What is with Kids these Days?

By Jason Powell

December 2, 2010

I appreciate the opportunity to present the society with my second paper. As I looked back at my first paper, I realized that it has been almost exactly two years ago to the day. I thought that once I presented my first paper, it would be much easier to pick my topics of my ensuing papers; I was wrong. I agonized over this since we received our schedule for this 2010-2011 season. Well, agonized might be a little bit of an exaggeration. I will say that I have certainly felt the pressure over the last several weeks.

Recently, Former President George W. Bush's autobiography came out and I thought about writing about him, but then I remembered that was supposed to stay away from topics on politics. Then I thought about writing on Former President Bill Clinton, but then I remembered that I needed to stay away from topics on sex. Then I thought about writing a paper on our current President, but then I remembered that I cannot write about topics on religion. And then I remembered some wise advice from our esteemed fellow society member, Bill Engler, who once told me to never talk about your job; it will be a miserable experience for everyone. Against Bill's advice I am going to touch on my job. Not specifically about what I do, but more of what I have been confronted with over the last six months. I also thought that this would be a good topic for the society, since we all are or will be dealing with the same dilemma.

Speaking of work, I have been in the workforce for the past 23 years. I have only worked for five companies, two of which my tenures were about 10 years each, with the last two companies of less than year each. My intention is not to read you my resume, but to provide with some background as to what influenced my topic this evening.

During my career, I have always been the youngest of my peers. My first job, I found myself working with people that were my Dad's age, in fact, some of them actually worked for my Dad. My second job, I was one of the youngest sales representatives, and moved into a management position, supervising sales representatives which were older than me. I then moved to Hopkinsville into a management position, and again, I was younger than the employees that reported to me. This continued until I left Dunlap Sales, and entered the medical industry. Then I became one of the older

ones. I was managing women who were 15 to 20 years younger than me. And then most recently, I am managing employees in their twenties. Here in lies the problem, or opportunity.

As you can probably tell, I am going to talk about Generation Y, the generation that was born between 1980 and 2000.   The definition of generation is: a group of individuals born and living about the same time, or the average interval between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring. The issue isn't them, but more of our ability to successfully interact with one another. From the book by Hans Jaeger, <u>Generations in History, Reflections on a Controversy</u>, it is suggested by Auguste Comte who was the first philosopher to systematically study generations. He said "social change is determined by generational change and in particular conflict between successive generations".   To quote other authors of the book, <u>Y in the Workplace</u>, "every generation has a touch of generational centrism or gencentrism, the belief that their generation is the most unique, advanced and capable compared to all preceding generations". It would argue that all generations complained about their predecessors; I most certainly have.

We have taken for granted the labels of the most recent generations. There is quite a bit of controversy as to when and what to call each generation. I would be digressing a bit if I were to delve into this, so let's just agree to the basic names and time frames for each generation. They would include: The Lost Generation or those who would have fought in World War I, the "Greatest Generation" or those who fought in World War II and were born between 1901 and 1924, the Silent Generation or the Children of the Great Depression who were born between 1925 and 1945, the Baby Boomers who were born between 1946 and 1964 (which I just missed by one year), Generation X who were born between 1961 and 1981, and finally Generation Y or the "Trophy Generation" who I already mentioned, were born between 1980 and 2000.

Back to my problem or opportunity, to manage and interact with Generation Y, otherwise known as: Gen Yer's, Nexters, Echo Boomers, Internet Generation, iGeneration, Generation Why?, and Millennials. There are about 75 Million of them in the US, about the same amount as the Boomers, and a great deal more than my generation, Generation X which there are about 50 Million. They are coming into the workforce with a vengeance, uprooting all that the Veterans and Boomers have established and with their numbers, they will easily over take the Gen Xers who are trying to maintain this order that has been established by their predecessors. "They are the first generation who got carted around in huge SUVs with "baby on board" signs announcing their arrival. They are the first generation of winners,

because they were not allowed or able to lose in school and basically got gold stars just for showing up", says authors of the aforementioned book, Y in the Workplace.

Where this may seem to be a problem for the older generations, we actually have an opportunity. We might not like the fact that we have to rely on them to support us for the next 50 years or so, but we do need to rely on them to support us for the next 50 years, until the next generation has to pick up the slack and take care of the Gen Ys. They are our future, and we need to get used to it. Instead of complaining about them , of how lazy and inconsiderate they are, we will need to mentor and lead them to success; at least that is what I plan on doing, I have to, it is my job.

Like all new generations, they are not very well understood by their predecessors, you and me. Yet we are the ones to blame for raising them to become what they are today and for creating the conflict that is occurring in the workplace. They have a different work ethic, attitude, and different set of values than us and this creates a great deal of conflict for both them and us. Neither of us is happy with the other and it is time to figure out how we can both benefit from our differences. After all, our future, the Gen Ys, the Gen Xs and the Boomer Generation, depends on it.

I mentioned earlier the nickname of the "Trophy Generation". This is due to their all getting a trophy for participation in whatever sport they played, and they didn't actually have to win or achieve a certain level of expertise to be awarded the trophy. I have coached several YMCA youth soccer teams, and we have to teach them that they need to kick the ball in the goal, which is the object of the game, but we are not supposed to teach them to count how many times they have either scored or have been scored upon. We are all winners, and it is not good for their self esteem. Yet, they all know and are affected by the fact that they or the other team has scored more goals. In fact, most of them have their Grandparents standing on the sidelines keeping score and offering ice cream to the winners and lifesavers to the losers.

As I have said, the Boomers and Gen Xers are the ones to blame. We want to raise our children with a healthy amount of self esteem. We want them to believe that they can do anything, and be anything they want to be. This is basically a rebellion by the Boomer and Gen Xers to how they were raised. They were products of the generation who wanted Children to be seen and not to be heard, or that they should show respect no matter what, and that they need to work hard to get somewhere in life. They are the generation that had to walk to school four miles, uphill both ways, in 12 inches of snow, without boots. They are the generation who would kick their children out of the house in the

morning, after doing our chores, and not allow us back into the house until dark. They are the generation who didn't tolerate back talking, or the use of profanity without the consequence of washing their children's mouth out with soap or having to pick a switch from a tree in the yard.

Oh boy, how things have changed. My kids do Not know what it is like to walk to school or ride the bus. In fact, we have dropped them off and picked them up from school every day, waiting in line for 30 minutes so they do not have to wait on us. They are not allowed outside without a parent, for fear of them being kidnapped. And they are put in timeout instead of being spanked because we as the parents are afraid that we will be reported to Protective Child Services if someone sees us performing corporal punishment. We want to have strong relationships with them, supporting and protecting them at all costs, while providing them with boundless opportunities.

One of the reasons that this can be a problem in the workplace is that Gen Yers have another characteristic that we as their parents have instilled upon them. They have been told that they can do anything or be anything; in addition they have not had to win or earn a reward, so they have a false sense of accomplishment. This has developed into a costly phenomenon called "catapulting", where the Gen Yers are able to catapult to the top of an organization or catapult right out of an organization. They tend to want instant gratification and believe they deserve the promotion; otherwise they leave the organization and go to work for a competitor. It cost my company approximately $50,000 to train a new sales rep, and we have been hiring Gen Yers over the past several years, only to train them, teach them the business and industry, and have them work for a year or two and leave us to start over again. This doesn't include the opportunity revenue that we are losing, if they were to stay.

Some of the other consequences to this self-inflation movement are: ability to handle failure, difficulty learning from their mistakes, accepting feedback and constructive criticism, not using realistic measurements when it comes to self evaluation, blaming others, lack of self awareness, and the inability to focus on the now. For example, "Sweetheart, it isn't your fault you failed the test, it is your teacher's fault for not helping you prepare for the test". A president of a communications company said, "A lot of these folks have a tough time being corrected and an even tougher time not blaming everyone else for their mistakes".

There are some advantages to the self- inflation movement. Scott Dodson, COO of Divide By Zero Games, Inc. says, "My experience with this generation is that they do not know that anything is impossible. Their lack of experience coupled with their tremendous confidence is an asset". This

4

confidence is also evident in the way they interact with fellow employees and customers. They tend to be very outspoken and bold. They have always had the opportunity to express their opinions, and the confidence to do so. It is their can do attitude and their belief in themselves that enables them to take chances which can be very valuable to an organization that is looking to venture out into new markets.

Psychologist Haim Ginott said, "Parents often talk about the younger generation as if they didn't have anything to do with it". When a parent is hovering or acting on behalf of their children, this is known as "helicopter parenting". They have good intentions, and only want the best for their child, but they take it a few steps too far, resulting in robbing their child's ability to learn from their mistakes and grow independently. Generation Y is very close to their parents, and in this case a bit too close. A good example of this would be, when a parent calls a college age child to wake them up in the morning or if they were to call a professor to discuss a grade that their child earned.

Despite the challenges that Generation Y might encounter with this close relationship with their parents and their inability to think for themselves and solve problems on their own, there are some advantages that can come from their being raised by "helicopter parents". Generation Y has high expectations of their managers. They want to recreate the same sort of relationship with them as they have with their parents. Whereas this can be intimidating for the manager, once this is achieved, the Gen Yer will be very loyal to them, and will be willing to tackle most any assignment and their loyalty will surpass the loyalty they have with the company.

Other advantages included in this wonderful relationship with their parents, is the confidence that they gain by the automatic support system. This like the "parent –like" manager enables them to feel as though they can conquer most any hurdle. When they are in constant communication with their parents, they are getting wise council, which they would not be able to get from their same-aged coworkers. It is imperative that managers of Generation Y, stay in close contact, listen and help them in a parental fashion. For example, one of my Generation Y employees called me the other day to tell me that he might need to take a few days off. He sounded upset and was having a hard time talking to me. He then told me that one of his best friends growing up was just diagnosed with a form of brain cancer and he wasn't sure how long he had to live. He then asked if he could head home to deal with this awful news. After talking with him for a few more minutes, he seemed to settle down and was willing to stick it out the rest of the day.

Motivating Generation Y can be a challenge. They thrive on external motivation more so than internal motivation. They are much more concerned with the moment or instant gratification, than looking out in the long-term. They are demanding constant reinforcement and rewards in order to be motivated to produce more results (i.e. bonuses, recognition, salary increases and promotions or anything that will help them get something now). We all enjoy external motivations like these, but Generation Y seems to take this to a new level; and they are happy to share this with you. Something that a Veteran or Boomer would never talk about, Generation Y shares all employment information with their friends and colleagues. This too can cause big problems with morale, and certainly if they are getting a better deal than their peers for obvious reasons. As a manager, we now need to expect that they will share much more information than what is normally accepted.

Another example of this comes from Helen, an HR executive for a Marketing Research Company, she says, "We hire researchers who are new graduates for research positions within our company. They have achieved the highest level of education in their field and due to demand they have many opportunities for employment. They also received a high level of compensation without any real world work experience. They truly feel entitled just because they have finished their degree. It takes us four weeks to train them and almost six months of experience before they are really up and running. They want lunches, gifts, prizes, advancements, and acknowledgments for everything that they do and feel it should be part of the job. We find that when these aspects are not incorporated, they slack off a bit. This is compared to our other new hires that are seasoned in the field and have transferred from other companies. They tend to come to work for us because of our reputation and because they believe in our mission and vision"(Y in the Workplace). There is a disconnect between their internal motivation, which is based on a false sense of self-awareness, and their constant need for external motivation. This certainly doesn't go over with their intergenerational colleagues and managers.

Again to look on the bright side of this need for external motivation, Generation Y is constantly wondering what their bosses' think of them and their performance. They are constantly looking for the external rewards or praise and recognition. This is very different from other generations, and a manager can definitely take advantage of this and gain more productivity out of the Gen Y subordinate. A Gen Y says: "Gen Y employees talk about how important it is for bosses to take the mentoring role and guide them with their work. Although at times this can be annoying to managers and supervisors. Gen Y employees say they really value this feedback loop and that it helps them stay motivated and committed".

One of the unique characteristics of Gen Y, is that they were all born into the Internet Age. They haven't had to learn how to use technology like us Boomers and Gen Xers, but they were actually taught by technology. It is their first language so to speak, and this is a huge advantage they have over other generations. It wasn't their parents who were teaching them how to speak, and interact; it was Barney the purple dinosaur and/or the Disney Channel. Technology has had such a huge impact on how we communicate with others and it varies tremendously by generation. For example: Veterans grew up using rotary phones and had in-person meetings and conversations, Boomers had touch tone phones and the use of memos, Generation X was brought up using cell phones, conference calls and e-mail, while Generation Y is using Smart phones, web base social networking, webcams, text messaging, and instant messaging. They are acquiring and gaining information at much higher speeds and volumes, and are doing it very well, all at the same time.

There is another conflict that is occurring. As Generation Y has entered the workforce, they are bringing with them this new language which is confusing to other generations and has had a negative impact on the workplace language and redefining what is appropriate communication. Each generation has different ways in which they prefer to communicate. A boomer may want to schedule a face-to-face meeting in their office, while a Gen X will end up calling a person after excessive Instant Messaging, and then the Gen Y will want to be texted or IMing, but they do not want to talk to you. This often leads to miscommunication and misunderstandings. They also will conduct their impromptu "text" or "IM" meetings at what the Boomer and Gen Xers feel are inappropriate times; during a meeting or a conversation.

An obvious concern for the older generations is that this new technology language is almost shorthand, and is in their minds unacceptable. Gen Y has never been without computers, cell phones or email and they would much prefer to send you a message using one of these devices, and preferably a short text, versus actually finding a pen and a proper piece of paper to write out a letter long hand. It would be a waste of time and it would take forever to get this to you via the "snail mail" system. I will not get into the language that is used, Rich Maddox, did a superb job of demonstrating this new language to us about one year ago. This frustrates management of today, which is currently made up of Gen Xers and Boomers, who were raised and taught how to communicate properly.

To be fair to Generation Y, they have grown up communicating instantly and they have been able to find information with a touch of a button. They see no limitations in communicating with anyone, anywhere and anytime. This also allows them to have more time to be creative. They spend

7

much less time making sure that things are properly communicated and more time on being creative and looking for new ways to accomplish the same results. Another advantage they have over us older folks, is the ability to communicate using these new technologies all at the same time; a form of communication multitasking. They are able to produce quality work, with ear buds in their ears listening to music, while searching the internet for information as well as reaching out to their vast social networks to include masses amounts of people simultaneously, while IMing.

Generation Y has the propensity to get bored or impatient with current processes that have been put in place by the Boomers or Gen Xers. They demand answers now, and think they can find the information on their own faster than it takes to ask the question. They also do not need to meet with any one face-to-face if they can text them or email them. This may have a negative impact on their ability to interact with others; which let's face it, is the way the world turns, at least this is how their older counterparts prefer it. So if managers plan on being successful managing Generation Y, they will need to get on board and do their best to learn these new technologies, and to also see the possibilities that can be achieved through this media.

The last area of difference that is becoming more evident with Generation Y, is their work ethic. When a Gen Y was asked the question, "how do you like your job?" she responded, "Honestly? Don't make me come in from 9 to 5 dressed in my parents' uniforms of suits and pantyhose. Flexibility, creativity, talent, performance-driven, casual, and hip are the buzzwords of my generation: not stiff, obedient, rigid, and structured. What's wrong with you people? We are electronically connected at all times, don't worry. I'll get your phone call, I have an iPhone, and I'll get the e-mail document you need to give me, I have a MacBook! Why do I have to work in a cubicle during the hours you set when I can work better and more efficiently on my own time, on my own couch, with my cool dog Sam right by my side?" Companies like Google, have gone way out of their way to satisfy this emerging workforce. They have built a headquarters that rivals any fitness club and shopping mall, equipped with stress relief rooms, nail parlors, and they even allow their employees to bring pets into work with them. They do work in cubicles, but they also offer private rooms so the Gen Y's can handle any personal business without the interruptions of fellow employees or the embarrassment of having to deal with sensitive issues within earshot of their co-workers.

Gen Y has a different outlook. As Google has discovered, this new generation has a combined their work with their life. A few of these differences are: The traditional work ethic says, work comes first, while Gen Y says, life comes first. The traditional work ethic separates work from personal time,

while the Gen Y work ethic has no distinction between work and personal time. They are probably onto so something with this new work ethic. It will take some time getting used to. I am actually encouraged by this new take on work-life integration and I look forward to seeing how this will help me manage everything better, or at least get the approval of my boss to do so.

There are some other differences between our generations of today, but we might be here for another hour if I were to have explored them with you. I wanted to point out some of the main differences and the pros and cons of each, to give you a better understanding of this younger generation. I wanted to explain the background behind their attitudes, work ethic, casual dress codes, and their insatiable use of technology. They are not being rude or disrespectful to their elders, they have been brought up this way; to call everyone by their first name and see everyone as their equal.

This generation is huge, and they make up most of the workforce here in the US. We can complain about them, and wish that they will get on the program, but I think we would be engaging in a losing battle. What is the old saying,"if you cannot beat them, you might as well join them". This is what I am encouraging you all to do. After all, our survival depends on them. They are the ones who will fund our retirements, and will taking care of us in our last years here on Earth. We need to mentor and support them in what they are doing. They can certainly use some of our wisdom to go with their over-confidence, and high sense of self esteem. So look past their dress, ear rings, texting while in meetings and basic laid back attitude, and embrace them. For again, our future depends on them.