

GenTrends

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

May 2003

Lest we forget

Conflict is a Part of Life

Pennsylvania's Shippensburg University is being sued by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education over its code of conduct which, in part, prohibits actions that "annoy, threaten or harm a person or group such as innuendo, comments, insults, propositions, humor about sex/gender specific traits, suggestive or insulting sounds, leering, whistling, or obscene gestures." According to the University's president, "We encourage and promote free speech among and between individuals and organizations. Through the exercise of this important right, our students are able to see various aspects of an idea, analyze those ideas and form their own opinions on those ideas. The University is also committed to the principle that this discussion be conducted appropriately." He does not indicate what the University defines as "appropriate." Arguably, a student's derogatory comment about another's student's breath could result in disciplinary action.

At what point in their maturity are those in our nation's youngest generations supposed to experience the many forms of conflict that will rear their ugly heads throughout the remainder of life? The college students living under Shippensburg's code of conduct are the same people who will enter the American workforce over the next few years devoid of an ability to cope with day-to-day interpersonal conflict.

Rather legislating a quixotic policy to protect these youngsters from rude and unsavory behavior, why not teach them to develop the skills to deal with

rights, American society has empowered every citizen and immigrant to fight for what they believe in or, for that matter, what feels good at the time. The only problem is that we are currently dealing with 280 million interpretations of individual rights. Those who continue to succeed in American society appear to be the people who can find the balance between standing up for what they believe in and looking past insulting, yet ultimately harmless innuendo, name calling, and provocation. Over-protected young people add no more to our society than those who seek to deface it through their senseless actions. R..W.W.

Do You Remember When . . .

- A quarter was a decent allowance?
- Laundry detergent had free glasses, dishes or towels hidden inside the box?
- Being sent to the principal's office was nothing compared to the fate that awaited the student at home?
- Decisions were made by going "eeny-meeny-miney-moe?"
- Mistakes were corrected by simply yelling, "Do Over!?"
- The worst thing you could catch from the opposite sex was "cooties?"

Of the Center's programs in 2002, 98% resulted from repeat or referral business!

Upcoming audiences include

Maryland Municipal League
American Public Power Association
Yuma Regional Medical Center
The Missouri Lottery
Oregon Telecom Association
National Electric Contractors Association
Financial Supermarkets, Inc.

"GenTistics"

In 2002, 5.9 million full-time students in four-year institutions spent some \$9.2 billion during the school year on discretionary items, up 27% from 1997.

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To ponder . . .

Over the last decade, there has been an exponential increase in the intensity that manufacturers employ to sell their stuff to the young. Today's teens are victims of the contemporary luxury economy. They have grown up in the age of the brand, bombarded and defined by name products, and intrusive and clever advertising strategies. Raised by a commodity culture from the cradle, teens' dependably fragile self-images and their need to belong to groups are perfect qualities for advertisers to exploit. . .

When they visit cities, middle-school students routinely rush to visit Niketowns, where they snap up the newest Nike sneakers like aliens returning to the mothership. Girls develop anorexic behaviors at a younger age than ever before, and advertisements for fast food become more adept at attracting an increasingly obese child population. "There will be a first step, a first word and, a first French fry," says a recent McDonald's ad, which arrives at a time when one-third of American children ages four to twelve are overweight, an ad that raised hackles among adult protestors when the fast food corporation launched a whole slew of other spots featuring tots, knowing full well that kids now begin asking for brands as soon as they can talk. . .

But companies in 2002 are not only attracted to teens and pre-teens spending money today, hooking them into a cycle of labor and shopping during their youths. Teen-oriented brands now aim to register so strongly in kids' minds that the appeal will remain for life.

To Read:

Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers. Alissa Quart. Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, 2003 ISBN 0-7382-0664-4. While aimed squarely at the seeming arrogance of the marketing establishment, Quart does present a balanced argument against some practices currently employed.

Case Study Corner

Our corporate leadership is predominantly matures. When we conduct performance reviews, they have mandated a distribution of performance ratings for all employees as follows: 50-60% "meeting expectations," no more than 30-40% "significantly exceeding expectations," and no more than 10% "outstanding." A majority of our employees are GenXers, and they believe "meeting expectations" means "average" and they are offended by that rating. Furthermore, even if performance would otherwise warrant better ratings, we are forced to rate some employees as "meeting expectations" instead of a higher rating so we can make the ratings fit the mandated percentages. How can we respond to the Xers' concerns without violating management's edict?

The truth is you can't. At the risk of encouraging subterfuge, I would begin by discreetly approaching the Xers and explaining the situation in which you find yourself. Then challenge them to come up with a more equitable system, keeping in mind that management has to be sold on the concept. Remind them that any strategy has to consider the pressures that management faces such as profit, corporate strategy, and compliance with wage and hour law. Suggest that they seek out other organizations that have implemented similar programs to what they have in mind.

Provided that the plan they develop meets the requirements you've outlined, I would then approach management under the guise of "they suggested this and I think it is worth considering." Be sure to bring the architects of the plan along to the meeting and let them defend it. It's tough to teach old management new tricks. But if they can be convinced that their system is harming morale and productivity, they should be willing to entertain modification to the present system.

This particular approach is the "editor's pick." Your responses are certainly welcome. E-mail them to wendover@gentrends.com and we'll publish them on the Center's website.

Send your questions to wendover@gentrends.com. If we address your issue in the Case Study Corner, we'll send you a free CD or tape from the Center's library of resources.

Your responses to Necking in the Hallway

Last month's issue posed a case study about teenage call center workers who were "making out" during breaks. We asked for reader input and received a variety of responses, the edited versions of which are printed below. (For the entire text of each, sans names, send an e-mail to dcate@gentrends.com.)

* * * *

Policy is policy in the workplace! . . . The boss may be wrong or right? But, the boss is still the boss! . . . There's a time and place for everything! Work is work and foreplay is prelude to sex!

* * * *

These kids need to understand the difference between "on the clock" and "private time." They have probably never had the opportunity to learn that there are consequences to their choices. The best thing that could happen to these kids is to get fired on the spot — and told why. They may resent the employer for a while, but in a few years they would understand why they were fired and would be better employees because of it

* * * *

I would put a non-fraternizing policy on work property into place.

* * * *

The organization should establish a uniform policy on what constitutes sexual behavior at work . . . Kissing is a sexual act and could lead to other kinds of sexual behavior.

* * * *

Sometimes you just have to tell employees that these are the rules, so abide by them or find work elsewhere. Since when do teenage employees set company policy? The employer does not have to get the employees' agreement. Part of growing and maturing is learning that behavior has consequences, but the first step in teaching is to stop the behavior before any harm occurs.

* * * *

Promote one of the participants into the supervisor's role over the other for one day and explain "sexual harassment" and the legal parameters.

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Set an implementation date for new policies with a brief overview of how violators will be handled.

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