Will We *Ever* Let Them Go?

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Like most of you, I hate stereotypes and generalizations. They're unfair and usually do more harm than good. It's why I'm not a fan of "bucketizing" people into this/that gender/age/ethnicity/economic/religious/political category in a search for homogeneity. Lately it seems the main "fruit" of these efforts is disunity.

But, at the risk of not taking my own advice, I'd like to weigh in on the conversation about a group that is perhaps more stereotyped than any these days. . . *Millennials*. Having raised two of my own, and as an author/publisher/mentor/educator devoted to training up the next generation, I feel a special bond toward them. But, judging by what I read and hear these days, it's as though their foreheads are etched with a "scarlet M."

You've likely heard their negative labels: entitled, lazy, fragile, impatient, narcissistic, distractible, relationally challenged, needful, and the like. Hopefully, you've also heard the positive: passionate, creative, connected, entrepreneurial, idealistic, and globally minded. (As a product of the Sixties and Seventies, it makes me wonder what was said about us!)

But, here's the deal: IF some of the negative stereotypes of Millennials have some merit, I don't believe it's only (or even primarily) because of them. Much of that responsibility lies with us—the generation that has parented and trained them. By all accounts, we are not equipping them as fully as we should—not parents, not schools, and in some cases, not employers. We're also struggling to let go. Big time!

Too often, instead of releasing eagles to soar with confidence, we're releasing young adults that we continue to control, coddle, or inadequately equip. Generally speaking, we're not providing the practical, relevant, holistic training they need to succeed in adult life, and it's showing. I believe this is attributable to several factors: 1) parents and educators assuming *the other* is covering certain key topics (e.g., finance, soft skills) so they end up falling through the cracks, 2) consequences of the breakdown of the American family, and 3) educators focusing more on training the mind than the whole person for adulthood. It's no wonder that the stage of adolescence continues to grow. And grow.

That's on us. And, we need to do better. For them.

So, in this article, I'll be offering my recommendations—to parents, secondary school educators, colleges, and employers—to help set our younger generation up for real world success. We all have a stake in this game. Due to space limitations, it's an incomplete view, so I'll focus on my best ideas. I'm sure you can add to the list, and you might even disagree with some of my views. I welcome your contributions. That's what makes it a conversation!

To Parents:

We all want our children to be happy and successful, but sometimes *we* get in *their* own way. In fact, discussions with those receiving our high school graduates (e.g., colleges and

employers) reveal the downside of helicoptering, performance parenting, excessive coddling, and absentee parenting: students struggling with self confidence and coping with the demands of adulthood. Parents are now calling professors to complain about grades. Parents are calling employers to complain about their "kids" being overworked and underpaid. Parents are even coming to job interviews! Many parents are so invested in their children's success that they simply won't let go. Is it any wonder why so many young adults are having difficulty growing up? Their anxiety and fear of failure is coming straight from their parents.

With that, here are some suggestions for raising our parenting bar and releasing a new generation of well-prepared and confident leaders:

1. **Adopt an empowering parenting vision and mindset:** what if we replaced "raising children" with "raising future adults?" This mind-shift can make a world of difference. In our book on this topic, *Parenting for the Launch*, we call it, "giving them wings, not strings" and "moving over from driver seat to passenger seat."

2. **Emphasize character and "soft skills" over performance.** Success in career and life requires a solid leadership foundation made up of qualities like integrity, reliability, high standards, kindness, respect, other-centeredness, work ethic, humility, positivity, and manners. It also requires attributes like self control, courage, resilience, interpersonal skill, decision-making, time management, and communication. These are *sustainable* leadership qualities. Where are we placing our parenting emphasis?

3. **Invest in your relationship**. It takes both quality and quantity time to build a relationship that endures. "I didn't spend enough time with my children" is an all-too-common regret you never want to experience! Stay fully engaged. At all times!

4. **Surround them with positive influences and adult role models and mentors.** Use every opportunity to introduce them to great people! These invaluable third party voices offer friendship, wisdom, and connections to help grow their network. It also builds communication skills and respect for adults.

5. **Help them build self awareness.** In the teen and young adult years, it's critical to understand one's assets, nature, and passions. Parents can contribute valuable insights that instill vision, belief, hope, and a sense of value and purpose.

6. **Encourage them to stretch themselves and take risks.** Help them embrace new experiences and challenges. Regardless of the outcome, winning is in the journey. Build a "Go for it!" attitude, and be attentive to signs of fear of failure.

7. **Limit their use of technology and impose tech-free zones during family times.** Be highly attentive to the addictive tendencies of technology, especially if it starts to affect their relationships, communication, and productivity. And, don't let devices and TV serve as a "babysitter" in your home.

8. **Be strategic about preventing some of the common Millennial stereotypes**. That means promoting a strong work ethic (chores help!), instilling other centeredness (volunteering for the less fortunate), learning to accept constructive

feedback, being able to build authentic relationships, developing their ability to problem solve and handle disappointments and conflict, and teaching them how to communicate professionally with adults.

9. **Resist the temptation to solve their problems and manage their performance.** These are self confidence destroyers that hamper decision-making and can create co-dependence. Remember, we're releasing eagles to soar!

To Secondary School Educators:

Today's secondary schools face enormous challenges in covering all the bases and setting students up for life success. In addition to their core education efforts, our teachers also deal with tremendous regulatory demands and increasingly fragmented families. As a former school board chair and educator, I honor their tireless investment in our younger generation.

Because our secondary educators play a vital role in preparing their graduates for college, career, and life, it's appropriate to consider their influence on the general state of young adults. In doing so, I'll approach it from the perspectives of the students themselves and the institutions receiving them after high school (most notably, colleges and employers).

Importantly, secondary students are not in a position to advocate for themselves, and they justifiably *assume* they are receiving the education and training they need for life. And, why not? Meanwhile, our colleges and employers *assume* their young adults will arrive prepared for college, career, and life. Again, why not?

However, it is clear from our weak college graduation statistics and the feedback from universities and employers, that these assumptions are often erroneous. Far too many students are dropping out and/or lacking the basic skills that employers are seeking. While many students are *book smart*, signs are they're not always *life smart*. Frankly, this is a predictable outcome when leadership development and practical training occupy a secondary role in our schools. In too many cases, our training of students is neither *holistic* nor *sustainable*.

With all that in mind, I respectfully offer the following recommendations to secondary school educators who are serving today's students and tomorrow's collegians and employees:

1. **Develop and implement a *comprehensive vision for a well-prepared graduate for life.*** My favorite Stephen Covey habit, "Begin with the end in mind," applies just as much to organizations (like schools) as it does to people. However, in my years of speaking at schools and conferences, I have never witnessed more than 10% of the audience state that their school has defined a well-prepared graduate for life. Never. This is an urgent priority because it frames everything. What skills, character attributes, and knowledge do our graduates need to *succeed in life*? That our employers and universities desire? We *must* know this.

2. **Create the necessary pathways and programs to implement this vision for *all* students.** This will likely involve new courses, reprioritization, and integration of leadership-building concepts in all classes.

3. **Require leadership and life skills courses for *all* students**. These courses, often under the purview of FCS and CTE (Family and Consumer Science and Career and

Technical Education) are simply too important to be considered electives. In addition to leadership and character skill building, *all* students should receive practical education in post-secondary preparation, career readiness, communication and relationship building, financial management, citizenship, manners, and self awareness. *We can no longer assume that our students are learning these vital skills at home.* (In too many cases they clearly are not!) This will likely involve some reprioritization of other courses to make room for these essential topics. The keywords are "holistic," "relevant," and "sustainable."

4. **Dispense with the "college or bust" mentality.** The significant first-year college dropout rate reveals the unintended consequence of an overemphasis on college as the immediate next step. For many high school students, other options such as employment, vocational schools, community college, trade schools, a gap year, and military or service are better fitting options. These are far from "second rate" choices.

5. **Prepare *all* students for a professional environment.** Among the biggest complaints about today's younger workers are their casual written and oral communications and manners. Clearly, this is an adverse consequence of today's tech-laden world and casual culture. Communication is such a success driver in life, and it deserves to be a greater priority in our schools. Also, courses in entrepreneurship, that would expose students to all aspects of managing an organization, would be beneficial. (While the latest focus is STEM/STEAM, it's important to recognize that most jobs, even in those types of organizations, do NOT require advanced math and technical degrees. Let's remember that as we develop our course menus and requirements.)

6. **Promote leadership and character, and reward students accordingly.** So often, academics and athletics command the greatest award attention in our schools. Ask most employers and they'll gladly prefer a 3.5 GPA with great character to a 3.9 with little else. How many leadership and character awards are offered in your school?

7. **Cease with grade inflation.** This form of coddling proves to be a short-lived source of self-esteem when students face the reality of competitive environments like college and the workplace. Let's be honest, we do them no favors when we offer them a false sense of their capabilities. The lack of resilience and fragility being reported on college campuses is a direct consequence of this behavior.

To College Educators:

Our nation's colleges and universities have a powerful, two-fold influence on preparing young adults for life success. On one hand, they play a role as *receiver* of our high school graduates. On the other hand, after four plus years of educational effort, they serve as *senders* of their graduates to employers, communities, and independent life. They're rather like the third leg of the relay race from parents to schools to colleges to employers.

The implications of this positioning are profound. College educators, via their admissions criteria, have an enormous influence on the high school agenda, especially in the area of course requirements. They are the proverbial tail wagging the dog when it comes to high school academic programs. Frankly, I believe this is an undue, and not always beneficial, influence. **Academicians, who often lack work experience outside of the classroom, are setting the agenda.** Based on their actions, they seem to undervalue

practical leadership/life skills training (e.g., personal finance) that is so relevant to students. Otherwise you'd see these courses reflected in their admission requirements! Not surprisingly, high schools design their course menus to satisfy the demands of colleges. That's an issue. I would argue, a big issue.

Secondly, college course offerings and their own graduation requirements are often lacking in *practical* life training. Rather, their first few years emphasize traditional academic subjects that are often redundant from high school, and irrelevant to life after college for many students. In other words, *college course requirements appear disconnected from their role in preparing students for independent living*. This is also a big issue.

Thirdly, colleges are often shortchanging students in the area of employability and job acquisition. Despite their massive investment, students are not always required to take career readiness and job search courses to help them achieve a positive financial return on their college experience. Today's graduates are increasingly ill prepared to navigate today's recruitment process. If colleges aren't accountable for this training, who is?

Several of my recommendations to colleges echo what I shared in my thoughts for high schools. However, because of the unique positioning of our colleges in preparing young adults for independence, others are specifically directed toward them.

1. **Apply my points 1-3 and 5-7 from the <u>secondary school educators' recommendation list</u> to your college/university institution.** Unlike the high school setting, the next step for most college graduates is a well-suited career. Accordingly, this *should* have significant ramifications on college programs, rather than predominantly focusing on academics for academics' sake. However, based on employer feedback, this is not generally the case. *I encourage colleges to allow employers to command a voice on this topic* to do a better job of representing the end users receiving your graduates. Invite them to share in your classrooms—
to offer valuable perspectives outside of the academic bubble. Most importantly, solicit their views on what constitutes a well prepared graduate for life and reflect their perspectives in your program. *Just as your views are influencing the secondary school agenda, so should employers be influencing yours.*

2. **Focus more on leadership and life-relevant training and (comparatively) less on redundant core requirements that are often found in high school.** While a broad-based educational foundation is important, far too much of the college experience (and dollar!) is devoted to courses that are simply not as relevant or practically beneficial to students. The opportunity cost is too great.

3. **Completely revisit the academic admissions requirements imposed on our high schools.** Aside from a base of core academics, it would better serve all students to incorporate leadership and practical life training to a greater degree. (Does anyone *really* believe that a two-to-three-year foreign language requirement for high school graduates is more important to life than financial literacy?!? Yet, the former is usually required, and colleges are silent on the latter.)

4. **Assume greater accountability for student career success.** All colleges and universities should be required provide success measures of their graduates in landing a job (both within and outside of their major). This would not only be beneficial to families in the college search process, but it would also help students in selecting their major. (Wouldn't it be helpful to know the percent of students

who landed a job in each major?) Also, students should be *required* to take a comprehensive career-readiness course involving career exploration, qualification, marketing, and excelling. With the lack of jobs for youth and young adults, many are entering the workforce extremely green. All colleges should seek partnerships with area businesses to offer students real-world perspectives, internships, and recruitment for future jobs. The bottom line: colleges need to take more ownership in providing graduates with a significant return on their sizable investment.

5. **Dispense with the political correctness, safe spaces, trigger warnings, segregated dorms, and disrespectful guest speaker treatment/disinvitations.** These efforts merely delay students' ability to relate/communicate with others, resolve conflict, problem solve, handle adversity, and respectfully consider differing views and perspectives. Unfortunately, this heightened form of coddling has become routine on campuses, and it will only inhibit your students' ability to navigate life. (Thank you Dr. John Edison, Dean of Students at the University of Chicago, for your [example](#).)

To Employers:

Many of you have already received a few new, younger workers from their parents, high schools, colleges/vocational schools, etc. Some of your new hires have arrived well prepared with the skills and attitudes you value, while others are undoubtedly lacking. It's with these latter cases that many of today's unflattering stereotypes about Millennials are being formed.

I know some of you have even resorted to specialized management training to deal with interfering parents of young employees. Many of you are also experimenting with ways to help your more experienced staff members relate to incoming "needy" Millennial co-workers. Some workplace consultants are even advising companies to adapt in all kinds of (often unorthodox) ways order to accommodate/pacify Millennials—as if they arrived from some other planet. Yes, it's come this far. How sad.

What to do? Here are some recommendations that can serve *all* employees, including Millennials, in your workplace:

1. **Build a contagious culture of excellence with high expectations and standards for all.** Develop an inspiring mission, vision, and values statement with the input of employees. Then, through relational management, set each employee up for success by defining excellence on the job and coaching employees to achieve it. Management should be invested in the success of each employee, providing feedback and guidance along the way. While less experienced employees have a longer learning curve ahead, workplace standards should not be compromised for them. Nor should invaluable constructive feedback be withheld because of a coddling view that they can't take it. Let them rise to the occasion. Most will.

2. **Incorporate mentoring as a part of new employee training.** One of the surest ways to workplace success is tapping into the wisdom of experienced and highly valued employees through personal relationships. A mentor program, where younger employees are paired with seasoned personnel, is an invaluable asset for onboarding, professional growth, and network building. It will also help reduce the generation gap among older and younger employees.

3. **Partner with schools and colleges in your community to offer real world perspectives from the workplace.** Since many students lack the work experience our generation enjoyed decades ago, insights from the professional community can be especially beneficial in filling the gap. Also, your company and area students will benefit tremendously from an internship program.

This article was intended to call out some of the issues we are facing regarding the training of our young people for life success. Because so many parties are involved—parents, primary and secondary educators, colleges, and employers to name a few—it's a complicated and multi-faceted subject. *Evidence indicates that we're missing some key training components, in part because of a mistaken notion that someone else is covering the territory. Our young adults are bearing the brunt.* Thus, the stereotypes.

Excessive coddling is also taking its toll. The pendulum has swung from the "sink or swim" parenting mentality in my generation to one of overprotection and control today. We need to restore a healthy balance.

Our younger generation has so much to offer. With holistic, relevant, and sustainable training methods that cover *all* the bases, guided by an attitude of empowerment, they will soar. Let's all do our best to make this happen.