

The Challenge of a New Generation

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If you've heard of Virgil Smith, it's not likely because of his incredible social media platform or his charismatic personality. He's actually just a quiet, unassuming, average teenager... until Hurricane Harvey hit the Houston area in August of 2017.

As a 13-year-old eighth-grader, this humble Generation Z kid was playing an online video game with his friend Keshawn who lived close by. When water began seeping into his home around 2:00 a.m., Virgil, along with his sister and his mother, grabbed some essentials and climbed to their apartment building's second floor for safety. They had hoped to wait out the storm there, protected from the hurricane. It was then that Virgil received a call from his friend asking for help. Keshawn and his family were trapped by rising floodwaters. Instead of waiting for an adult to do something or even waiting for authorization, Virgil quickly sprang into action.

He scampered downstairs to his own apartment, grabbed an inflatable mattress, and paddled to his friend's apartment to save him and his family. Once he secured them on a second level, Virgil began hearing noises from other parts of his lower-income neighborhood in Dickinson, Texas. They were the voices of neighbors crying for help. The entire neighborhood was rapidly submerging.

Virgil hopped on his makeshift raft again and paddled around the neighborhood near his apartment, pulling people out of dangerous, flooded homes. When all was said and done that night, he had saved seventeen lives. Virgil's mom, Lisa, was stunned as she watched her asthmatic son's heroic effort.

The soft-spoken teen, who probably still doesn't see himself as a leader, intuitively modeled brilliant leadership and hardly spoke a word about it afterward. In the spring of 2018, Virgil Smith was awarded a Citizen Hero award from the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.¹

Virgil Smith's story is a vivid case study, demonstrating the three unique qualities of those belonging to Generation Z when they are at their best.

First, Virgil did something *different* than others expected.

While it seemed everyone else was understandably stuck in survival mode, Virgil spent his time and energy risking his own life to save 17 people. He was in a different frame of mind—perhaps from his video game hours or the action movies he'd watched—but he was different. In all of the reports I've found about his heroic actions, it seems that no one else in his neighborhood was either willing or able to do such a thing. *This is a picture of what we can expect from the students in Generation Z. They are going to be unique and will even pursue different aspirations with different methods than what older generations may deem conventional.*

Second, Virgil did something *more* than what others expected.

You can tell what people are made of during catastrophic situations, like hurricanes. We've all witnessed heroic efforts by people of various ages in response to disasters in our country. The truth is that Virgil could have been a hero simply by helping his mom and sister get to safety. Or just his friend, Keshawn. But instead, he paddled to each voice he heard until he beat the odds and the job was done. *In the research we've done and conversations we've had with the students of Generation Z, they are already showing signs that they will do more with opportunities than previous generations, through smart technology or pragmatic tactics.*

Finally, Virgil did something *new* that others didn't expect.

Sometimes, it takes extreme circumstances to push folks into thinking new thoughts. Hurricane Harvey helped Virgil become a problem-solver as he transformed an inflatable mattress used for guests to sleep on—and leveraged it to save lives. He was unconventional, scrappy, and unworried about his youth and inexperience, his asthma, or his safety. *For Generation Z, necessity really is the mother of invention. We can expect to see lots of new innovation as this generation of young people seeks to solve problems, some of which we've never seen before.*

Are You Ready for a New Generation of Kids?

Now, you may be thinking: *Wait a minute. Virgil does not sound like the kids I know today. I see teens everywhere that are lazy and apathetic. They're gamers. They lack ambition. They're on their phones all day long.*

I know those kids, too. Those are kids who represent the other side of Generation Z. Too many of them have not been led well; they've not been equipped to become the best version of themselves. I'll bet that even Virgil has exhibited some of these characteristics. As our non-profit, Growing Leaders, has worked in partnership with more than 10,000 schools and organizations, we see students who are at their best along with those who aren't optimizing their potential. Perhaps the adults in their lives simply didn't know how to lead these "screenagers"? The future snuck up on many of them, like it did millions of parents, teachers, coaches, and employers. The truth is that many of us were ambushed. This book is about how to lead today's emerging generation well, to equip them to look more like Virgil in the face of a great challenge.

Virgil didn't know what to do or what to say when others shared their gratitude for what he'd done. He's a boy of few words. He did admit through tears that it felt good. In saving 17 lives, this young leader influenced his entire school, quietly, boldly, and, at first, by acting alone. Essentially, this is where leadership begins. It's an inside job before it's ever an outside job. It usually begins with a negative emotion, a feeling of dissatisfaction with current conditions. Ultimately, it drove Virgil to do two things:

Solve problems.

Serve people.

What if all of Generation Z could do these two things as well? That's a goal they won't reach if we don't help them learn to be better—better even than we were. Ancient Hebrew and Chinese cultures told parents not to limit their children's knowledge to what they'd learned, since they grew up in different times. This advice has never been more relevant than it is today.

Elon Musk, who has been making headlines for years now with his Tesla self-driving smart car, colonies on Mars, spaceships for civilians, and other artificially intelligent devices, is a great example. In 2017, he became dissatisfied with his kids' private school, so he pulled them out of it and created his own. He called it *Ad Astra*, meaning "to the stars." It appears to be constructed around the notion that educators should "teach to the problem not the tools."¹ This simply means that instead of merely offering math equations to memorize or theories to digest, you begin with a problem and work backward. It's not that theories aren't helpful, just that incentive increases when students are actually **solving real problems** and **serving real people** not merely doing busy work. The world our kids will enter, as adults, will be drastically different from the ones we graduated into decades ago.

Journalist Benjamin Stetcher describes it as "a world filled with artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, automation, virtual reality, personalized medicine, self-driving cars, and people on Mars. A world where people might not even have jobs and where society itself may be arranged in fundamentally different ways. How are parents, and society for that matter, supposed to know how to prepare them to succeed in a world that we cannot predict?"¹

Educators, Parents, Coaches, Professors, Employers, and everyone who is invested in the success of Generation Z: May I whet your appetite for the rest of this book?

Educators: What if education changed to match our world today? In the past, schools were basically storehouses of knowledge where the information resided. That's not true anymore. Information is online, wherever you are. The job of the school is to cultivate curiosity, to equip students to find solutions, and to blend them together in order to create new solutions for new problems, just like Orville and Wilbur Wright blended bicycles and birds to create an airplane.¹ They originated an entirely new industry by combining two existing realities. Virgil Smith took an air mattress, typically used to sleep on, and leveraged it to save lives.

Parents: What if parenting styles changed to match the culture in which we're raising our children? Today, most parents I meet fall into one of two categories:

- Overwhelmed. (*We give up trying to manage kids' high-tech lives.*)
- Over-functioning. (*We do too much to control kids' lives and outcomes.*)

But our kids actually need us to be neither. Our children need us to be *intentional* about equipping them to navigate smartphones and social media yet *laissez-faire* about letting them explore new places, skin their knees, and fail at projects, so they're not gripped by fear and anxiety as they enter adulthood.

Coaches: What if coaches approached their young athletes with a bigger picture in mind than merely winning games, matches, or meets? What if we began to see that the real value of sports is a platform for kids to perform at their best and learn life skills in the process? So while we don't have to stop keeping score, we must focus on developing habits in our athletes during the championship process, like discipline, focus, emotional intelligence, strategy, and leadership.

Professors: What if colleges no longer organized themselves based on "majors" but on problems that needed to be solved? This means that students would experience *customized learning*. Imagine students taking courses, for instance, in physics, psychology, math, and languages to solve a societal problem in Africa. It also may mean we blend departments and colleges based upon genuine dilemmas that require the perspective of multiple fields of study to address. Bringing together the young, enthusiastic minds of students with the brilliant, experienced minds of professors takes learning beyond the classroom.

Employers: What if we hired young team members and not only on-boarded them to their particular job but cast vision for the overall mission of the company—then we listened as they shared where they felt the future was heading? What if every supervisor practiced "reverse mentoring," where they both mentored and received mentoring from a Generation Z staff member who described how the latest social media platform could be leveraged to better achieve the mission? What if we allowed the students of Generation Z to weigh in on ideas to reach organizational goals?

Today's Culture is Shifting Again

I'm convinced we need to lead, parent, teach, and coach Generation Z differently because of these new realities we face. Generation Z is not merely a continuation of the Millennial generation. While there are definite similarities, today's kids who make up Generation Z have grown up in the 21st century, which is radically different from the 1980s and 1990s when Millennials were kids. But we've not adapted as we attempt to raise them, teach them, coach them, or employ them.

Let me offer you a picture.

In 1997, a young entrepreneur named Reed sold his tech company and decided to celebrate with his wife one evening. They drove down to the local Blockbuster video store, (You do remember those, don't you?) and they rented the movie *Apollo 13*. Afterward, Reed neglected to return the video. In fact, he lost it for quite some time. When he finally found it, he sped back to the store and turned it in only to find he owed a huge late fee. On his drive home, two thoughts flooded Reed's mind:

1. How do I tell my wife we've just been charged a big fine on a late video?
2. There's got to be a better way to experience home video entertainment.

Shortly afterward, on the way to his fitness center, Reed had an epiphany about a different way to handle memberships. His gym charged him one, flat fee regardless of how much he used the equipment there. What if a video store charged one monthly subscription and

customers could rent as many videos as they wanted? And what if the customers never had to leave their homes? At this point, Reed Hastings created his original idea for Netflix. After some development, he shared the idea with Blockbuster, assuming they'd see the improvement on their business model. But, alas, they didn't. They believed they had a handle on the future of movie rentals and told Reed to take his idea somewhere else.¹

And he did.

Netflix took the world of home entertainment by storm, mailing DVDs to consumers and, later, streaming videos on our televisions. And while they aren't the only "show in town," they control a large part of the market. In the meantime, Blockbuster shut down their last store in Alaska and is no longer a brand we buy from today. In less than three decades, Blockbuster went from entering the record books (with 9,000 stores) to entering our history books. Netflix is a 21st-century approach to home entertainment, while Blockbuster was a 20th-century method.

In many ways, I feel like we adults have a "Blockbuster" brand of leadership, while Generation Z is growing up in a "Netflix" world.

In May of 2019, the ABC network aired a special called "Screen Time" hosted by Diane Sawyer. For six months, Sawyer and her team toured the U.S. talking to doctors, families, teachers, and tech insiders in pursuit of answers to questions about how our smartphones are affecting us. I love one of the comments a pre-school child made to his mother. He was trying to talk to her while she scrolled social media sites, looking down at her phone, not at him. She replied once in a while with a nod as he spoke. Yet, clearly, she was preoccupied. The young boy finally took her face in his hands, moved it toward him, and said, "Mommy, I need you to listen to me with your whole face."

This young child was simply saying that the way his mother was leading him was not connecting with him. May I expand this thought? I believe the way our culture has conditioned all of us to parent, teach, coach, and lead is not working. Thankfully, there is a better way.