

MILLENNIALS:



LEADING THE CHARGE FOR CHANGE

BY N. SUSAN EMEAGWALI

No conversation about student leadership would be complete without a closer look at the population of students who sit in our classrooms today, their traits and hopes for the future, to determine what kind of leaders they are likely to make. They are in fact the Millennials—born between 1982 and perhaps 2004—according to Neil Howe, a historian, demographer and renowned authority on generations in America. And the Millennials, also known as the Net Generation and Generation Y, are a generation like no other. With their love of technology, social networking, collaboration, innovation, and a “Yes We Can!” attitude, Millennials are forcing established systems, be it education, the workplace, or corporate America, to take them seriously; to reevaluate how they do business in order to accommodate what is the first digital generation in recorded history.

Deconstructing the Millennials

Each generation has a persona, with core traits, note Howe and William Strauss in their book *Millennials and K-12 Schools*, and the Millennials are certainly no exception. Howe and Strauss identified the seven core traits of this population:

- **Special:** Older generations have done much to protect and nurture the Millennials, instilling in them their importance to their parents and to the nation.
- **Sheltered:** Millennials have been the focus of the most comprehensive youth-protection movement in American history.
- **Confident:** They are very optimistic and trusting that the future will be brighter, even though their adults may disagree.
- **Team Oriented:** They have a strong desire to build consensus, and they forge tight peer bonds.

- **Conventional:** While their parents may have eschewed norms and rules, Millennials seem to want to reestablish a regime of rules.
- **Pressured:** They feel great pressure to succeed and meet increasing demands—be the pressure from the outside or because of their own ambitions.
- **Achieving:** The desire for accountability and higher standards drives the education reform movement. It also drives the Millennials, who are focused on achievement and meeting these high expectations.

Educating the Millennial and the Role for CTE

While their parents and grandparents may have thrived in a ‘chalk and talk’ school environment, the Millennials, with brains seemingly wired for innovative learning, are bored. More than 42,000 high school students were surveyed about

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their thoughts, beliefs and perceptions in 2009 for the annual High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE). The 2009 survey covered 103 schools in 27 states. The results showed that just as in previous years, students feel no real connection to their learning.

“We could have the same headlines [from past surveys], ‘Kids are bored, not connected to school,’” said Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, HSSSE project director, upon the 2010 release of the survey results. “We’ve got similar numbers in terms of kids who are bored every day—about 49 percent of the kids are bored every day, 17 percent every class. That’s two-thirds of the kids who are bored at least every day.”

Other data from HSSSE: Students who contemplated dropping out cited a lack of engagement with the school as a reason; 50 percent said they considered dropping out because they didn’t like the school (51 percent cited this in the 2008 survey); 39 percent said they considered it because they didn’t like the teachers (40 percent in 2008); 42 percent because they didn’t see the value in the work they were asked to do (45 percent in 2008).

At a time when raising student performance is a national concern, and student engagement is being linked to student performance, CTE has a real opportunity to show that it is a primary deliverer of strong academic preparation in ways that appeal to Millennials: *i.e.*, project-based learning (think Project Lead the Way as an example) and career academies. Howe told *Techniques* that there is no “right or wrong” in the learning or behavior traits of the Millennials compared to past generations, but their uniqueness does bring forth realities that must be addressed by the systems in place—whether it be education or the workplace.

To accommodate these learners, schools should redefine how they educate students in the classroom, Howe said. Finding out what skills educators want them to achieve and then designing the curriculum so that they can achieve those

goals—effectively reverse-engineering the curriculum—has to be an integral part of reinventing education. While the design of today’s classroom remains a relic of the past in which students have to learn things in the manner the teacher learned it, Millennials want to be taught in a way that *they* can understand it.

“The rapid spread and huge popularity of career academies—small schools for middle and high school students in which the curriculum is structured around career ‘themes’—proves that mixing relevance and rigor is a winning formula for Millennials and their families,” Howe and Strauss write in *Millennials and K-12 Schools*.

Howe told *Techniques* that this presents opportunities for CTE, in that it can offer students a learning environment that is aligned with their seemingly preferred learning style—a more hands-on approach.

Millennials “are very confident; they are all going to get four-year-degrees, and what that means for CTE is that you cannot represent CTE as second-best. Boomers had fewer problems with that, but not Millennials,” he said. “This gives CTE the opportunity to say that we’ll not only teach you a field, we’ll get you college-ready.”

He also expressed real concern for what he termed a “scandal” in how K-12 and postsecondary education are aligned. While many Millennials think they have what it takes to succeed in college, many find that they don’t when they get there, and are shocked by that realization. This requires leadership from community colleges and university leaders, Howe noted, to get policymakers to emphasize alignment between K-12 and higher ed.

Perhaps one ray of hope is that the movement towards standardized curriculum requirements with initiatives like Common Core State Standards, an initiative by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, could do a lot over the next de-

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cade to bring consistency in what students learn—perhaps fostering more seamless transitions into postsecondary education, without bedeviling high remediation.

Millennials in the Workplace

With millions of them reaching the age they can enter the workplace each year, they are sure to transform the way employers do business. For one thing, they want to solve problems; Howe notes that Generation X (Gen Xers) are more likely to say that if they don't like where they work, they'll quit, while Millennials are more likely to try to find a solution. To paraphrase him: If Millennials don't like what they see, they are more likely to get their parents to track down a legislator or some other person with authority to complain so that it may be corrected.

The sort of work style that the Millennials bring to the table is that of flexibility and group consensus. The Millennials look down on the cutthroat attitude that was de rigueur of, say, Gen Xers. The Millennials want everyone to help each other and believe that they are only as strong as their weakest link. The collective ethos of the Gen Xers of success by any means informed their approach to life, and they were willing to take risks to achieve their goals. But Millennials have lived very sheltered lives and as such have very different expectations about life compared to their parents; as such they are very much risk averse.

What Motivates Millennials to Become Leaders

In a 2008 study, *Change It Up: What Girls Say About Redefining Leadership*, the Girl Scouts of the USA surveyed both boys and girls across the nation about leadership, including how they define leadership; their experiences, failures and successes with their leadership activities; and their aspirations, hopes and fears. (The online survey was administered in 2007 to 2,475 girls and 1,514 boys between the ages of eight and 17.) Among its broader

findings, the study found that the desire to help others is the top reason both boys and girls want to become leaders.

“No matter who the role models are—be it a family member, a historic figure, or a celebrity—what girls and boys admire and want to emulate is their commitment to fighting against injustices in society, their focus on helping others, and their determination in overcoming adversity and standing up for beliefs,” the report noted.

However, there were some significant differences regarding the motivation to become a leader, and they fell along gender lines. Girls are more likely to want to become leaders so that they can help others (67 percent vs. 53 percent for boys); share their knowledge and skills with others (53 percent vs. 47 percent); and change the world for the better (45 percent vs. 31 percent). Boys are more likely than girls to be motivated by the desire to be their own boss (38 percent for boys vs. 33 percent for girls), make more money (33 percent vs. 26 percent), and have power (22 percent vs. 14 percent).

One thing is for certain—regardless of why Millennials want to become leaders, educators and programs need to harness this generation's leadership potential. At LeaderShape Institute, a nonprofit based in Champaign, Illinois, they are seeking to do just that. LeaderShape has graduated about 42,000 students from leadership training sessions hosted by 70 to 80 college campuses annually. Last year, the institute also hosted several students from Chicago's celebrated charter high school: Urban Prep Academy. One of LeaderShape's most notable graduates is Google co-founder and CEO Larry Page, who has practically adopted the institute's ethos of “a healthy disregard for the impossible” as his personal motto.

Paul Pyrz, president of LeaderShape, told *Techniques* that it is critical to expose young people to leadership concepts at an early age, because it allows them to make decisions about their lives “based on their

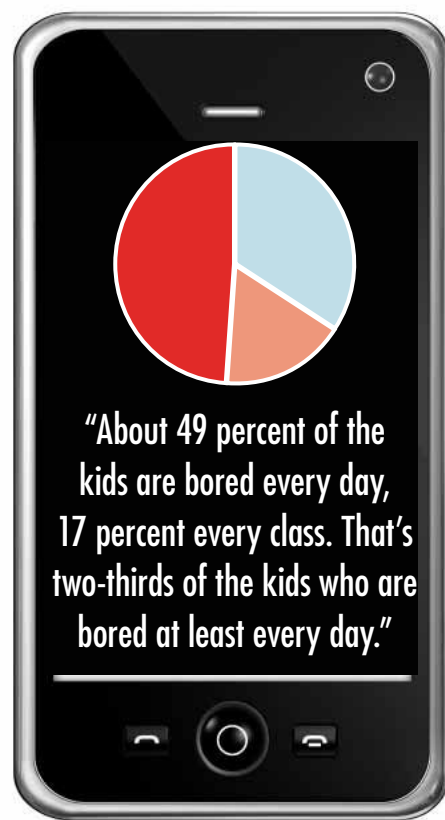


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passions and values, not necessarily where they will make the most money.” He said LeaderShape cultivates in students that “healthy disregard for the impossible” so that they may blaze through their own path in life, not that travelled by so many others. In what is becoming a much smaller world, they also need to learn how to work with others from diverse backgrounds.

“The world is getting smaller and smaller, and successful leaders, for that matter successful people, will need to have the skills to build and be a part of communities that they have not imagined so far in their lives,” Pyrz said.

In working with the Millennials, he sees in them a great desire to be part of something big that will bring about change.

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world. They want to have more meaning in their lives and demand that they connect with the purpose and mission of any organization they are a part of. I also think that these young people think change happens much more easily than old folks do, so they are often disappointed in prolonged efforts and long-term plans.”

Looking Ahead

In his bestselling book *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*, Don Tapscott notes that the Net Generation (his term for the Millennials) is a remarkable one that will truly change the world. They are changing the way business is conducted, which school reform initiatives are embraced, and have even affected politics—a la 2008 when they showed up en masse to vote in the presidential elections.

In *Grown Up Digital*, a follow-up to *Growing Up Digital*, Tapscott asks: Will we let this generation reshape the world? He notes, “As we enter the new age, the future won’t just happen. It will be created—and primarily by them.”

We can look at one of the Net Generation’s biggest stars, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, to see that Tapscott’s forecast may be proving right. After all, Zuckerberg’s innovation is being used by millions of people, young and old, all over the world, and is particularly embraced by Millennials who are using it to develop a kind of collectivism like no other. (Not to mention Facebook and other social media helped to facilitate revolution in the Middle East and North Africa.)

Tapscott adds: “They are seeking to protect the planet, and they find racism, sexism, and other vile remnants of bygone

days to be both weird and unacceptable. They will seek to share the wealth they create. They will want power in every domain of economic and political life.”

But make no mistake, the Millennials have attracted their fair share of detractors—from academics to journalists to pundits. Many have called them lazy, dumber than they should be, too entitled, lacking in social skills, and unable to handle the real world. Mark Bauerlein, a professor of English at Emory University, was blunt in his *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*, noting that Net Geners “are a portrait of vigorous, indiscriminate ignorance” (page 26).

Still, it’s anyone’s guess how the Millennials (or the Net Generation, if you prefer) will be remembered by history, since that history is still being written. But one thing is for sure—business as usual just won’t cut it in a world where the only constant is change, and we have a dynamic population of young people who are saying: “Indeed! Change is what we want!” **T**

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NAHB Prepares Students With Real-Life Job Skills

The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Student Chapters program is located at high schools and two- and four-year institutions across the country. Administered by the Home Builders Institute on behalf of NAHB, the program allows students who are studying construction to have access to all the benefits the association offers industry professionals.

Each year, NAHB hosts a Residential Construction Management Competition for its

Student Chapters. The competition challenges chapter teams to develop a complete set of workable drawings, a materials estimate and a construction schedule for a home plan; they then present their project to a panel of judges at the International Builders’ Show.

This year, California Polytechnic (Cal-Poly) State University, San Luis Obispo; Pennsylvania College of Technology; and Cumberland-Perry Area Vocational Technical School won the four-year college, two-year college and

secondary competitions, respectively.

Michael Stone, a member of the Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo team, said he and his fellow teammates were glad to be bringing the trophy back to their college.

“This was a great professional experience. Through the competition, we got exposure to the real world, learning how to put together a proposal and work as a team. It’s a far different experience than we can get in a classroom,” Stone said. **T**