

Developing the Digital Generation

Dr. Tim Elmore / www.GrowingLeaders.com

Our organization is consumed with developing this next generation of students into leaders. They will soon be adults and will lead our world into the 22nd century, if you can believe it. They've been called all sorts of names as sociologists have tried to wrap their arms around their identity:

- The Millennial Generation
- The Internet Generation
- Echo Boomers
- Nexters
- Generation Y
- The Nintendo Generation
- The Sunshine Generation
- The Digital Generation

I like to call them “Screenagers” because so much of their interaction takes place on a screen. They truly are the digital generation—having grown up their entire lives with access to digital technology. What name do they prefer? Year ago, several thousand of them sent suggestions about what they want to be called to the late Peter Jennings at abcnews.com, and “Millennials” was the clear winner.

“In this uncertain economy and highly competitive business environment,” says Claire Raines, “companies across North America recognize that the differentiator is their people. Those organizations that emerge as winners in the battle for talent will have their fingers on the pulse of this newest generation. They’ll design specific techniques for recruiting, managing, motivating, and retaining them.

“The Millennials are just entering the workforce, and, as they do, employers are scrambling to find out everything they can about them. Are they Gen-Xers on steroids? Or are they a new breed entirely? How do they choose a career? And why? How will they change the workplace as we know it today? What are they looking for when they post their resumes on monster.com? What is their work ethic? What is unique about them? How do the best and brightest managers communicate with and motivate them?”

First, Let’s Understand Them

Before we talk about how to develop this generation into effective leaders and workers, let’s summarize the factors that have shaped them. Let me suggest a few factors below.

1. Terrorism.

You and I became familiar with it as adults. They grew up with it. 1993 in New York City. 1995 in Oklahoma City. 1999 at Columbine High School. 2001 at the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

2. Heroism.

Following the 2001 terrorist attacks, our kids heard the word “hero” more than they had in the entire previous decade. And the heroes were policemen, firefighters, city mayors and ordinary citizens.

3. Multi-culturalism.

Talk about diversity and tolerance. Those words are their middle name. They not only plan to travel and work abroad, the world has come to them—with a rising Latino, African and Asian population.

4. Patriotism.

After Vietnam and Watergate, patriotism reached an all-time low in America. September 11, 2001 change all that. Today, voting is up, civic service is up and flags waving in front of homes is up.

5. Syncretism.

This generation has embraced seeming contradictory beliefs. They're values are pluralistic and they attempt to reconcile varied and opposing principles, parties or practices so they can co-exist.

6. Nepotism.

Parental leadership is huge. Kids welcome it at school and work. Family is a top priority for most of them. Parents plan to direct their kids and secure their future. This can be a controlling factor.

7. Consumerism

Research shows these kids want both influence and affluence. They don't take "no" for an answer and are used to getting what they want. They want "things" and are impatient if they have to wait.

8. Technology.

This generation considers technology an appendage to their bodies. They connect via screens: texting, Facebook, internet, gaming, YouTube. Technology enables them to change the world.

Relevant Ideas for Developing Them

Based on research from Neil Howe, William Strauss, Mike Males and Claire Raines on this Digital Generation, let me suggest some relevant ideas to develop them into leaders:

1. Design their work space so that they are set up physically to share ideas. They love community and constant communication. They generally perform better in teams and with interaction. Create community at the workplace and expect the interaction to eventually improve your outcomes.
2. Provide consistent feedback. You may have been the type that said, "Just leave me alone once you give me a job." This generation is often the opposite. They are used to constant affirmation.
3. Establish a reverse mentoring program. Companies such as Procter and Gamble and Siemens have set up tutoring for middle-aged executives. Young newcomers help the executives navigate the Net. Jack Welch (formerly CEO of General Electric) says that "e-business knowledge is usually inversely proportional to age and rank. GE matched 1,000 managers and 1,000 young employees. Even though the younger cohort had just joined the firm, they often understood new technologies better than GE's finest.

4. Consider assigning projects to groups of employees who are evaluated as a group for reaching a goal. This is what these young people have been used to at school. Don't worry. You will find out who did most of the work and who performed as the most valuable player. But almost everyone in this generation is better by working as a team.
5. Communicate outcomes you wish to accomplish—but don't measure hours. These kids are not into clocking in hours, but finding the most innovative ways to reach a goal. Measure what really counts—results. Let them work odd hours if possible.

Assessment: Students are EPIC. Is Your Message Also EPIC?

Futurist and author, Dr. Leonard Sweet, coined an acronym years ago. It summarizes what educators and youth leaders should understand if they plan to connect with students today.

Students Today Are Part of an EPIC Generation

As you teach or work as a youth leader, your chances of getting your message to stick with Generation iY and be remembered by them will grow substantially if you make it EPIC. Why? Because they're part of an EPIC Generation. Assess your message and delivery. How EPIC is it?

E – EXPERIENTIAL

They are looking for a sage on the stage with a lecture but a guide on the side with an experience. Your message should create an experience.

Evaluate: Do you provide an experience, visually or physically, beyond a lecture?

P – PARTICIPATORY

Students want to participate in the outcome of where the class or project is going. They support what they help create. Allow them to upload and express their thoughts.

Evaluate: Do you let students have a “say” and weigh in on the direction of the program?

I – IMAGE RICH

This generation has grown up with images—MTV, VH1, Videos, Digital cameras, photographs and DVDs. Images really are the language of the 21st century not words.

Evaluate: Do you fill your messages with metaphors and visuals that help them retain it?

C - CONNECTED

Students are connected both socially and technologically. They want to interact with each other and dialogue as they learn.

Evaluate: Do you enable them to connect with each other and interact with the message?

Three Ideas You Can Use to Build Leadership in Students

Spin the Globe

Gather around your family globe. Talk about the different needs people have around the world. Ask your young person to spin the globe, and have them point to a certain spot on it, as it revolves. When it finally stops, identify what country their finger is pointing.

Then, discuss the culture, the people and the needs of that nation. If you need help, I suggest you pick up a copy of the book, *Operation: World*, by Patrick Johnstone. The book is an encyclopedia of each country, giving commentary on how to pray for each one. Finally, decide what one thing you could do to help the country you've discussed. At the very least, pray for them and the needs they have. Add them to your prayer list for the week, or pick a new country each evening to pray for.

Read Psalm 67. Discuss the message of the psalmist: God has blessed us as a means to an end. He blesses us that all the nations of the earth may hear about him. We are to utilize the blessings God has given us to bless others.

Stand For a Cause

Sit down with your young person and choose an organization that stands for a cause, and work for it. The cause could be feeding the homeless, it could be building homes with Habitat for Humanity, or it could be cleaning up the roadsides in your community. Be sure and choose one you believe in.

Pick a Saturday and go help them. Take a stand with them. Do something that communicates you believe in putting feet to your values. Talk over what it really means to believe in something.

Praying Through the Mall

Pick a time to take your young person to the shopping mall. Before leaving, tell them you are going to do an experiment that will help them learn to love and view people the way God does. (This experiment will be easier for older students).

Prepare them to walk alongside you as you stroll down the aisles of the mall. As you pass people, look into their eyes and observe their faces. Consider what kinds of needs those people are experiencing in their life. You'll find it's easy to spot loneliness on a face; it's easy to spot anger or aimlessness or depression.

As you pass them, smile at them. Then, once you've passed them, pray for the needs you might have seen in their faces. You might pray something as simple as: "Lord, those old folks looked lonely. Remind them of your presence, Lord, and if they don't know you, reveal yourself to them." Or, "Lord, those teenagers looked angry. Give them peace, Jesus, and if they don't know you, reveal yourself to them."

Do this experiment for as long as you want. I suggest you do it for about a half an hour. Afterward, sit down at a restaurant for a discussion. How did forcing yourself to stop, think about and pray about other's needs change your view of people? Remember Jesus did this too: "And when Jesus saw the

multitudes, he felt compassion for them, because they were sheep without a shepherd..." (Matthew 9:36)

Attempt the Impossible

This idea works best when both of you make the commitment and hold each other accountable to keep it. Sit down together and determine to attempt something this week you couldn't possibly pull off without God. It may be a big goal

they set for school, or it could be taking the risk to talk to someone about your faith. Both you and your young person should share what you'll attempt this week, then pray for each other. The Lord may even lead you to attempt something you hadn't planned. The key is to step outside of your comfort zone. Share what happened at the end of the week.

The Apostle Paul was consistently attempting the impossible. He put himself in situations where God had to show up, or he was sunk. That's why God was so real to him. His goal wasn't survival—it was pleasing God. In Acts 20:24 he said he didn't even count his life as dear to him, so that he could finish his calling and ministry with joy. Pray for that same spirit in yourselves.