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A publication of  Vantage
Leadership Consulting



TALENT MANAGEMENT

CROSSED WIRES: 3 KEYS FOR GEN X & Y TO EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE GEN Z



BY **Beau
River, Psy.D.,
Partner**

AS SEEN ON
Forbes.COM

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Frustrations are mounting as Gen Z gets plugged into organizations; the big question is whether the problem is young adults in the workplace, or elder generations struggling to effectively integrate new values systems into their cultures?

The disconnect between Gen Z and their organizations, bosses and elder generations is creating another fraught dynamic that adds to an already stressful climate at work. Multiple social reckonings over the past three years (the Global Pandemic, remote work, the Great Resignation and Great Layoff) have all raised the expectations and tension levels in workplaces. And the integration of Gen Z into working life appears to be causing another rift. A chorus of complaints now reverberates from boardrooms to break rooms. These concerns rose to center stage at last year's Davos summit where **"CEOs couldn't stop complaining about their Generation Z-ers."** Managers are finding Gen Z often **difficult to manage** and having a strikingly **different view of the world**. However, understanding this challenge requires a deeper look at generational and social dynamics impacting young adults entering the workforce.

A broader look at the factors influencing these impressions reveals a more complex picture. Namely, corporate America has a chronic complaint that resurfaces like clockwork about every 10-15 years: The 'kids' these days are just not quite right. This is not a new complaint and not long ago it was one **leveled at Millennials**. Less than 10 years ago terms like "lazy" and "entitled" became ubiquitous stereotypes of the Millennial employee - remember Simon Sinek's famous (or infamous) **musings** about Millennials? Yet as the **largest portion of the US workforce**, Gen Y managed **historically high levels of change** and were the backbone of navigating one of the most stressful periods in the history of organizational life during the Global Pandemic. Now there are few questions about Gen Y's resolve, and Gen Z is under the scrutiny of elder generations' expectations and assumptions about young adult life. **Research suggests** that a major factor in this dynamic is that as our view of ourselves changes, so does our view of the

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Stephanie Grady Clay has been with Vantage for six years and was recently promoted to Director of HR, Learning and Development.

MEET STEPHANIE CLAY: 10 QUESTIONS IN 10 MINUTES

- Q: What is the most important room in your home?** **A:** Hands down, the Kitchen. Both my husband and I love to cook/bake, and we're doing our best to cultivate that same love with our toddler, who will dance around the kitchen with us to Motown or Disney or CocoMelon. We make messes, have floor picnics, navigate constant requests for sheeeee (Cheese), but most of all, connect and enjoy our small family together. It's not a big room, we're constantly having to move each other to get things done, but it's exactly what we need.
- Q: What did you want to be when you were small?** **A:** Oh goodness, let's see. I definitely wanted to perform, be a singer or an actress. I love film, I come from a family of cinephiles. But I also love to bake, and I wanted to help people, so the dream for ever was to open a Drama/Baking studio, where we would teach both theater and cooking classes. Okay, that's still the dream, but layer in helping kids with their emotional development. The intersection of theater and therapy continues to intrigue me, especially in our current climate.
- Q: What is the best gift you have been given?** **A:** The best gifts I have received were given exactly when I needed them, and unexpectedly. So it's not so much the thing I was given as the connection I felt to the person who gave it, because I appreciated so much that they were seeing me at that point in time in my life. That has been true of my husband, my parents, friends...but okay here's one great example. For my 30th birthday, my roommate put together an all-day scavenger hunt, and at the end surprised me with a ukelele, something I desperately wanted but could not afford at the time. It was really special.
- Q: If you could go back in time to change one thing, what would it be?** **A:** Here's the thing – I'm a pretty big fan of time-travel, the multiverse, etc. So based on those theories and concepts, I hesitate to even consider what I would go back and change, historically or personally; something about having a baby has made me uninterested in alternate timelines...or perhaps, more afraid of the butterfly effect. (Watch the movie *About Time*; you'll understand.)
- Q: What's your favorite family tradition?** **A:** I'm in a weird part of life, the transition from what we used to always do, to what we do now. Loss and new life has a way of forcing change in tradition, and it's not easy to let go and make new ones. But if I had one that I've kept and continued, it's baking for the neighbors the weekend before Christmas. We go on a baking frenzy, and then deliver up and down our street. People don't expect that kind of connection anymore, it's like it's been lost in the Pandemic. It feels good to check in and see how people are doing and share something bright in the middle of Winter.

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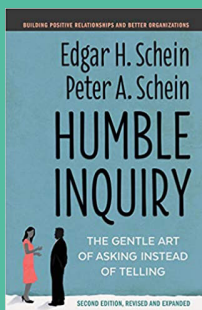


BOOK CLUB RECOMMENDATION

Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling

by Edgar Schein & Peter Schein

Build your emotional intelligence with this worldwide bestseller. The Scheins define Humble Inquiry as "the gentle art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not know the answer, of building relationships based on curiosity and interest in the other person." It was inspired by Edgar's twenty years of work in high-hazard industries and the health-care system, where honest communication can literally mean the difference between life and death.



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upcoming generation. This generational hand-wringing and critique by Gen X and Y appears to be directed at Gen Z as they increasingly enter the workforce.

Gen Z is also **struggling more** than any other generation in the workplace, both in managing stress and maintaining their sense of self. The stress and uncertainty of the Global Pandemic hit them as they were launching their careers and defining themselves as adults and professionals. As a result, Gen Z may seem more reactive in situations where they feel the greater good is challenged. This is likely related to them growing up with social upheaval, uncertainty about the health of the planet and **regular exposure to troubling social events** through online platforms. Further, personal authenticity is an area of particular emphasis for Gen Z. “Gen-Z generally perceives themselves as multi-hyphenates. Unlike previous generations, they don’t define themselves by just one or two traits or interests, and they don’t rely on their job title or company identity alone.” Said Tennessee Watt, Diversity & Inclusion Marketing expert and Gen Z thought leader. “Gen-Z tends to have more activities and areas of involvement outside of work to express themselves and their creativity. These extracurriculars can come to define Gen Z more than their 9-5 work identity.”

Given these factors, executives need to reconsider how to strike an important balance: they must both address Gen Z’s emphasis on authentic self-expression, purpose, inclusion, sustainability, and find ways to incorporate these areas of emphasis while earning fiscal results. This is no easy task and it speaks to a **broader challenge** leaders are facing in balancing organizational health and business performance. To better understand the challenges facing organizations, leaders and Gen Z itself, we sat down with Dr. Kelly Kinnebrew, an expert on Gen Z entering the workplace, to discuss how managers can better engage, guide and develop Gen Z, and adapt their talent strategy accordingly. By giving him an objective space to discuss his achievements and motivations, the assessment results reestablished him in the business as a potentially viable candidate for future leadership roles, while also clarifying his developmental areas and giving him critical feedback.

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Meet Stephanie
Clay: 10
Questions in
10 Minutes
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Q: If you had a warning label, what would yours say? **A:** Hahahahah – “Will push her baked goods onto you (out of love)” or “May interrupt your important work conversation to show you the latest adorable picture of her toddler.”

Q: What’s the most fun you’ve had this week? **A:** Hmm... one of three things: 1) Helping plan our firm’s Summer Retreat; 2) Playing my toddler’s favorite game, which is facing off against each other in the garage and running in circles; or 3) Watching a middle school actor convince an audience that he is being “attacked” by a ferocious, stuffed husky dog from IKEA. I certainly lead a strange and rewarding triple life right now.

Q: What’s the last movie you went to see? **A:** I’m honestly devastated to say, I do not remember the last film I saw in theaters. I can tell you last night we watched *The Bourne Identity* again on Netflix. But right now my life is mostly *Frozen* and *Moana*.

Q: What childhood activity do you wish you could still do now? **A:** Trampolines. The next door neighbors have one and those kids are having the time of their lives. At this age, all I see now is a way for me to break my arm. Or my back.

Q: Would you rather explore a new planet or the deepest parts of the ocean and why? **A:** Just reading this question made me squirm. Neither, thank you, I’m great right around sea level. (Why? *Finding Nemo*. *Armageddon*. And *Gravity*. And *Apollo 13*. And *Arrival*. And *Passengers*. And *Wall-E*. And *Alien*. And the third season of *Agents of Shield*. Please especially don’t ever ask me to go into space. Unless maybe Malcolm Reynolds is offering space on *Serenity*.) 🌐

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Beau River: Outside of stereotypes and labels, what is truly unique about Gen Z and their approach to work?

Kelly Kinnebrew: The first difference is this generation's upbringing. Many Gen Z-ers have [opted out](#) of some experiences that build independent living skills like getting a driver's license, dating, and holding a job. About 50% of Boomers and 40% of Gen X-ers held jobs in high school compared to less than 20% for Gen Z. This matters a lot since they are showing up to workplaces with less professional experience than prior cohorts.

River: How are stress and mental health concerns playing a factor in how Gen Z shows up and performs in the workplace?

Kinnebrew: Starting in 2011 we saw a [sharp upturn](#) in teen rates of depression, anxiety, risk factors for suicide, and suicide attempts. [More and more is coming out](#) about the negative effects of social media and exposure to terrifying news content on kids, teens, and youth and the connection to increased rates of anxiety and depression. Add to that a pandemic at key growth years for Gen Z and [dramatically fewer interpersonal experiences](#) and you have a perfect storm of delayed adulthood.

River: This is sounding quite challenging. What unique strengths does this generation show, or is it too soon to tell?

Kinnebrew: Yes, it is too soon to tell just yet, but we do have early signals and likely outcomes. This is the most educated and [demographically diverse](#) generation our country has ever seen, these are notable strengths with far-reaching implications. Also, Gen Z has a somewhat more realistic expectation of job fulfillment compared to Millennials which can help them push through early career challenges. But, as work continues to be the part of life that Americans look to find a greater [sense of meaning-making](#), these forces may push and pull against each other. Lastly, we see a stronger interest in [societal and climate issues](#) than generations past, and even a bit higher than for Millennials when they were their age. This has positive implications for corporate sustainability goals and finding the talent needed to drive those initiatives.

Dr. Kinnebrew went on to highlight the following three points for successfully engaging and managing Gen Z.

- 1. Help Gen Z work with uncomfortable feelings.** Frustrations and stress in the workplace are converting more quickly to HR complaints or simply quitting. Managers could help their people deal with these feelings by modeling tolerance in sitting with anxiety, and appropriately sharing their knowledge and experience in choosing healthy coping strategies. Related to emotion management, be cautious with feedback delivery. Contrary to what's out there, it's more [attention](#) than feedback that Gen Z is after. They may hope that this means praise, though the data says that they're a bit less praise-seeking than Millennials were at their age. Tread lightly with hard-to-hear feedback until a cushion of psychological trust and safety has been built.
- 2. Give clear direction before leaning into ambiguity.** Work offers few "right answers," but this is unfamiliar territory to most Gen Zs. Critical, big picture thinking may not materialize as organizations expect, and the delay will be felt more since careers demand these skills sooner than for any prior cohort. Ask probing questions to help them see all the parts to problems more fully. Teaching them about the affect heuristic couldn't hurt either. That's the tendency that humans have to consult our feelings when thinking through problems. Ask how much or whether that data should factor into issues.
- 3. Help Gen Z define professional authenticity based on the context.** Managers can help Gen Z-ers understand authenticity as an integration of an array of personas. Some personas should move forward as the context requires, and some should be downplayed. This is mature and adaptive. Also, helping Gen Z manage boundaries and build professional relationships will help set them up for success in the long run. Role playing hard conversations and practicing challenging interactions,

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even small stakes ones, can help them effectively manage relationships when people have different values, beliefs and priorities than they do. 

ABOUT BEAU RIVER, PSY.D.

Throughout his career, Beau has focused on accelerating the development of individuals, teams and organizations. Insights into people, systems and group dynamics gained through years of assessment experience allow him to match leadership behaviors with the strategic imperatives that drive operational success. Beau completed his undergraduate education at Dartmouth College, and went on to receive his M.A. and Psy.D. from the Adler School of Professional Psychology.

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