

GenTrends

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

May 2005

Sometimes It's Actions Not Words

A friend of mine in academia hired a graduate student last month. This individual had top grades, said all the right things, and possessed enough charisma to light up a room.

On his first day of work, my friend happened to have a new computer desk he needed assembled. He asked this student to put it together. Four hours later, he began to wonder why the job wasn't done. What he found was the student sitting on the floor in front of a poorly, but partially assembled desk complaining about how hard it was to build the thing. Then he noticed an unopened package of parts on a nearby table. When he asked about them, the student replied, "I didn't know what they were for, so I didn't use them." When my friend asked about the instructions, the student replied, "Oh, I never read the instructions." My friend laughingly suggested that in the future he's going to ask all graduate student applicants to assemble a computer desk, *before* they get the job.

This story proves once again that it is simply not enough to ask questions when hiring. I'll be the first one to attempt assembly of a computer desk without reading the instructions, but not for four hours. While it may be argued that this is an isolated incident, I hear enough of these stories to know it's not. Blame it on menu-driven thinking, lack of common sense, too much television, or whatever. The bottom line is that employers need to be more vigilant in selecting new people, regardless of the position. Society has taught many of them that charisma will get you the job or the promotion. We have to teach them otherwise.

R.W.W.

Leadership and the Emerging Generations

The Center for Generational Studies has introduced a *new* program focused on what leadership will look like in 2010. As the Baby Boom generation begins its slow march into retirement over the next decade, the faces of those running organizations, large and small, will change in both practice and philosophy. Organizations are seeing a migration away from the Boomer work tendencies of long hours and sacrifice for the corporate good.

But this is about more than work ethic. It's about how the next generation will alter leadership practices as we know them. Based on hundreds of hours of research and surveys, this session provides those attending with the insights and sources to prepare for this massive shift in practices. This is not about reaction. This is about the preparing the groundwork for continuity of direction and management.

Leadership and the Emerging Generations will help you connect with the values and expectations of those presently in their 30s and early 40s who will assume responsibility for strategy and execution going forward. Walk away with practical ideas for recruiting, developing and mentoring the future leaders of your organization. Time marches on. This is an issue that requires the attention of every organizational leader today.

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"GenTistics"

The percentage of incoming undergraduates planning to major in computer science declined by more than 60% between 2000 and 2004.

Higher Education Research Institute



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To Ponder . . .

A few things are known about teenage risk-taking. First, while most teenagers do a few stupid things, only a few get into any real trouble. Most teenagers come out just fine.

In fact, a fair amount of risky behavior is not only normal but also necessary, psychologists say. Lynn Ponton, an adolescent psychologist in San Francisco and the author of *The Romance of Risk*, says risk-taking by teenagers has been wrongly stigmatized, with parents lumping all risk-taking together into one frightening glob, too horrible to think about. Close your eyes and hold your breath.

But many child psychologists say teenagers need to do chancy things to find out who they are, where they fit in. And parents need to figure out when the chancy thing is within normal range and when it's moved far beyond – a tricky calculation that can often depend on the kids themselves. For some kids, trying out for the school play or taking an advanced math class is all the risk they need. For others, it's flying over ravines on mountain bikes, walking on the wild side of town, or taking the first gulp of beer. Ponton and others say that teenagers who do experiment with a wide range of areas – even drugs and alcohol in a limited way – often adjust better in the long run than those who completely hold themselves back.

“We used to call risk-taking acting out, and we used to think of all of it as bad,” Ponton explained. “But risk-taking is a normal tool of development. Teenagers define their identity through risk.”

Barbara Strauch writing in The Primal Teen

To Read . . .

The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries About the Teenage Brain Tell Us About Our Kids. Barbara Strauch. Doubleday, New York, 2003. ISBN 0-385-50339-3. Journalist Strauch has written an engrossing book that goes one step beyond the normal self-help manual.

Hiring Someone Else to Potty-Train Your Kids

It has come to this: It is now possible to outsource most aspects of parenting. The burgeoning industry of services aimed at harried parents, that began with the likes of birthday party packages at gyms and pizza shops has expanded to the point where you can now hire someone to assist with everything from potty-training your toddler to getting your teenage daughter to agree to a passably modest prom dress. “Fussy baby” services in Chicago, Denver, Brooklyn and Oakland, CA, help comfort-shrieking babies. In the New York suburbs, an entrepreneur has built a flourishing business by taking over one of the most timeless parental rituals of all: For \$60 an hour he teaches kids to ride a bike.

Hilary Stout writing in The Wall Street Journal

Editor's note: At the risk of appearing judgmental, I have to wonder what the children involved with these services are learning about sustaining relationships, resolving disagreements, and developing a sense of self-efficacy. Sadly, I fear that these same youths will enter the world of work over time, expecting someone else to handle the inevitable challenges that life presents. Look out managers! Here they come!

Wooing the Boomers

The Baby Boomer market is so lucrative that entrepreneurs are literally competing to capitalize on it. At the 2005 Boomer Business Summit, 40 contestants vied for a \$10,000 prize in the Boomer Business Plan Challenge. The finalists ranged from a company that makes a high-tech knee brace to a low-tech moving company.

The competition was organized by Santa Clara University, the American Society of Aging and Mary Furlong, a consultant to businesses that seek to market to older people. The stakes for the contestants are huge – more and more money is in the hands of people who are likely to spend it on reading glasses rather than computer games. People over 54 had more than twice the net assets of younger people in 2001 according to Federal Reserve data.

Peter Svensson, The Associated Press

Case Study Corner

I serve on the faculty of an executive MBA program. Our typical applicants are in their 30s and employed full-time. Over the past few years, we have noticed that rather than receiving a writing sample with the application, we are receiving PowerPoint presentations instead. While these presentations are well done for the most part, they provide little insight into applicants' writing skills. How can we convince these young people to comply with our request?

The short answer is to simply reject all applicants who fail to submit a writing sample. They didn't follow the instructions. But the question you pose is a little more involved.

Those in their thirties have developed a focus on expediency and outcome. They've also learned that it is easier to gain forgiveness than permission. Apply these two characteristics to your application process and you have someone who knows it is easier to develop a PowerPoint presentation than to write a coherent essay. “Rather than ask if it can be submitted,” they think, “send it in and see what happens. If the school protests, tell them you're busy. They'll probably accept it anyway.”

The solution to this situation is simple, but the politics behind it may be more complicated. I would suggest that you place a note on the application indicating that “electronic presentations are not acceptable in lieu of essays.” I would also pose an essay question that is personal enough to make sure that it forces the applicant to truly reflect on his or her purposes for seeking an MBA. (This will also discourage them from delegating the assignment to someone at work or home.)

As for the politics, you must decide what to do when your applicant pool drops by a considerable number. After all, stricter requirements may have an impact on enrollment. On the other hand, you can be assured of better quality applicants who accept the spirit of the process. Besides, students who write coherently reflect well on the institution after they graduate and, by the way, submit papers that are easier to grade.