

State of Mind - January 2008

A group of employers was sitting around discussing a recent article about how to deal with “twenty-somethings” – the so-called “millennium kids” we hire and try to manage. Frustration was the universal experience regarding issues such as poor quality of work and lack of motivation demonstrated by this new breed of workers. This has prompted a search for any literature that suggests employees need to learn how to please those who sign the paycheck. Other than recommendations for writing resumes or interviewing, there is nothing.

The message is clear...the worker must be coddled. They have come to expect that everything will be done for them. Somehow they have failed to develop even basic survival skills. It is truly amazing that they show no sense of embarrassment or remorse when their mistakes are pointed out. When given negative feedback they come across as offended or clueless. This is even seen at colleges who have to explain how parents can help students deal with being homesick as if it is some type of epidemic rather than just a rite of passage.

In 1976, *Passages* by Gail Sheehy enlightened us about what to expect in each decade of our lives. More recently, she has revisited the topic and, not surprisingly, has found some differences. She notes, “People are taking longer to grow up and much longer to die – thereby shifting forward all the stages of adulthood by up to 10 years... The old demarcations and descriptions of adulthood, beginning at 21 and ending at 65, are hopelessly out of date... Adolescence is now prolonged until age 30. People don't feel fully grown up until they are in their 40s.”

If Sheehy is right, then we may be in for a decade worth of disappointment as we wait for the maturation process to occur. Her perspective helps explain some of the difficulties encountered when trying to find high performers who are capable of “self actualization” without having their hands held. Most adolescents are self-centered, lack the ability to delay gratification and have little insight. They have a distorted view of reality fueled by the rapid accumulation of wealth by relatively young entrepreneurs during the dot-com boom and distortions seen on television. This is a good part of the candidate pool we may pursue.

There are ways to address this without compromising our needs and expectations. However, because of the laws that bend over backwards to protect employees, you must be really careful when hiring. You must set expectations in clear terms that leave no room for interpretation. If you adopt certain new workplace characteristics such as flexible hours or less formal dress codes, they should be defined as a privilege predicated on meeting performance goals. While you may have to weed through more prospects, you will be more satisfied when you hire someone who has matured early

and understands the benefits of wanting to excel. They are out there; you will have to compete to get them – a challenge not unfamiliar to successful business owners.

As a spinoff, employers are going to suffer from acceptance of mediocrity as a performance benchmark if something isn't done to fix the education system. No-Child-Left-Behind is a crock. Anyone who knows statistics will understand "regression to the mean" and its negative implications regarding pursuit of excellence. While focusing on bringing up the scores of lower functioning students, we are diverting attention and resources from the high performers. No wonder the United States is falling behind most other developed countries when math and science abilities are measured. It is time to DEMAND the best out of everyone and realize that in all contests some people are left behind. It may be based on lack of talent or failure to try. Everyone should learn to read, write and do math that will assure basic competence, but in many cases, the best thing we can do is find the right fit for their talents and abilities. Everyone should be given the chance to excel, but those who don't live up just may not be meant to thrive in academic settings. Excellence must be the benchmark...not just making sure children pass some test.

Speaking of excellence...the West Virginia University Football Team showed what passion, teamwork and commitment can do to win against the odds. They should be looked at as a model for the West Virginia business community. Give our entrepreneurs and small businesses the right support, and we will show the world what we are made of. We have to adapt, change, take what we have, and not try to be anyone else. Our self-criticism should stay in the locker rooms of business and government, and we should go onto the field expecting the best and finding ways to excel using our finest West Virginia values.