Lawyers who understand what matters to Gen Z know that if they value the work product, they need to say it out loud. And they remind themselves to do so. The most motivated and committed associates work for lawyers who notice and show appreciation for day-to-day achievements, like initiative taken, status communicated, decisions thoughtfully made and deadlines met.

These lawyer leaders also listen, seek feedback and act on it. They take time to meet with the associates who work with them regularly and get to know them personally.

2. Help team members feel connected.

Those of us lucky enough to have a good friend at work know how a quick break and a good laugh are sometimes all we need to reignite our motivation.

There is research to back this up. According to Gallup research, workplace friendships are linked to increased productivity, profitability, job satisfaction and retention.[7]

Lawyer leaders who cultivate a sense of connection on their teams in today's hybrid law firm environment reap these benefits. How? They schedule time for their team to work together in the office, if that is not already a given, and arrange to have lunch as a team when they are there.

When working remotely, they check in regularly and encourage collaboration. And they know that nonwork social events send a signal that relationships matter. They invest time in a night of bowling with the team because they know that camaraderie benefits everyone, including their clients.

3. Offer a sense of agency.

It is well documented that lawyers value autonomy — i.e., a level of independence and decision-making authority — even more than the general public.[8] For young millennials and Gen Z, this is especially true when it comes to where and when work gets done.

According to hybrid work expert Paulyne Sombret, while "[m]illennials have paved the way for more flexibility and better work-life balance, Gen Z has decided to make it the new norm." [9]

In other words, they demand it. While more senior lawyers may balk at the way that Gen Z lawyers set boundaries, lawyers who get the best work from their teams make efforts to meet them where they are.

How? By paying close attention to an associate's performance and offering autonomy when it is earned. For example, a lawyer supervisor can be more flexible about an associate's work schedule, within the in-office expectations of the law firm, when they know they can count on that associate to be responsive to client demands, available when needed, proactive on their matters and attentive to deadlines.

Similarly, when high-performing lawyers inspire trust, good supervisors make efforts to include their input in decision making and delegate projects they can work on autonomously.

When lawyers pay attention to what team members care about, it motivates them to bring their best. And when they do, senior lawyers can delegate to them with confidence, everyone grows, and clients benefit.

4. Help team members to find meaning in their work.

Gen Z and young millennials are more purpose-driven than any previous generation.[10] But what gives them a sense of purpose? The best lawyer leaders ask.

They become curious about what provides energy and meaning to their team, and they use coaching questions to find out, such as:

- What social issues do you care about?
- What impact would you like to make?
- What are your core values?
- What do you enjoy doing most?
- What are examples of meaningful experiences you have had in the past?

Associates are rarely asked these types of questions, and the answers can offer valuable information. For example, lawyers who find meaning in helping others benefit from context that demonstrates how their efforts make a tangible contribution to the team or the client. Lawyers who are inspired by the mission-driven aspects of the firm benefit from opportunities to take on leadership roles in firm diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, community service, and pro bono efforts.

When supervisors pay attention to what drives young millennial and Gen Z lawyers and connect them with work that provides energy and meaning, the effect is powerful: There is a spark you can see in their eyes.

Conclusion

I am optimistic there will be a time when the actions listed above are part of every senior lawyer's toolbox. And lawyers in BigLaw will be all the better for it. After all, don't we all perform better when we feel trusted and that our work has meaning?

Stacey Schwartz is a professional development leader at Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP.

The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of their employer, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.

[1] <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/610856/new-challenge-engaging-younger-workers.aspx#:~:text=The%20younger%20group%20of%20millennial,from%2013%25%20to%2014%25>.

[2] <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-gen-z>.

[3] Gen-Z: Now Influencing Today's Law Firm Culture, <https://www.mlaglobal.com/en/insights/research/genz-now-influencing-todays-law-firm-culture>; see also <https://www.mlaglobal.com/en/insights/research/to-retain-top-associates-firms-need-to-put-their-people-first>.

[4] <https://www.mlaglobal.com/en/about-us/press-releases/gen-z-attorneys-increasingly-aspire-to-career-paths-beyond-biglaw-new-survey-from-mla-finds>.

[5] <https://hbr.org/2023/11/4-fundamental-ways-to-boost-employee-engagement>.

[6] Id.

[7] <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/397058/increasing-importance-best-friend-work.aspx>; <https://hbr.org/2022/10/the-power-of-work-friends>.

[8] <https://www.managingpartnerforum.org/tasks/sites/mpf/assets/image/MPF%20-%20WEBSITE%20-%20ARTICLE%20-%20Herding%20Cats%20-%20Richards1.pdf>.

[9] <https://www.deskbird.com/blog/gen-z-work-life-balance>.

[10] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2023/09/15/engaging-gen-z-our-most-purpose-driven-generation/?sh=3459abd72a2e>.