THE GENERATION GAP: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND MANAGEMENT

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For the past several years businessmen have been in a panic about the rate at which our society has been changing all around us. This panic is not evident in running around and looking scared, but it is very evident in the kinds of questions which are raised about the young people of today, about the increasing rate of technical and general managers becoming obsolete, and about the nature of organizational change. Ten years ago we would have heard relatively little about organization change and organization development. Today, more and more companies are discovering that if they don't tool up for change they will be left behind. One aspect of tooling up for this change is to understand what is going on today in those who will be running our organizations tomorrow. What I would like to do in this short paper is to try to describe what I see to be the major needs and wants of today's young people, and then to outline some thoughts on how managers should respond to these needs and wants.

1) What are the needs and wants of today's young people?

The best way to answer this question is in terms of some themes which come out repeatedly as one talks to young people, and as one reads reports of student unrest, and as one studies graduates in the early phases of their managerial careers.

THEME 1: Disappointment and disillusionment

The young of today are disappointed in what they see all around them in our society. They do not see the older generation as practicing
what it preaches. At the minimum they are disillusioned by this; at the maximum they are angered by our hypocrisy.

As one student puts it:

"You cannot expect us to use logic and reason because there is not much around us that is logical."

A business school graduate puts it this way after one year of work: "I thought I could sell people with logic and was amazed at the hidden agendas people have: irrational objections. Really bright people will come up with stupid excuses...they have their own little empires to worry about."

There is great mistrust and a feeling of adults being hypocritical.

"People in positions of responsibility must be more honest with themselves. When you have lost self-insight accept this fact and know that you have lost self-insight."

"Be honest with others. Be able to admit errors. Don't give reasons for action which are just rationalizations. Be able to admit that you don't expect everything you say to be believed."

"It is hard to trust you. When you delay decisions, the effect of the delay is to make us lose trust."

I think the young people today see us with terrifying clarity, and they see clearly because we have taught them great diagnostic skills and have given them the time and leisure to use these skills on the very institutions which have taught them.

"When the student becomes service and problem oriented, and goes out into the community, he becomes radicalized because of the terrible things he discovers out there. Why radicalized? It is a terrible choice--do you spend your time helping one black child to learn better, or do you spend your time trying to reform the system which retarded his
reading in the first place?"

"Many of us never had to want for anything so we were free to think--think about what the good society should really be."

"You in the University want rational discourse, but would you be negotiating with students now if there had been no riots last year? Is this the result of rational discourse?"

**THEME 2: Impatience and action orientation**

The young of today want to solve some of the problems they perceive around them. They have the confidence not only that they can be solved, but that it can be done fast if one puts in enough time and energy. I don't think any one thing has irritated students more than the University attitude of "we are studying the problem, but you must be patient."

As one student puts it:

"We don't want you just to listen to us. We want you to listen and then do what we tell you to do. If you have to study the problem, then do the study in a week. If doing the study in a week means working twenty-four hours a day, then work twenty-four hours a day. If you get tired working that hard, then let some of us who won't get tired do the job."

A young graduate expresses a similar feeling:

"First you can't get agreement on a diagnosis, and then you get resistance to change ... you are told to stick around for thirty years and if it is still a problem, we'll look into it."

What good is curricular reform if the student who proposes it has graduated by the time the University institutes it? As one of my colleagues puts it, perhaps the reason four years seems like a lifetime to a student is because they see life as ending after thirty anyway.
Another reason for the sense of urgency and impatience undoubtedly is the draft. Students do not feel that they have the time to drop out of school to reflect on things. They must achieve whatever is to be achieved now. The draft not only constrains the student to stay in school but it serves as a generally threatening and punishing authority. You have to be a good boy, you have to get good grades, you have to stay out of trouble or you get drafted. No wonder the draft is for so many young people a specific target of their hostility and rebellion.

**THEME 3: Need for personal involvement and personal accomplishment**

The young of today are not satisfied to be small cogs in giant organizational machines. The main reason, I believe, is that they need to be involved in something which provides them with immediate feedback on how they are doing; something where an accomplishment can be linked to their own action somehow. They do not want to be engaged in projects which may show results only in some years, or where it is not clear who contributed what. The popularity of programs like the Peace Corps probably derives in part from the fact that each volunteer has some personal area of responsibility where he can measure the effects of his own efforts.

One **graduate** put it very well after one year of work:

"I didn't like the tight rein that was kept on me; I was not really allowed to make a mistake."

Another says: "You don't get any feedback for six months and then if someone doesn't like what you do, you suddenly get terminated."
In the University we notice a growing antagonism to grading systems. Such antagonism seems paradoxical if we say that students want feedback. The answer is that students don't want to be evaluated in an impersonal and arbitrary fashion. They feel that grades are often based on irrelevant aspects of their performance and that the teacher who gives the grades does not really know them personally. In my own experience they are right in feeling this way. All too often the grading system functions as an easy way to avoid genuine feedback and genuine evaluation based on close knowledge of what the student has learned. My hunch is that most performance appraisal systems which are built on ratings of personal traits are similarly arbitrary and useless.

The need for personal accomplishment is closely allied with a feeling of anti-authority and anti-establishment. The older generation cannot be trusted; it is hypocritical in preaching logic and morality and then behaving in an illogical and immoral fashion, and it is too passive and unresponsive. Therefore, the older generation must be resisted and, if possible, displaced. For many students and young people these feelings are a carryover from adolescent rebellion. They transfer the conflict with their own parents to all forms of authority. They hope to work out in the University and on the job the things they could not work out at home. They hope to compensate for what they see to be insensitivity and lack of courage in their parents.

The anxiety which bosses of college graduates and faculty members in Universities feel when they deal with the young of today
is probably a reflection of their own conflict and ambivalence. They too would like to strike out at arbitrary authority and at the stifling practices of large organizations.

THEME 4: Idealism and moral purity

The reason the young are as disillusioned and disappointed as they are is because of strong idealism, commitment to a pure morality which is uncompromised by the day-to-day demands of a materialistic world or various kinds of self interest. An especial irritant is phony excuses or untruths which the young perceive in the older generation. "Tell it like it is" is a key value. Do not rationalize or make excuses. If you have made a mistake, admit it.

In the business school graduate, the idealism shows up most clearly in his expectations that business will be run by the logical principles which have been taught in school. He is completely unprepared for the compromises which must be made when logical principles are adapted to human realities. As often as not he quits his job in disgust to build up his own company, to find a smaller organization where he perceives a more rational approach, or leaves organizational life altogether.

2) How can schools and organizations best respond to these needs?

If the young of today are disillusioned, impatient, action oriented, and prepared to get deeply personally involved on behalf of strong ideals, how can we in the Universities and in business best respond to these needs and wants? Of course, one simple alternative is to say that these are youthful foibles which will go away after a while. "When the kids grow up a little more they will settle down."
While the growing up is supposed to occur, the organization is, of course, busily teaching its value system to its new employees, what I have called organizational socialization. Through a variety of formal and informal pressures, educational programs, and indoctrinating efforts the organization attempts to bring the person into line with its way of doing things.

There are three kinds of responses to this situation:
1) The individual can reject all the goals and values of the organization: a response I am calling Rebellion;
2) The individual can conform to all the goals and values of the organization: a response I am calling Conformity; or
3) The individual can accept the basic, pivotal goals and values of the organization while rejecting those traditions and norms which are not crucial: a response I am calling Creative Individualism.

The problem is, if we take the "let's wait while they grow up" attitude, the likelihood is much greater that we will end up with Rebellion or Conformity, than Creative Individualism. The danger of Rebellion is that the young people of today are prepared to take rebellious action much more forcibly than they used to. They will get our attention one way or another. Another more serious danger is that the young of today are right in several respects. Reforms are needed both in the schools and in large organizations. We have drifted, we have become fat and lazy, we have let stifling practices creep in while extolling the virtues of our dynamic organizations. The young see this more clearly than we can, and we would do well to pay attention to what they tell us. But how do we do this?

Some will answer this question by saying—alright, let them try
to run things for a while, they'll soon see that they can't do any better. In other words, this is the exasperated parent, unable to control his child any longer, who abdicates completely. This response is just as foolish as the one of ignoring and/or repressing the young. We in our wisdom can certainly insure that the young will fail by giving them more than they can handle. This will make us feel self-righteous but won't solve the problem. And in the end the young will hate us more than ever.

The only sound path is a difficult one—we must seek to set up honest, open, collaborative relationships with the young. We must be prepared to deal with them directly, to share our concerns about their lack of experience and competence, but, at the same time, to recognize the areas where their criticisms are correct and where their judgment and competence are high. Then we must seek to give them challenging and meaningful tasks which take into account both our needs and theirs.

I will give you three examples of what I mean. One of the most successful seminars I ever had in the Sloan School was one in which I told the students at the outset that we were delving into an area where my own knowledge was rather limited. We then parcelled out the uncharted territory among four student teams and they went off to do the reading and research with the full knowledge that it was each team's responsibility to do a good job. If they did a poor one, I would never know. Therefore they were not performing for the teacher—they were working on a genuine learning task for all of us, teacher and students alike.

A second example: many companies are beginning to realize that the college graduate can be integrated into the organizatio
more rapidly and effectively if he is given a meaningful and challenging assignment at the outset of his career, and if his boss sees himself as a collaborator/teacher rather than a protector of the company against the incompetence of the new man. Elaborate management training programs can often be given more fruitfully after a year or two of working.

My third and final example has to do with recruiting. My friends in the placement and recruiting business tell me that in recent years business has done much better by telling it like it is instead of giving fancy sales pitches. You may be interested to know that some of our graduates read recruiting ads with the following filter: they assume that the company's weak spot is that which they emphasize in the ad. If the ads emphasize challenging careers and a "small company atmosphere", they assume that the organization's major problem is the inability to achieve these two things. I have tried reading ads with this filter and have come up with some fascinating hypotheses about some of our large corporations.

On the other hand, the recruiter who is honest in saying that life in his company will be drudgery for a year or so while the graduate learns the ropes, that the graduate may not make it, that there are some real risks along with the opportunities, seems to get at least an equal share of the applicants and often has circumvented disillusionment and high turnover.

Let me close with a few don'ts,

If the young are idealistic, don't try to oversell them with materialistic blandishments.
If the young are action oriented, don't ask them to sit down and spend another week or month talking things over with you.

If the young seek challenge, don't put them at arms length in low-key, passive kinds of training activities or make-work projects.

If the young are mistrustful, don't try to con them with sales pitches, rationalizations and defensiveness. They will see through it.

In the long run you will do better yourself in "telling it how it really is."

N.B.

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REFERENCES
