

Techniques

SEPTEMBER 2018

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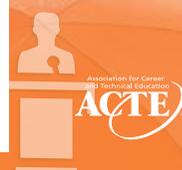
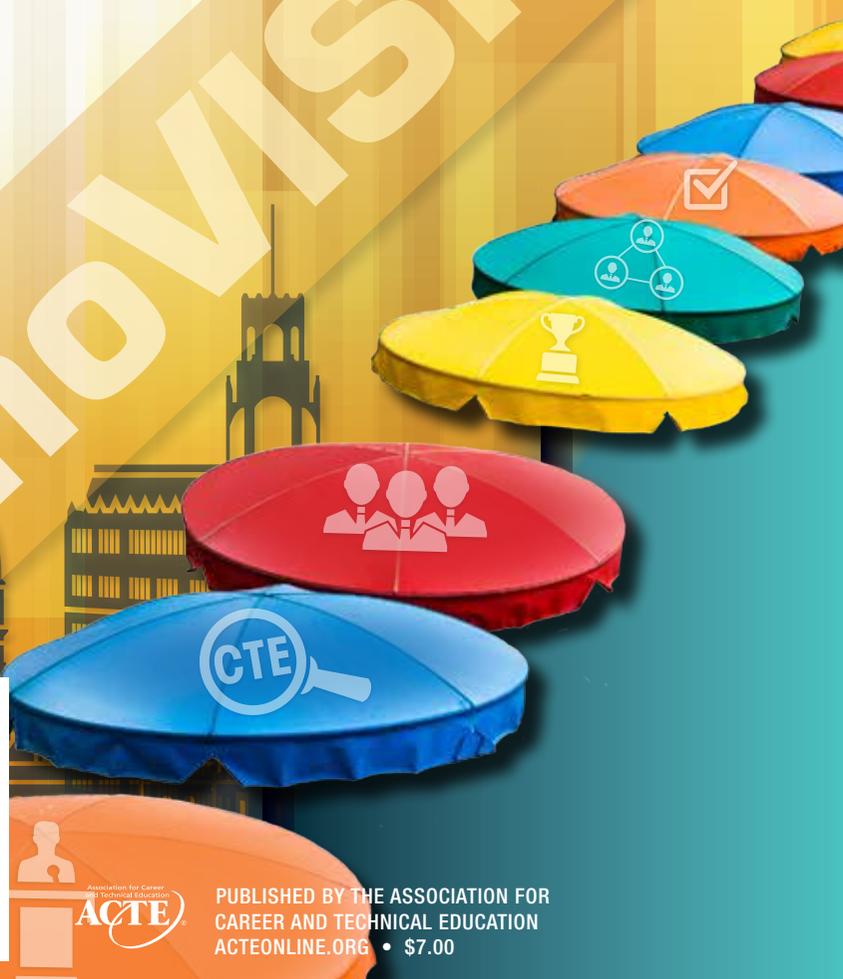
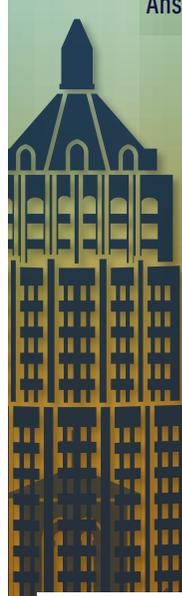
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Answering Why: Unleashing Passion, Purpose, and Performance in Younger Generations

By Mark C. Perna

TALENTED, INTELLIGENT AND LOOKING FOR PURPOSE, THE NEXT 'GREATEST GENERATION'

is here — and they may not be who you think. Yes, I'm talking about today's younger generations, the ones usually stereotyped as entitled, coddled, lazy and self-interested. While individual cases may bear out these traits, such stereotypes arise not from deficiencies in young people, but from an ongoing struggle to discover their passion. They haven't found the 'want-to' to power their 'how-to' yet. It's not lack of drive, but lack

of direction that has created the negative image we often see today.

After more than 20 years working as an education and performance consultant with organizations across North America, my perspective is resoundingly positive. They have the innate potential and grit to succeed. With an inborn curiosity, they are extremely intelligent, resourceful and imaginative. There is nothing they can't do — if they want to. They generously support the causes they believe in, despite the college debt burden they bear. When they

see what they want, they move to accomplish it. Their incredible passion makes them capable of outstanding performance; what they sometimes lack is the purpose that drives it all forward. And that's why they are always asking why.

Why?

This core trait has led me to dub both the millennial generation (those individuals who reached young adulthood in the early part of the 21st century) and Generation Z (those born between 1995 and 2010) “the

“Today’s young people truly want and need to understand why things are done a certain way because it lends credibility to their participation.”

Why Generation.” When told to complete a task or assignment, they often want to know why it matters. For baby boomers (the older generation to which I belong), their questioning can come across as insubordinate or a challenge to authority, but, in general, nothing could be further from what they intend.

Today’s young people truly want and need to understand why things are done a certain way because it lends credibility to their participation. If they see no logical reason for the effort, they won’t put

in a great deal of energy. They want their contribution to mean something. In fact, they want to determine for themselves if there is a better way to do it and if there is something they can add to make it better for everyone. Often when they ask why, it’s not about challenging authority but improving the process and outcome as a team player. It’s not that they don’t care — it’s that they do, so much that the reason matters just as much as the task itself.

In order to make the most of our educational, professional and social in-

teractions with today’s youth, we have to bridge the disconnect between older and younger generations, so-called ‘generational rifts’ shaped by very different backgrounds, experiences and societal influences. Our goal is not to turn them into replicas of older generations, but to work with their unique strengths and, yes, even weaknesses to understand them, mentor them and ultimately motivate them to perform beyond all expectations. They can do it — and we can help.

Excerpt from *Answering Why*

One day in late 2014 I delivered a dynamic speech to a large, fully engaged and interactive audience made up of college and high school career and technical administrators, teachers and critical support staff. I spoke passionately about how they could significantly increase performance in the younger generations by helping them hear the branch creak in their lives. I shared how generating the 'want-to' is associated with students finding their own 'light at the end of the tunnel' based on their unique interests, talents and abilities. Success for these younger generations comes with their personal discovery of that perfect intersection of career and lifestyle.

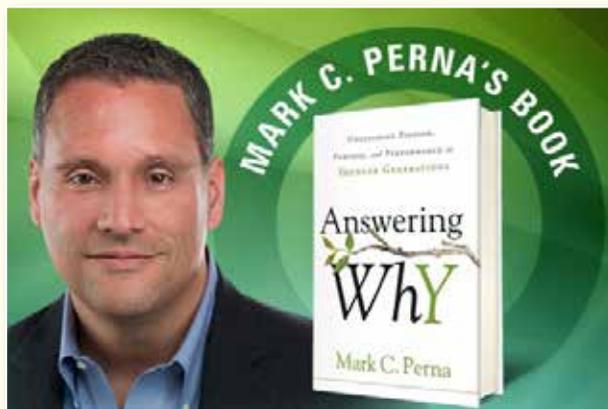
The speech went well, and I received an enthusiastic ovation at the end of the presentation (always appreciated). Afterward, I greeted a great number of people who had formed a line to one side of the stage, but one individual stood out from all the rest. He was a teacher that I guessed to be in his mid-50s. When he spoke, his deep, slightly raspy voice commanded attention. When he approached, he was not nearly as enthusiastic as the other folks in line. He introduced himself and proceeded to tell me that he thought all this information regarding the younger generations, creating the 'want-to', and blazing the light at the end of the tunnel was interesting, but that "these kids" (that's how he referred to them) "do not know the first thing about what they want to do with their lives — they are totally clueless."

I wish I could tell you that he delivered that statement in a matter-of-fact way... but he didn't. He said it coldly, abruptly, and with a spattering of anger and frustration that stopped me in my tracks. He was serious and deliberate, as though he had harbored these thoughts for far too long and was now prepared to launch a diatribe at an unsuspecting recipient — me. I listened and tried to understand his concerns with the younger generations, but ultimately left the conversation unable to influence his perspective on what he unquestionably experiences in his teaching position. Not knowing anything else about the gentleman, I can only speculate that he

teaches a challenging group of students who see no light at the end of the tunnel and have no 'want-to' that drives their action. My sons went through this period as well, and it wasn't easy. He must be dealing with that at every turn to have made his comments with such visible frustration.

I spent the better part of the next several weeks thinking about this man and his heartbreaking perspective on our younger generations. Can it be true that "these kids do not know the first thing about what they want to do with their lives" and that "they are totally clueless"? Certainly a great many young people today do not know what they want out of their lives — isn't that buried somewhere in the definition of being young and immature? As I pondered the question, I began to consider that, in the end, he was blaming the students for not knowing what they wanted to do with their own lives. I thought about that for a while and this reality struck me: students today do not know what they do not know. This is the awareness gap I've mentioned earlier, and it's huge in the arena of career exploration. They think they know, but they don't. They have not been shown what's possible and how to get there — because we haven't told them.

Answering Why: Unleashing Passion, Purpose, and Performance in Younger Generations releases nationwide on Sept. 18, 2018. Visit MarkCPerna.com to learn more.



Because today's young people have been reared to view their contribution as unique, special and important, we need to answer their "why?" so they can see the task at hand as something worth their best effort. But, why? And how?

Experience is everything.

The younger generations are constantly in search of new and exhilarating experiences, and this can be a powerful asset. Beyond the fact that career and technical education (CTE) is, itself, a highly experiential learning model, a robust CTE program can equip a young person with skills that translate into a high-paying career, which then leads to the type of lifestyle that can support their pursuit of new experiences. We must begin to view their experiential nature as an ally in the learning process, both in the experience of learning itself and in the experiences they can then afford as a result of the skills they acquire.

Helping young people reach their goals means helping them to find their own internal motivation — something I call the 'light at the end of the tunnel'. The tunnel is the work they have to do to get to the light, the goal, which is the reward for that work. The secret lies in uncovering what each student's light is and demonstrating every day, in every lesson, how your program moves them closer to that goal. Often the light is a type of lifestyle that allows them to have lots of exciting experiences — because as we've said, experience is everything. Once they discover their light, blaze it every day so they can see, taste, touch, feel and experience the rewards of perseverance.

We must stop blaming young people for not knowing what they want to do with their lives. There is a misconception on the part of many people that the younger generations are to blame for being clueless about their education and career direction. But whose fault is that? Yes, it's frustrating to engage with young people who seem apathetic about what comes after graduation. But if they're apathetic, could it be because they haven't been exposed to any exciting possibilities? As parents and educators, have we truly taught them about the abundance of options available to them? They don't know what they don't know; that's why they are students, after all. We have a priceless opportunity to impart that knowledge at a crucial point in their educational journey.

Invest in a culture of planning.

We must invest in building a strong planning culture across our organizations. A planning culture is an environment in which planning, sharing our plans, talking about our plans and praising planning efforts are the norm for everyone, from students to staff. In a planning culture, where planning and goal-setting are integral to our teaching strategies and curriculum, planning actually becomes cool — and it sets students up for success in their future endeavors. A strong planning culture delivers a dynamic competitive advantage, both for our students and our organizations in today's changing educational landscape.

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- Patrick Biggerstaff,
former Region III Fellow, former Indiana ACTE President, and currently ACTE Administration Division Vice President

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“We must stop blaming young people for not knowing what they want to do with their lives.”

Identify their competitive advantage.

Where the noun ‘adult’ has increasingly been used as a verb, ‘adulthood’ is a catch-all term for fulfilling the responsibilities that come with adulthood. Behind the memes, Generation Z is concerned about their ability to make it — to get and keep a real job, move out on their own, file their taxes and remember to go to the dentist. That’s why the creation of an instructional narrative centered on gaining competitive advantage is so compelling: anything to give them an edge in the face of big challenges.

When the ‘want-to’ is strong enough, the ‘how-to’ will come.

We can justify, plan, perform remarkably and achieve astounding results when we put our minds to something. Hands down, the human spirit is one of the most miraculous, problem-solving and persistent forces in the universe. This is no less true of millennials and Generation Z. Answer their ‘want-to’; the ‘how-to’ won’t be far behind. When they find what they really want out of their life and career, they will find the way to make it a reality. Taking the time to tell and show the reasons for the things they’re expected to do will engage them at a deeper level and validate their need to know.

They can make a difference in the world. Show them.

If we want today’s young people to fully engage and buy into our programs, we have to demonstrate that these programs matter, both for them and for the community they will be serving. We have to show them the difference they can make in the world. From social justice issues to environmen-

tal concerns, millennials and members of Generation Z often hold strong convictions about how things can be improved. How does a robust career-focused education equip them to make a bigger impact in the areas that they’re passionate about? How can they use the skills and abilities they’re gaining now to affect the world in a positive way? We should weave that narrative into our lesson plans to capture their imagination early on in their educational journeys. They have the passion to change the world; let’s help them find the purpose and the

power to unleash the performance that can make a difference. ■

Mark C. Perna is the founder and CEO of TFS, a full-service strategic communications and consulting firm whose mission is to share and support every client’s desire to make a difference. As a noted generational expert, Perna has devoted his career to empowering educators and employers to unleash the tremendous potential of today’s young people. Email him at mark.perna@tfsresults.com.

ACTE STATE LEADERSHIP

STATE *Leadership* TRAINING PROGRAM

State Leadership Training is a one-year program to develop state and regional association leaders, as well as your up-and-coming leaders, through specialized training in association management and leadership development. The sessions will be scheduled as a preconference as follows:

SESSION 1: ACTE’s CareerTech VISION 2018

November 28, 8:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. - San Antonio, TX

SESSION 2: ACTE 2019 National Policy Seminar

March 24, 8:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. - Washington, D.C.

More information is available at
www.acteonline.org/state_leadership_training.



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