

Gen Trends

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

November 2006

Overcoming the Common Sense Gap

Part two

In last month's issue, I discussed the challenges managers are facing with the so-called "common sense gap" among young workers. I also suggested some strategies for assessing this deficit during selection. If you'd like to review the article, just click on this [link](#). This month I'll take a look at what to do with current employees who seem to lack this trait.

It can be maddening to assign seemingly simple tasks to individuals only to discover they seem incapable of completing them. But before we castigate them for lacking common sense, we should take a look at how the task was delegated and the skills and orientation we assumed they had.

It is only natural to assume that our logic is everyone else's logic and that those around us possess the basic skills we learned early on. This is simply not true. To effectively delegate to those younger than ourselves, we must first observe and ask questions. Have you seen the individual perform this task or similar tasks before? Was s/he successful? Does this person appear resourceful when faced with everyday dilemmas? How does this person approach uncertain situations? With confidence? With caution? With frustration? With fear? How does this person resolve situations outside of his or her control? By asking questions? By brainstorming? By surrendering? Taking a bit of time to reflect on these questions will help you evaluate where you need to begin in delegating a task.

Next, consider the task at hand. How clearly can you explain what you would like this person to do? Better to be too simplistic than too complex. If the person complains about the way in which you are explaining the task,

apologize and explain that you're just trying to make sure s/he understands. Then learn from this exchange and pick up the pace. Before delegating, consider the questions that may come up and be prepared with answers and resources. Be willing to take the time necessary to ensure that the person truly understands what needs to be accomplished. Spending an extra five minutes verifying his or her understanding will save you time down the line when s/he doesn't ask for all kinds of clarification. A strategy I've used is to ask, "What questions do you have?" after delegating a task. Inevitably, the person will say, "I don't have any." At this point, I'll express surprise and inevitably the person will ask a couple of questions. Most employees don't like to appear "dumb" in front of their supervisor. One has to encourage questions.

Finally, clue this person in on the big picture. In this era of too-much-to-do in too-little-time, it's tempting to say "Just do this." After all, this person works for you. Right? But without at least a cursory understanding of how s/he is contributing to the mission his or her level of engagement is likely to be minimal. When I first went to work thirty-five years ago, I simply did what I was told and kept my nose to the grindstone. Today's young employees want to know more and be more involved. Give them the chance to engage and then watch them develop the "common sense" you need.

Send me your ideas and let me know what you think. I'm at wendover@gentrends.com.

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Clicking Through Life

Maybe it's me, but I'm beginning to wonder about the impact of reality programming and software on the emerging generation. I was struck, for instance, by an article in *The Wall Street Journal* the other day portraying an electronic game called Guitar Hero in which players can pretend to be rock stars. It's sort of a new take on Milli Vanilli.

Today's technology enables people to become anyone they want, Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, John Elway, even Donald Trump, but only for a few hours. Then they have to report to work as bus drivers, retail clerks, welders and such. Is it any wonder that employers are having an increasingly difficult time maintaining the attention and attendance of young people filling the work-a-day jobs that employ most of our population?

Arguably, those over 25 have been in the workforce long enough to understand that repetition, self-discipline and eventually mastery are the cornerstones of work. But what about those just entering the workforce? Imagine the teen who comes home from school, wins the Super Bowl on his Sony Playstation and then heads off to busing tables for the rest of the evening. Then there's the newly minted college graduate who's used to spending three or more hours a day winning wars and hunting bad guys who now feels "trapped" in a "dead-end" job as an accountant?

How do managers compete with these daily trips of fantasy? After all, these young people have developed expectations that far exceed real life possibility. Don't get me wrong. I'm not knocking aspiration. But are we not, as a society, failing to explain the roles of hard work, sacrifice, long hours and, of course, luck in the success they assumed can be found by winning the game? I'd like to say that they all know the difference between fantasy and reality, but I'm not convinced that's the case. Reactions? Click on this [link](#) and send me your thoughts.

Case Study Corner

I work the front desk in the development office of a college. A work-study student is supposed to relieve me for lunch every day. Unfortunately, she fails to show up at least once a week. I finally explained to her that I can't go to lunch without her being there.

She said, "Sorry, I had no idea."

"So," I continued, "If you can't make it for some reason, please call and let me know."

Now she still fails to show at least once a week, but she calls to let me know. What should I do?

A couple of thoughts cross my mind: Firstly, the fact that you asked her to call if she would not be there was probably interpreted as "It's okay to be absent as long as I call in."

Secondly, it appears that she was not properly informed of the specific tasks for which she is responsible, when originally hired. In the rush of things these days, it can be easy to overlook the details when orienting someone. But we have to remember that most students' orientation about a work-study job is considerably different than that of employees who make their living in full-time positions.

If you are her supervisor, it's time to sit her down and review the specific responsibilities she's been given along with the specific hours she's expected to work. I'd ask clarifying questions when you're finished such as, "Do you clearly understand what you need to do?" and "Do I have your word that that you will be here consistently for your hours?" If you do not supervise her, then I would ask the person who does to speak with her.

While we'd like to think that punctuality and self-initiative should be givens, experience is teaching many of us that those entering the workforce for the first time have not been taught that these responsibilities are important and that others depend upon them. If this young woman continues her present habits, I would consider reporting her performance to the work-study administrator. Perhaps the threat of losing her financial aid will encourage her take the responsibilities seriously.

There's Proof!

Older workers are more loyal than employees of younger generations. At least that appears to be the case based on a new survey released by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. "The Employee Tenure Summary," released September 8, finds that employees ages 55 to 64 have been with their current employers an average of nine years—more than three times the tenure of workers ages 25 to 34. HR professionals are speculating that one of the reasons lies in the different motives employees have. For instance, younger workers are attracted to jobs by higher pay, while older employees place greater value on health care and retirement benefits.

"That Woman is Just Trying to Help!"

My cousin Sheryl, her daughter, Amy and her 83-year-old mother, Frances were driving from Atlanta to Charleston to visit me for the weekend. Since Sheryl has a fear of highways and getting lost, Amy brought along a portable GPS. She programmed my address in for the trip. Because Sheryl was taking all the back roads "Bella," the nickname name of the GPS' electronic voice guiding them, kept telling them they were going the wrong way. Sheryl, in turn, would point her finger in the "face" of the GPS and say something sarcastic.

Francis, believing that there was really a woman someplace giving them directions, said, in a very hushed whisper, "Sheryl, you better be careful. That woman is just trying to help you. You are going to make her mad." How sweet is that?

As related by Deborah Bonner

Have a Situation?

We're always looking for interesting situations around which we can build case studies. E-mail us one we use and we'll send you a book from the Center's library of resources.

Happy Holidays!