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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 26: JENA BURGESS – MILLENNIALS AND THE WORKPLACE

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from all across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, never before have so many different generations worked together professionally. One generation, in particular, is having a significant impact on the way we work and the way business is conducted. The millennials. According to some projections, in ten years, millennials could make up as much as 75 percent of the global workforce. They're large in numbers, and they're considerably different on many fronts from previous generations. As a result, millennials and the organizations that hire them have to learn to adapt in order to succeed. Well, Jena Burgess is CEO and founder of Coach Jena B., an early career success consulting firm. She works with millennials, companies, universities, and organizations on, among other things, millennial impact. She joins us on the podcast today to talk about millennials and the workplace. Here's our conversation with Jena Burgess.

Ken White

Jena, thank you for taking time to be with us today. This is a cool topic, and you are right in the middle of it right in the midst of it talking with millennials and companies. Thank you very much for being here today.

Jena Burgess

Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to have this conversation. I don't think we get to have it enough, so any opportunity that I can have it. I'm excited to be there.

Ken White

Oh, great point. So we hear so much about millennials and the generation, and it is a sweeping generalization, but the generation, who are they?

Jena Burgess

So millennials, there is a variety of different statistics out there in terms of date. But for the most part, it's anyone born after 1980 up until 1995. So your oldest millennial is around 36 right now. So which is always an interesting piece of the conversation because folks always assume millennials it must be these new hires coming into the organization. But the reality is these are likely your first or second-year managers.

Ken White

Yeah. Interesting. What do we know about them in terms of work and career and their hopes and dreams, and desires?

Jena Burgess

Sure. Well, there's simply a disparate experience depending on industry and background and demographic just around the country. However, some key things that we do know is that they're absolutely looking for purpose and meaning at work which is a definite differentiator for this generation versus others. They're really looking for training and development. That is something they expect early and often. Feedback has been another hot topic for millennials versus other generations. How often they want feedback? How detailed they want that feedback? So there are a variety of different areas, but those three buckets, I feel like, have been really the hot topics around most companies.

Ken White

And for many of their bosses, those were the last things they were thinking of when they first started a career.

Jena Burgess

Exactly. These are the things that you work your way into.

Ken White

Yes.

Jena Burgess

You know I establish. I learn the ropes. I do what I have to do. I keep my head down. Then eventually, I'll find kind of my purpose. I'll be able to use my strengths at some point in that I'll find meaning and, around that, get my feedback promotions, all of that good stuff. We have flip-flopped that model and expected earlier and more transparency around when we're actually going to get it. And I say we because I am a millennial. I'll be very upfront about that.

Ken White

So when you're talking with organizations, how do you approach that?

Jena Burgess

It just depends on the organization. You know, I find it has to start with your recruitment process, so by way of background, I was actually in campus recruiting for a number of years for different organizations, from technology startups to Fortune 500 to the Big Four accounting world. And what I noticed is the recruitment process really lays the foundation for what folks expect during their time at an environment or, you know, at a new organization. And if you're recruiting, let's say, you know what, I have a company I want the best. I'm only going to go to the Ivy League schools. Liberal arts, perhaps. I'm hearing all these folks, but they don't match actually what my needs are at the organization. So we're already starting off at this conversation that doesn't match right. So I think that organizations have to first think, depending on which industry you're in, who is the right hire for my company, and it can't be recruiting at just my alma matter because I went there.

Ken White

Right.

Jena Burgess

Because our c-suite went there, it has to find organizations and universities that match personalities, skills, and expectations for their companies.

Ken White

Oh, that's great advice. So how do companies find out about those good matches?

Jena Burgess

So there's variety of different assessments research you can do internally. When I work with organizations, I say alright, let's figure out where your hires are coming from. You can look at the majority, the most successful through performance reviews, and say, really, what are the universities and colleges that do well here? If you have robust campus recruitment process. For a lot of companies sometimes they, haven't started being strategic around their campus recruiting process. They're lucky to have hires come in. They say hey, you want a job for the summer. Great. We'll teach you the ropes, you'll learn the way, and we'll see if it works out. However, it may not be the right hire, and that assessment really needs to happen early and often.

Ken White

So a millennial comes in, and there's oftentimes, and you hear it, and I hear it. There's this communication gap between the generations. It can be really funny, actually.

Jena Burgess

The telephone game.

Ken White

But it's incredibly frustrating.

Jena Burgess

It is, it is. I mean, communication is a hard skill no matter what age you are, no matter where you are. We're all looking to better understand each other. And communication is only as good as it is received. So the challenge is you have generation that's been communicating not only through technology but just in a way that is not necessarily as detailed as it incorporates a certain amount of etiquette to it. They're pretty straightforward. They don't really understand why process needs to get in the way all the time. They say well. This just needs to be done. Can we do it?

Ken White

Yeah.

Jena Burgess

And so you have this mismatching of generations who kind of understand politics understand how to create an environment to help people kind of get to communication. These generations are coming, and they're ready to communicate with you, and they have no problem telling you what they're thinking.

Ken White

The title of their boss or the hierarchy just doesn't seem to matter a whole heck of a lot.

Jena Burgess

No communication, especially between the generations, is also about code and using certain words and phrases that match their understanding of the world and understanding of their experiences. And right now, we have a vocabulary that's not in sync. The generations, you know, our Xers, boomers, and traditionalists have been using language that's been very corporate-friendly, very process friendly. You have millennials, Gen Ys, iGen using language that's more purpose driven efficient. You know, I love the saying there's no shortcuts in life. However, for these generations, yes, there are shortcuts in life because it's been coded.

Ken White

Yeah.

Jena Burgess

Everything has gotten to be immediate gratification, and I actually can solve that problem faster if you think about it. So the way they communicate and the way they think is, in fact, different.

Ken White

Yeah, very much so. I was talking to a millennial yesterday who was very frustrated with her boss, and she said the only way I can communicate with her is face-to-face or by phone. Who does she think she's kidding?

Jena Burgess

Right.

Ken White

She's so frustrated that she couldn't fire off a text or whatever she wanted to do. And so when you run into when you're working with companies and they have those issues, how do you, how do you go about fixing it? How do you guide them?

Jena Burgess

Sure. You know, I don't think there's a one size fits all. I don't think there's a playbook to this. I think it's really unique to your organization and the tone that you want to set. So if you say listen, we're a company that really does value customer service, speaking face to face, building rapport, relationships matter for them, for example, then that may be just part of your culture, and the hires you bring in really need to understand that and be open to that. And there are plenty of millennials and Gen Ys, Gen Zers who do value that, then I go back to this recruitment process. Are you finding those students? Or are you going to your top technology schools in the country with the best engineers and the best process makers and hiring them and expecting them then to now build this rapport and have this mentality that you had?

Ken White

Right.

Jena Burgess

So they do exist. I don't ever like to lump generations together to say this is the only way they operate.

Ken White

Sure.

Jena Burgess

But it does take a little bit more work on the front end to find the right hire.

Ken White

If you find you're a part of an organization that doesn't do that kind of work on the front end, I'm sure many don't.

Jena Burgess

Right.

Ken White

And you're in a team environment. You're frustrated. How do you deal with that?

Jena Burgess

I love to do programming in terms of wellness and learning, and development. I find that when you can create a conversation, take folks away from their desks, get them all in a room, and learn something new together. Not only does it level set everybody's emotions and the things that they're going through in their day-to-day, but you also start learning from one another in their own experiences based on the activities that you choose or the topics that you choose. I think that's an easy fix and something that I've seen be really successful, and everybody gets to learn. It's great when senior leadership can be in the room as well with your new hires with your, you know, first-year managers all having conversation, and maybe it's positivity at work. I can only tell you how many conversations and examples come out of just that phrase. How can we be more positive at work today? What are your challenges? Why do you find that you end up being negative towards Friday, and the challenges and things just from the perspective of the different generations that get talked about in that conversation is so interesting. And that awareness is really key.

Ken White

Awareness leads to understanding.

Jena Burgess

Exactly and then creates a conversation which helps us then say what's our communication plan moving forward and what are some the trends that we see. So we know where to start.

Ken White

Interesting.

Ken White

We'll have more conversation with Jena Burgess on millennials and the workplace in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. If you're looking to improve your leadership and business skills, the Center for Corporate Education has some terrific programs scheduled in the upcoming weeks. Finance for the non-financial professional, rapid cycle innovation for health care professionals, and a five-day certificate program in business management. These and other programs are on the calendar. For more information check out the center's website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Jena Burgess on millennials and the workplace.

Ken White

Have we seen a divide like this before? It seems like in the media, and when people talk, whoa, we've never seen. Have we seen anything like this, or is this truly unique?

Jena Burgess

You know, I've definitely read and seen different things in research where you could compare, for example, the generation X experience with them being a little bit more mistrustful of organizations, much more direct in their communications, for example. Generation X loves email, in fact. So they're not all that different. But I do think there's this careful realization of maturation versus generations. And I think that for some of us, we forget there's a process, and we quickly become our parents, so to speak. We say what's going on with these generation? What's up with these kids today? So that's the maturation process, and in that, we end up just joining the ladder buckets that we didn't realize we join one day. But then, the flip side of the conversation is technology. Technology has rapidly changed our ability to understand this world. And when you have digital natives, and that's all they know. Yes, I do think we have not seen that before. The idea of immediate gratification, the ability to meet all of my needs immediately, is completely, in my opinion, undocumented at this point. I can text an emoji to Domino's and get my favorite pizza delivered without having a conversation. Without putting any information in, I can just text literally an emoji. I mean, that is a dramatically different experience than any other generation. So yes, I do think it's unprecedented in terms of technology. But then, on the other side, it's really just fact that most folks need to go through their maturation process and realize what they don't know.

Ken White

And if that millennial is talking about, I can send, I can text an emoji to Dominoes. Her boss might be saying A. I don't know what an emoji is. No one delivered pizza when I

grew up. You know you either made it, or you didn't even eat. I mean, wow, what a wide expanse in work. It's unbelievably interesting. You spent a lot of time with millennials and coaching them as they go into the workforce. What are some of the things you try to instill in them?

Jena Burgess

Sure, for millennials, and I spent a lot of time at colleges, universities, or through internship programs or new hire programs, and my favorite thing to share with millennials is give yourself time to become the person you're meant to be. And to me, that's really important because when you're a millennial, and you have access to so much information, you're so strong about your beliefs what it is that you want out of this world. And you know how to communicate it. You forget that, again, that maturation process is going to happen for you. And if there are things, you don't know until you experience it. And so when you come out, you know, guns blazing, and I'm ready to go hit the ground running asking for exactly what you want. You need to be aware that those asks are going to look different five years from now, and they're not even more different ten years from now. So you have to give yourself time to go through the process before showing all of your cards. So I really try to work with millennials on managing their expectations. Understanding what it is they actually want from work and being really clear on that so that when the other things happen that aren't so friendly or that you weren't necessarily expecting out of your work experience. It doesn't throw you completely off your career track. I can't tell you how many students I work with at universities that say I really wanted to be in this career. However, I know I did an externship or an internship I couldn't stand the way that people were treated. I really didn't like the rules of the environment, and I have to kind of level set for them. That was one place, one location, one specific company. You can't bucket that into everybody's experiences. And now, with technology, everybody tweets about their experiences or they're on group chat saying don't come to this company. Don't do this. It's awful. And that becomes the truth. So they don't give themselves time to actually experience the world for what it is before they actually enter it. So again, back to this idea of give yourself time to become who you're meant to be kind of allows them to level set. All right this is where I am today and I need to kind of figure out what the future looks like when I get there.

Ken White

Really great advice, but when you're 21 or 22. It's tough not to be in a hurry, isn't it?

Jena Burgess

It's really tough, and that's a robust conversation for sure because the rush and leap-frogging and the job hopping

Ken White

Yeah.

Jena Burgess

is something that really needs to be understood for what it is, and there's a couple of different things that contribute to that experience. So, for example, for my generation, I graduated right in 2009. Things were not friendly. You were graduating with a salary that was not even close to what you're paying annually at your university. My first job was twenty-nine thousand dollars a year something that most students today not experience so Gen Z will be a little bit different in that in that sense but then not only was I not making nearly what I had invested but I had to wait quite a few years before I was ever going to see that dollar back in my pocket again. And so I personally was very impatient. I job-hopped four times through my career before starting my own company, and honestly, it became a survival mechanism as well. I can't. I don't have the time to sit here and actually not be able to pay or afford life. I have to be able to figure out how can I make a living being a communications major one, not having a technology or engineering background.

Ken White

Right.

Jena Burgess

To be able to kind of make a living and start living the life that I was hoping to have after my investment. So I think a lot of folks forget about that. Is, you know, a lot of millennials did graduate into this, you know, recession where you were not getting paid what you needed to get paid. I was working at a startup, a technology startup on Wall Street, and we were hiring MBAs, folks who had tons of experience, great candidates, and paying them what we would pay an entry-level candidate who had none.

Ken White

Right.

Jena Burgess

Because we could right, which I don't know if it's appropriate to say, but the reality is we have to think about these truths and understand that the hopping and the impatience piece is really us trying to level set some of our experiences as well and get back to where we need to be.

Ken White

Interesting. But I think job hopping or moving is a heck of a lot more accepted now than it ever was before.

Jena Burgess

You know it is, and it isn't. I see the both sides of it. Obviously, for someone who has done it, I've managed to get a job, so I was successful in my job hopping. However, I did face a lot of scrutiny, and I did get that question every time I sat in the interview and said I noticed that you've been a couple places. Tell me more about that. Having them really understand that, well actually, my first job, after being there for six months, they decided to lay off 500 people because of the recession. My job was no longer necessary, and I got demoted. So I need to go to the next place.

Ken White

Sure.

Jena Burgess

At the next place, the business model changed because they decided to move the algorithm to being all technology-driven to not include any people. So my job got changed.

Ken White

Sure, yeah.

Jena Burgess

Everywhere I went, my job got changed, which is a fact of life. And I think millennials need to understand that, too, that you need to be incredibly adaptable and know that in a global economy, what you get hired for may not actually be what you end up doing.

Ken White

Right.

Jena Burgess

I talk to students quite a bit about that.

Ken White

And employers. I'm not so sure millennials all know that employers understand those changes they understand business models change and so forth.

Jena Burgess

They, you know, there's a bit of catch-up on both sides, and what's great about millennials is they're the most flexible and tolerant generation that we've seen, and they're really open to change. They are really open to diverse experiences, not to mention just diversity in employees and experiences in the workforce. So we can take advantage of that, and I

don't feel that employers are having that conversation of how can I take advantage of them being so open-minded versus how come they don't think like me.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Jena Burgess, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you get to the next level in your career with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, check out our website at wmleadership.com. That's wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week, Jena Burgess, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe and productive week.