In Good Hands

Career Development

I got my first teaching gig over 50 years ago when I became a big sister. Since then, I've loved every opportunity that I've been given to have an impact on the lives on others. I've watched those I care about learn, grow, and change the world.

During my time in workshops, on social media, and even in private conversations with colleagues and friends, there has been a lot of focus on what is wrong with millennials. I am less concerned; there is no doubt that every generation sees change as a step in the wrong direction. However, differences aren't inherently bad.

The proper attribution of this quote to Socrates or Kenneth John Freeman notwithstanding, the sentiment contained within remains: "The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers."

While my experiences with young people have not been conducted under strict research guidelines, my five decades of observations suggest that things are never as bad as we choose to make them seem. As a parent, teacher, tutor, mentor, counselor, sister, friend, and student of human behavior, I am happy to say that whatever failings are attributed to millennials, they have proven themselves more than capable of shedding the traits despised by their elders to do the work that needs to get done.

Instead of focusing on generational differences and establishing an "us versus them" mentality, we

should try to understand each other. This thought brings another Socrates-attributed quote to mind, “The secret of change is to focus all your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.”

We should be building up the next generation, helping them to navigate the world they are inheriting, not castigating them for receiving trophies they did not earn.

An important aspect of teaching and mentoring is to meet our students where they are before expecting them to be anywhere else. This means helping them to understand how to bring their current personalities, experiences, and expectations into new environments and showing them how to use their strengths to make contributions that serve not only themselves but also the greater society.

One of many recurring knocks on millennials is their attachment to their devices — their constant need to be connected. We could chastise them for bringing the devices into the workplace and using them at inappropriate times, or we could educate them on appropriate usage and reap the benefits of a workforce that is more comfortable with the technology at their fingertips — and the efficiency it brings.

The human need for connection, relationships, and approval hasn’t changed. However, the method by which those ends are achieved has. So, in revisiting meeting people where they are, we need to take the time to understand their needs and how obtaining those objectives may be different. Once we are armed with that knowledge, our job is to help them become better equipped to get what they want.

There was a time when the approach to human management was to tell workers: “Do your job and keep your mouth shut.” Our knowledge of human behavior and motivation management has evolved since the start of the Industrial Revolution, and it will continue to evolve through the information revolution and beyond. To expect that things will remain the same forever is shortsighted and counterproductive. It is time to embrace the next generation and help them channel their desires for connection, relationships, and approval in a way that speaks to who they are while knowing that, like technology, we (and the future) are in good hands.

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