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Adjusting the Sails *A Closer Look at Generation iY*

I SAW A MASTER SAILOR AT WORK IN JANUARY OF 2010, when I was part of a team that trained youth workers in Egypt. During our stay in Cairo, we got in a sailboat for a tour on the Nile River. It was interesting to watch our guide navigate his way down the river. He struggled at first, attempting to figure out which way the winds were blowing at the time. Once he did, some turns were fast, and others—not so much. It was work. Twice he stopped to rest, and we almost drifted into the banks of the river. Needless to say, he stayed quite busy—but he did get us there.

In one sense, this new generation of young people is like the wind. They are gusting in all directions, causing quite a stir in the workplace, their schools, and at home. Sometimes their overconfidence or impatience can burst out of them with hurricane force. Yep, the generational winds are blowing hard.

Now, let me ask you a question. Wouldn't it be strange for an experienced sailor to sense the wind blowing in the wrong direction and begin to yell at it? Please indulge me for a moment and imagine this scenario. Picture a sailor who gets so upset at the changing winds that he stands up in his boat and begins to shake his fist and scream in anger, lecturing the wind about proper direction and how it ought to help sailors while they are out at sea? Or wouldn't it be pitiful for the sailor to simply throw up his hands and sit down, surrendering to the wind? Or worse, what if he told his crew that since the wind wasn't cooperating, they were helpless; they couldn't do a thing but let the wind take the boat wherever it wanted?

As ridiculous as this sounds, this is what many adults have done with young people today. They have shaken their fist at the wind, or they've given up trying to do anything with it.

I have spoken to employers who told me they will never hire another recent graduate. I have heard teachers say they can hardly wait for retirement since they can't do a thing about kids today. I've had parents confide in me that they don't know what to do with their kids except scream at them.

Because I am a parent, a teacher, and an employer, I can identify with each of these reactions. But I've come to understand that the youth population is a bit like the wind on the sea—and good sailors know what to do with that wind. In fact, they actually use it to propel the boat where they want it to go.

They don't change their goal, in other words. They just adjust the sails.

And that's my whole point in writing this book—not to vent anger at kids today, but to illustrate how the winds have changed for young people and how we, as adults, must adjust our sails if we have any hope of taking our society where it needs to go. I believe there is a potential for crisis if we don't make some adjustments. But there is also incredible opportunity, and there's plenty that we adults can do—that we *must* do—to make it happen.

Let me get personal with you. I am deeply concerned, as a dad and as a leadership trainer who is in front of fifty thousand students every year, about the iY generation that's just beginning to enter the adult world. I believe in these young people, but I meet far too many adults who have given up on leading them well, and this scares me. These students have far too much confidence and far too little experience to be left to their own devices.

Generation iY has so much to offer, but they need direction—mentors who engage them in a relevant way, channel their energy, and provide them with the challenges they need.

Who Is Generation Y (and iY)?

They're the children of the late Baby Boomers and the early Gen-Xers—born between 1984 and 2002. And while experts differ on what to call them, all agree they're bound to change the way we approach life. Here are some common names for this powerful generation.

- The Digital Generation
- The Internet Generation
- Nexters
- Screenagers
- Echo Boomers
- Mosaics
- Sunshine Generation
- Bridgers
- Millennials

Portrait of a Generation

I don't know why you picked up this book, but I do know one thing: the subject of this book will affect you and everyone you know in the next fifteen to twenty years. The year 2030 is not that far away. Even if you have no interest at all, or no connection at all with this next generation of kids—you will be affected by how these kids turn out.

Generation iY will be the largest in earth's history, and iY kids are the largest portion of that generation. Already, nearly half the world's population is under twenty-five years old. That represents about three billion people. In America, their numbers already rival that of the Baby Boomers, and with immigration—which is a wildcard—their population may grow as large as a hundred million, nearly a third of our total population.

Generation iY is also the most eclectic and diverse in our nation's history, as well as the most protected and observed. They are also the first generation that doesn't need leaders to get information; they have electronic access to every piece of data you can imagine.

All this will either turn out to be good news or bad news as they migrate into adulthood. In fact, let me tip my hand right now at the beginning of this journey. My research reveals there are four words that describe the reality of Generation iY. They are:

An Overwhelmed Generation

In 2007, the American College Health Association surveyed the largest randomized sample of college students since its inception. Their study revealed that:

- *94 percent of students reported feeling overwhelmed by their lifestyles.*
- *44 percent said they felt so depressed it was almost difficult to function.*
- *Almost 10 percent had considered suicide in the past year.¹*

The stress comes from both internal and external sources. Many of these kids grew up with parents who put the pressure on them to perform. After all, the child is a reflection on their parents. Parents want a trophy to show off as their offspring enters adulthood.

On the other hand, stress can also stem from a lack of healthy pressure growing up. Children who lived with undue comfort through high school may face a shock when they enter college and face demands that are a little closer to adult life. The transition from the life of ease to a more demanding adult world can lead to stress.

Another source of stress, however, can be self-imposed. Children over the last twenty-five years have internalized a fierce competitive sense. They want to be the best. And from the time they're small, they've been told that they *are* the best—they are special, they have unlimited potential. Trying to live up to those expectations is inherently stressful.

I met Nate at the hospital last year. He was being released with instructions to stay on his medication. Nate had admitted himself when he had a panic attack and began to entertain thoughts of suicide. He was only nineteen years old.

When we conversed over a latté that day, Nate told me why he'd decided to check in to the hospital. He felt pressured and overwhelmed. He had no job and really needed one. His dad had been out of work for four months due to the failing economy. Nate's GPA had dropped, and so had his chances at getting into Georgia Tech—something both he and his mom wanted desperately. In fact, his mom was counting on it, and Nate couldn't imagine disappointing her. But whenever he tried to focus on his studies, he got grief from his girlfriend and friends on Facebook because he rarely had time to hang out like he used to.

Nate had finally buckled under all that pressure. He is among a large population of teens who feel this way.

According to researchers Howe and Strauss, 70 percent of teenagers “worry a lot” about finding a good job when they get out of school, whereas only 37 percent of adults think that teens worry about that. Four times as many high school students worry about getting good grades as worry about pressures to have sex or take drugs, and six times as many complain they don't get enough sleep.²

Perhaps sixteen-year-old ice skater Sarah Hughes said it best. After winning her gold medal at the 2002 Olympic Games, she reflected, “Sometimes I feel more pressure than maybe I should, because I know there are so many people who want me to do well.”³

What if this generation grows up and never finds a healthy way to handle all this pressure? What if, as adults, they continue to seek and find artificial ways to cope? Will America have a large percentage of adults with chronic depression? Will the majority of adults in twenty years be addicted to prescription drugs as a means to handle feeling overwhelmed? What if they perpetually yearn to return to their adolescent years—to escape marriages, job commitments, and legal obligations? What if adult life just doesn't suit them well because we didn't prepare them to be adults?

I wonder if we'll see normal responsibilities today reduced to bite-sized chunks in the future: McJobs. McMarriages. McCommitments. Marriage licenses

may have three- and five-year contract options. Perhaps their children will have six fathers, because each successive “dad” was only able to commit for three years. Jobs may be reduced to serial contractual projects—partly because of changes in the job market, but also as a manageable response to feeling overwhelmed.

An *Overconnected* Generation

Young people tend to respond in one of two ways to being overwhelmed.

One, they push back and get lost in a virtual world of online fantasy video games or a social world of texting, Facebook, and Twitter. It’s a coping mechanism. They survive by escaping reality and becoming someone else.

Or, option two, they respond by trying to measure up. They push themselves to be a “superkid.” They go online to perform. They strive for perfection.

With either response, we may have a train wreck ahead of us.

Some call this generation the “connecteds.” Instead of using their youthful years to discover who they are and develop a lasting set of values to live by, they may become adults who can’t make it unless they are constantly on Twitter with their friends. Noise. Busyness. Connection. Talk. Volume. Speed. When will they ever unplug and discover their own identity? Will they ever experience the solitude that enables them to think or reflect on their lives? Will they become a generation so connected that they just parrot what peers are saying in their social network? Or will they be individuals who can think and act on their own without consensus from others?

The train wreck may also take the form of miserable relationship skills and low emotional intelligence. Because so much of their life is connected by technology, young people can fail to develop face-to-face people skills. Texting, for instance, just doesn’t prepare them to interact in real relationship dilemmas. Durable and lasting relationships cannot be reduced to a few words on a screen. And trying to resolve a conflict or “breaking up” on a screen is a lazy person’s solution. In my opinion, screens are for information—not emotion.

Our focus groups have shown that young people are short on patience, listening skills, and conflict resolution. Call me the Master of the Obvious, but it appears their generation is better at interacting via technology than face to face. We’ve let them become socially isolated and lethargic. Peter Eio of Lego Systems reminds us: “This is the first time in the history of the human race that a generation of kids has overtaken their parents in the use of new technology.”

Rachel is a sophomore in college. She is adorable, but she’s also a product of the age in which she grew up. She recently told me about a crisis she faced on the

week she had a big paper due for a class. Her cell phone and PC crashed—and she crashed too. With both of her prized sources of technology down, she plunged into despair. More than that, she became paralyzed. It didn't dawn on her to borrow a friend's phone to call for help or walk over to her professor's office to negotiate a new deadline for the paper. She felt she had no options. So she took an incomplete in the course.

With each passing year, Generation iY continues to flock to new technologies, quickly becoming masters at interfacing with them 24/7. Cell phones have become pocket TVs and pocket PCs. Twitter took off in 2009. That year fourteen million folks began tweeting, many of them posting hourly updates on their life.

A common theme in all these technology advances, according to author Neil Howe, is to invite Generation iY to do something faster while also inviting them to spend more time at it. It's an interesting paradox. Most new technology claims it will save the user time. Usually, however, it beckons them to actually spend more time using it. In this sense, many of the devices that Generation iY depends on are addictive—psychologically if not physically. The very process of using them promotes dependence.

If the trend of overconnectedness continues, Generation iY risks trading the traditional value of quality relationships (face-to-face encounters that require time and energy to unpack our feelings and thoughts) for virtual relationships defined by speed and quantity. Technology without maturity can be hazardous.

An Overprotected Generation

We have given Generation iY safety seats, safety belts, and safety policies on everything. They can't ride a bike without a helmet, they've been discouraged from going places on their own, they've been shielded from financial realities, and they've spent much of their childhood inside, in front of a screen. (Some even call them "screenagers.")

Safety is certainly important. But for Generation iY, safety has often been allowed to trump growth. As parents, we don't want them out of our sight. As educators, we're concerned about liability and feel we need to avoid risk. We believe we are protecting our future by protecting them. In reality, we may be harming the future. Because of our overprotective parenting and education methods:

- *A large percentage struggle with obesity.*
- *A large percentage experience nearsightedness.*
- *A large percentage find it difficult to fulfill commitments.*

- *A large percentage wrestle with depression after eighteen years old.*
- *A large percentage discover life is hard to cope with after leaving home.*

This generation has been so sheltered by their parents, teachers, counselors, and an overregulated government that many have trouble developing strong, independent coping skills. Authors Neil Howe and William Strauss write, “Overly involved parents have become a real hassle for many educators.”⁴

So what does this look like in a real-life kid? I’ve known Kelli since she was in middle school. She recently graduated from college. Her entire story is a picture of overprotection. While none of the turns in her life were inherently bad, together they produced a young adult who is unready for life in the real world.

When Kelli was in elementary school, her mother pulled her from public school and chose to homeschool her. I certainly understand that. My wife and I chose to homeschool our teenaged son so he’d have a more flexible schedule as he prepared for his career. For Kelli’s mom, however, homeschooling was more about protecting Kelli from school pressures and controlling what she was exposed to than about preparing her for life.

And then, as Kelli grew, her mom also tightened the reins. At middle-school age, Kelli was not permitted to go on a trip to Florida (just one state over) with friends because of too many variables her mother couldn’t control. In high school, Kelli wanted to go on a one-week mission trip overseas with her church youth group. She was not allowed to go because her mother worried about the safety of being in a developing nation. When Kelli started looking at colleges, the only options her mother would consider were universities two hours or less away from home.

Now that Kelli is a graduate, her mother has seen the value of cutting the apron strings, but the damage is already done. Kelli took a job four states away from home and was unable to perform. She called her mom several times a day, crying, because she was homesick. Not surprisingly, this didn’t sit well with her supervisor. Later, when Kelli broke up with her boyfriend, she was devastated. Her employer insisted she make sales calls instead of texting her boyfriend through the day. Eventually the situation became more than she could handle. Kelli quit her job at age twenty-two and moved home.

Let’s face it. This happens millions of times over each year. America has become obsessed with protecting children at all costs, and this generation has suffered from that obsession. We will not let our precious children do anything without a helmet, cell phone, warranty, insurance policy, knee pads, or a guaran-

tee. And we do it out of love (as well as media-generated fear). But what kind of adults will our preoccupation with safety produce?

America was built on risk. Opportunity. Free enterprise. Failure and determination. Will these ideas be found only in our history books?

More to the point, will our overemphasis on safety and security produce a generation of kids who simply don't know how to find their way in the world?

Five Generations

Ready or not, Generation Y is entering adulthood. A new breed has entered our campuses and workplaces, and they are already influencing their worlds. Although they have evolved from previous generations, Generations Y and iY have their own distinct identity.

	Seniors "Greatest Generation"	Builders "Silent Generation"	Boomers "Pig in the Python"	Busters "Generation X"	Generations Y & iY "Millennials"
Birth years	1900–1928	1929–1945	1946–1964	1965–1983	1984–2002
Life paradigm	Manifest destiny	"Be grateful you have a job"	"You owe me"	"Relate to me"	"Life is a cafeteria"
Attitude to authority	Respect them	Endure them	Replace them	Ignore them	Choose them
Role of relationships	Long term	Significant	Limited, useful	Central, caring	Global, 24/7
Value system	Traditional	Conservative	Self-based	Media	Shop around
Role of career	Loyalty	Means for living	Central focus	Irritant	Place to serve
Schedules	Responsible	Mellow	Frantic	Aimless	Volatile
Technology	What's that?	Hope to outlive it	Master it	Enjoy it	Employ it
Market	Commodities	Goods	Services	Experiences	Transformations
View of future	Uncertain	Seek to stabilize	Create it!	Hopeless	Optimistic