

# "A Generation of Paradox"

## The Strange, Contradictory Characteristics of Generation Y

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A paradox can be defined as two or more realities that seem contradictory. More simply put: it's a statement that seems to contradict itself. Henry David Thoreau once said, "The swiftest traveler is he that goes afoot." C. S. Lewis said, "Someday, you'll be old enough to start reading fairy tales again." He said this to his godchild, Lucy, to whom he dedicated, "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

Those statements appear illogical and contradictory to our logical minds. In actuality our world is full of paradoxes--and I believe we will see more of them as the emerging Millennial generation comes of age than in any of the previous four generations. They experience inward realities and outward realities that their parents and teachers don't understand...but they live with them. The following are paradoxes we observed once the first wave of Millennials graduated college:

**PARADOX ONE: They are sheltered...yet pressured.** Millions of these students have been sheltered from harsh realities by their parents, yet they live with more pressure on their lives than the previous two generations. The pressure comes from parents, themselves and competing with their peers for a scholarship in college. They are pressured to make the grade, make the team and make the money by the culture in which they live.

Our Response? Help them to simplify their lives as much as possible. Help them to slow down and make sense of what goals they really want to pursue.

**PARADOX TWO: They are self-absorbed...yet generous.** More so than the first wave of Millennials we studied in the 1990s, students today are more likely to be self-absorbed and not even know it. They spend more time getting ready for the day in the morning than Generation X and the Baby Boomers and they spend more money on themselves as well, even when you factor in inflation. However, these students give their time and money away at a much faster pace. In fact, you might say they see money as "easy come, easy go." They love giving and helping others, once their needs are met.

Our Response? Provide options to participate in a cause that is bigger than they are. Expose them to needs in their community or around the world in developing nations and challenge them to expand their horizons.

**PARADOX THREE: They are social...yet isolated by technology.** This may be the most social generation in history. They are in constant contact with peers and family through text messaging, cell phone calls, IM, Facebook, MySpace and all sorts of internet networks. The irony is, they are also the most isolated bunch of students, because so much of their relational contact is via technology. Their people skills are poor and most are bad at handling difficult people. They have been used to "logging off" when a relationship becomes difficult. In one sense, many students are never alone, yet they are lonely.

Our response? Create face to face relationships with them, as well as peer communities where they meet in person. Yes, it's a hassle, but we must teach them to communicate and handle relational difficulties.

**PARADOX FOUR: Adventuresome...yet protected.** One employer said that this generation has been to the Amazon river or climbed the Rocky Mountains but never punched a time clock on a job. Life has been much like a reality TV show: exciting yet controlled. Parents have monitored almost everything. They may love the exhilaration of bungee jumping and the reckless thrill of white water rafting, but don't know how to negotiate adversity in the real world of people and mundane jobs. Often, each level of school has prepared them for more school not the real world.

Our response? Enable them to take control of their lives. Allow them to set their priorities and warn them that they'll live with the consequences of their decisions. Help them become drivers, not passengers, in life.

**PARADOX FIVE: They are team-oriented...yet diverse.** These kids have grown up playing soccer on teams and performing school projects in groups. Many wore uniforms in school and they have been taught tolerance. They tend to be a harmonious generation of kids, much more so than their baby boomer parents. Yet, they are the most racially diverse generation in modern American history. There are many

differences among students born between 1984 and 2002. Sadly, when a kid feels ostracized by his peers on the school campus, he may resort to taking a gun and shooting it.

Our response? Work with them to appreciate strengths in others. Highlight the differences in inward strengths and how each person adds value to a team, not based on ethnic background, but gifts and skills.

**PARADOX SIX: They are visionary...yet vacillating.** We see this all the time. These young people will capture a passion for something--and get caught up in a vision for becoming involved in an organization to make the world a better place. Yet, the vision is fleeting. It loses its novelty quickly. As one dean said to me: "These students want to change the world, but before the week is over, they've changed their mind." It is frustrating to listen to them after a while. They hop from vision to vision and may never stay long enough to make a lasting difference and really see transformation. They are just undecided about the future.

Our Response? We must help them remain focused on one major priority at a time, and keep commitments for a set length of time. I remind them of the Habitudo: we must become rivers not floods. Rivers are helpful. Floods are damaging.

**PARADOX SEVEN: Their orientation is high achievement...yet high maintenance.** This is a confident, optimistic generation of kids. They are definitely achievement oriented as a whole. They believe they can and will make the world a better place...by noon on Friday. Their naïve and often immature perspective may not be new (kids are usually naïve), but their expectations are so high these students can become high maintenance. They are used to being praised for simply participating on a soccer team or a piano recital. They require lots of attention, feedback and rewards from authorities.

Our Response? As much as possible, we must provide consistent feedback, at least in the beginning. We must stay in communication with them and celebrate even small wins when they achieve them.

**Paradox is OK...** One interesting footnote about Millennials. They are frequently aware of the paradoxes in their life and they seem to be able to live with them. They demand high morals from leaders, yet they admit to cheating on tests in school themselves. Paradox is OK with them. This means we must help them navigate the ones that could cause a train wreck in the future, and choose a course of action that enables them to live with integrity. This may be the most exciting, and amusing, time to be a mentor to a student. Tim