

# Gen Trends

July 2006

## *Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!*

### The Filters in Our Lives

It has become a well-established fact that half of those who enter the profession of teaching after graduation from college leave the field after just five years. While many of us lament this, I have to wonder how many reflect about the role we may play in this phenomenon.

This point was brought home to me during a conversation with Chris, a second year high school science teacher. "I enjoy the teaching," he said, "but I feel like everything I say has to go through four filters before it leaves my mouth." I asked him about those filters and this is what he said:

"You've got the student filter, which has always been there. It's their job to catch you in a mistake. But that's okay because they're kids and looking for fun.

"Then you've got the administration filter. Am I breaking some unwritten rule? Am I making more work for the principal? Am I making the district look bad by what I say or by some seemingly minor decision I make?"

"Next, you've got the parent filter. Will what I say be misinterpreted by the students and end up causing me, or the school, grief with Mom and Dad? Will some off-hand comment I make create a flurry of parental phone calls to me, or worse, the administration?"

"Finally, you've got the society filter. What does society think of me as a teacher? Am I living up to its expectations with what I say? Am I allowed to express my honest opinion in the classroom without checking with someone first? Am I allowed to express my genuine feelings and emotions in the classroom the way my teachers did when I was growing up?"

As I listened to him, I began to think about the impact that this may be having on the generation of students who will become parents, voters, employees, consumers and, in some cases, teachers.

If we, as a society, censor everything we say or do for fear that somewhere, someplace, someone will find fault with it, have we not voluntarily turned ourselves into what George Orwell predicted in his book *1984*? It's been said that children enter school as a question mark and leave as a period. I believe that is truer today than ever. But we can't simply blame the teachers. In many ways, they're simply the messengers.

I sometimes wonder what role I might be playing in the collective de-evolution of trust and the growth of collective paranoia that seems to be gripping our educators. As a former public school teacher, I know how much more freedom I enjoyed twenty-five years ago than they do today.

Finally, we need to consider the impact as these young people enter society. How can we expect them to make balanced, clear-headed decisions when they have come of age in a time where every decision appears to have such far reaching consequences? Is it any wonder that employers complain of poor problem solving skills among many of them? But it's not a skill issue, I would argue, as much of a fear about making a mistake, in any forum, that will impact their lives going forward.

Imagine working in an environment where everything you do or say as a professional is being evaluated on levels over which you have little or no control and by people who have little, if any, experience in your role. Teachers do it everyday.

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## To ponder . . .

Teenagers today are not pliable, and they say what is on their mind — always. Yet for all their mouthiness, especially at home, it is not at all that as adults these teenagers will be “worse” than their parents, either less caring or less motivated. They may be more caring and more motivated. They may, in turn, be better parents.

Besides, it is possible to elicit respect from teenagers; it’s just of a different kind than the older version. This new respect can only be based on the strength and confidence of parents. This kind of strength of character, really, is not as easy to come by as a strength based on the switch or the belt. More confidence is required to employ this strength. With few apparent weapons in their arsenal, parents must stand up to all that their teenagers may dish out, and still come out with their heads held high, their confidence intact, and their position as the parents and the bosses still acknowledged, if begrudgingly. It is not easy. But it is possible.

The first step is to accept a child’s right to say whatever he or she has to say, no matter how stupid or unreasonable. You don’t have to listen to all of it, you can leave whenever you want, but you respect their right to say it. Then you say what you have to say, you stand your ground and are not blown away by the inevitable response. This kind of parenting earns respect. It’s the strength not to descend to teenagers’ level of name-calling when they would lose respect for you. It’s the strength to walk away.

## To read . . .

***Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?*** Anthony E. Wolf, Ph.D. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 2002. ISBN 0-374-52853-5. While written for parents, the wisdom in this book is also fitting for those managing teens and those in their early twenties.

## Case Study Corner

*Several months ago, I was put in charge of moving one of the units within our organization to another building. I am 28 and have been with the company for three years. While moving disrupts everyone’s lives, most of my headaches came from those who have been around the longest. Rather than contributing their support, they turned out to be my biggest obstacles. I got the job done, but there were some harsh words and difficult times. Now I am simply working alongside of them again and I can tell they don’t trust my motives. How can I overcome that?*

I don’t think this is about overcoming an obstacle as much as re-establishing relationships. When you’ve worked in an organization for a long time, you tend to put down roots, emotionally and physically. Having some “gardener” come along and transplant you can be an unsettling experience. When that gardener is considerably younger and does not share the history you do, you might resent his or her very existence. In attempting to put off the inevitable, you might drag your feet and do what you can to resist. But eventually you go along since you really have no choice.

All of that is to say that there might be some regret on both sides about the harsh words and difficult times. But it’s not human nature to take the first step in settling things. So instead it festers.

The best thing you can probably do is discreetly approach those with whom you had problems and attempt to mend the relationships. You might begin by saying something like, “I’d just like to apologize for anything I said that may have offended you when we were making the move.” If they reciprocate, then you’re off to a good start. If, instead, they say, “You ought to be sorry,” I’d probably walk away. This is not about you. It’s about them and there’s very little you can do about that.

Relationships take time to mend if they’ve been damaged. I’d like to think that your supervisor is observing all this and supporting your actions. If so, you might turn to that individual as well for ideas and support. As you know, this happens in every job, so get used to it.

## Is American Community Unraveling?

A study conducted by Duke University and the University of Arizona, has revealed that the average number of people with whom Americans discuss important matters has dropped from three to two in just twenty years. In a way, the study is a vindication for author Robert Putnam. His book, *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, commented on the supposed demise of community taking place in today’s society.

The study’s authors found that one quarter of Americans say they have no one with whom to discuss their most important business. The study illustrates the escalating social isolation of past decades due to the emergence of television, two-career households, and suburban living that has meant the demise of old, close-knit neighborhoods.

Some critics maintain that this isolation is overstated and that e-mail, text-messaging and such have taken the place of traditional community settings and means of association.

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Fathers and mothers have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise . . . Specialized competence and success are all that they can imagine.

Educator Allan Bloom

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