

Gen Trends

Catching the Wave of the Generations to Come!

October 2006

Overcoming the Common Sense Gap

In a recent meeting with some mid-level managers, I was asked about the decision-making skills of young, front-line workers. The comments ranged from "Don't these people have any common sense?" to "They seem to struggle when faced with a dilemma in which they can't choose an answer from a set of choices." As mentioned before in this column, I have been hearing these concerns voiced since 2000, the time at which the leading edge of the Millennial generation began its march into the workforce. With millions of them now filling positions throughout US commerce, it is only natural that employers' concerns about this become more pronounced. This is not to say that every Millennial shares these traits. But as a manager, it is critical that new employees be assessed for their ability to problem solve.

This begins with selection. Can you screen for common sense? I don't know. How do you define common sense? A more effective practice would be to clearly define the environment and tasks the person will be performing and outline the typical situations in which independent problem solving may be necessary. By "independent problem solving" I mean occasions when the employee will be forced to generate options and make a choice between them. A good example of this might be dealing with a customer who returns to a store with a damaged item and receipt and says that when he opened the package the item was already damaged and he wants a refund.

What do you do? Immediately call the manager? Ask how the item was damaged? Check the sales history of the

customer to see if he has a habit of returning damaged items?

In another setting, a good example might be the young professional who is assigned a research project such as surveying the local market for interest in a new service. How do you begin? Google "marketing" for the geographic region in which you plan to offer the service? Call on likely consumers? Research local competitors? Pose this situation to young applicants and then just listen. Do they ask questions for clarification? Do they launch into a solution? Do they freeze in place?

A final recommendation might be subjecting applicants to an assessment center. As I mentioned in last May's column, asking applicants to complete an in-basket exercise where there are no right and wrong answers is an effective means for assessing someone's skills at resolving typical on-the-job dilemmas. You might ask them to write a memo, deal with an ethical situation, force them to prioritize a series of critical issues, along with mixing in a couple of repetitive tasks such as collating and stapling 500 copies of a five-page report. Does this exercise take more of your time and energy? Yes. But which would you rather do, take the time up front or cope with the "common sense gap" after they have joined your team?

In next month's issue, I'll explore more strategies for coping effectively with the critical thinking deficit once the person's on board. In the meantime, send your comments and reactions. I'm at wendover@gentrends.com.

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2005 National Survey of Student Engagement



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To ponder . . .

Despite superficial differences between progressive “child-centered” education in vogue in the 1920s, Life Adjustment education in the 1950s, the “schools without failure” in the 1960s, and Outcome Based Education in the 1990s, the debate over educational philosophy has remained essentially unchanged. It is a debate over both the methods and aims of teaching, between those who believe that education should concern itself with intellectual discipline and the succeeding waves of innovators who offer the “child’s interest” or the well-adjusted personality, self-expressiveness, or self-esteem as more attractive alternatives.

America’s school wars inevitably turn on fundamental questions: What is the goal of education? What do schools intend to teach? And what do they expect their students to learn? A school that sees its ultimate product as the well-adjusted teamworker with a healthy sense of self-esteem is unlikely to adopt the same means as a school whose goal is to create individualists. But the jargon of the educationalists is particularly unhelpful in sorting out such questions. One of the current buzz-phrases, for example, declares that “All children can learn.” But that begs the question: Learn what? Trigonometry? Advanced physics? Or some watered-down stew packaged under a label like “sound environmental stewardship?” Does the phrase “all children can learn” mean that all students have the same capabilities? (In which case it is false.) Or that all students will be able to meet the same standards? (Which is fanciful.) Or, rather, does it mean that the standards for learning are set so low that they can be met by all students?

Charles J. Sykes

To read . . .

Dumbing Down Our Kids: What American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can’t Read, Write, or Add. Charles J. Sykes. St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1995. ISBN 0-312-13474-6

Case Study Corner

I am trying to incorporate the new generation of workers into my medical practice. I hired a young woman who had been highly recommended by a local radio station where she worked for a while. We hired her at a pretty good salary for someone so young, even though she had no degree. She talked a really good game. She was to be my administrative assistant and her duties were outlined for her very clearly. But she had absolutely no respect for her elders or authority. She was constantly challenging me in every request I made of her. She was continually saying she needed something to do, but then I’d find that she hadn’t done the things I had already assigned. She finally gave her notice saying she found something else for a great deal more money (which I found out later was not true). On top of all this, she did not work out her notice. I know she could have been an anomaly, but it has scared me to death to give anyone else her age a chance.

I agree with you that this woman may have been an anomaly. But that said, your experience reinforces how diligent we must be about the selection process. Don’t be discouraged about this emerging generation of young workers. There are lots out there who are willing to work hard, but we need to enforce clear expectations along with thoroughly screening them. Unfortunately, society has sold them a bill of goods about what work is. When they discover that it can be repetitive and less than stimulating, they’re likely to be disappointed and start looking for other opportunities. As employers, we have to do as much as we can to engage them from the get-go and help them understand the critical role they play within the organization. The fact that this woman consciously deceived you tells me that she’s not mature enough to succeed in any responsible position as of yet. Eventually, this will all catch up with her. Unfortunately, you had to play a role in this process. I would beg you to firmly let anyone who calls you in the future know that you would NOT hire her again. Without saying anything further, they’ll get the message.

This is Spooky

The Central Intelligence Agency is advertising on Comedy Central as part of a recruiting effort for its clandestine service. Using the hook, “Are you ready for a world of ambiguity and adventure?” the ads have been running since August on this and a variety of other cable channels. The agency says it is receiving 2,800 resumes per week as a result.

Blink and You Buy It (They hope)

Clear Channel Communications has begun selling radio commercials lasting two to five seconds in length placed between songs in hopes that it can successfully battle listeners’ tendency to change channels when a commercial break starts.

Unlike traditional radio commercials that can last as long as 60 seconds, these “blinks” are designed to reinforce conventional radio messages that may be broadcast during longer commercial breaks.

Don’t Forget . . .

The Center’s curriculum on managing *age diversity* is the perfect solution for improving results in your workplace. From the novice presenter to a seasoned veteran, the package includes easy-to-use instructions and materials that eliminate the hassle of research and development. Deliver the material in a live session. Make it available online. Hand someone the self-directed course on a disc. Then watch productivity grow as employees incorporate what they learn into the workplace. Contact Deb Bonner for more information. 1-800-227-5510.

Have a Situation?

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