

## TEACHING MARITIME LEADERSHIP TO THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION AND BEYOND

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### **Abstract**

The Millennial Generation or Gen Y - those born approximately during the years 1980-2000 - have entered the workforce or will be entering soon. This generation will be moving into leadership positions in the very near future. The generation born in about the year 2000 and beyond is now being called Generation Z. The Gen Z students will be entering our universities next year and we need to be ready for them. They are as different from Millennials as the Millennials are from Gen X, the generations that preceded them. Unless the educators understand these distinctions, the lessons may go unlearned or at least under-appreciated by those who will be entering the maritime workforce and assuming leadership roles in the next few years.

While technical competence is paramount for all sea-farers, the ability to assume leadership roles is much more difficult to quantify and to teach. Today's students entering maritime universities around the world often have different learning styles and different values from those who have dedicated their lives to teaching both the technical skills and the leadership skills required for today's mariners.

**Keywords:** Leadership Development, Maritime Leadership, Millennials, Gen Z

### **Introduction**

*If you want happiness for a lifetime, help the next generation. /Chinese proverb/*

There can be as many definitions of the word leadership as there are people trying to define it. We know it when we see it, but how do we teach it? The way students learn today, not only soft sciences such as leadership, is very different from the way most faculty and mentors developed

their own skills. In order to effectively develop leaders for today and for the future of the maritime industry, we must learn more about who we are teaching, how they learn and what we mean by Maritime Leadership. The Maritime Model of Leadership has been defined in previous IAMU presentations (Kreta 2015) in this way:

*The Maritime Model of Leadership is one which embraces the history, importance, and tradition of the seafaring chain of command while promoting active participation and engagement in modern team management best practices.*

*The Maritime Leader is a “loyal shipmate,” who is ethical, responsive and goal-oriented, who strives for excellence, demonstrates integrity, and is confident, ever-learning and adaptive.*

For our students to truly comprehend the significance of this model, we, as faculty and mentors, must better know our students.

### **What is a Millennial?**

The term “Millennial” was coined for the children born just before the turn of the century. Especially in the US, the groups of those born at certain times, and with typical attributes, have been grouped into approximate generational terms. The Center for Generational Genetics (2016), a research and consulting firm out of Austin Texas, states that there are “three key trends that shape generations; parenting, technology and economics”. The Center’s research leads them to distinguish the following five generations based on birth years:

- Gen Z, i-Gen, or Centennials: Born 1996 and later
- Millennials or Gen Y: Born 1977 to 1995
- Generation X: Born 1965 to 1976
- Baby Boomers: Born 1946 to 1964
- Traditionalists or Silent Generation: Born 1945 and before

Other organizations have slight variations of dates and names, but essentially, the individuals in these groups tend to share common experiences and goals, and perhaps most importantly to us – learning styles. Here are some attributes of each generation as far as shared experiences:

- Gen Z, iGen, or Centennials: Born 1996 and later
  - September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center attack in New York, is mostly part of their history, not their experience
  - These are our current typical college age students
- Millennials or Gen Y: Born 1977 to 1995
  - Have become the largest generation in the US workforce
  - First to come of age in the new millennium
- Generation X: Born 1965 to 1976
  - Short period between Baby Boomers and Millennials, with Gen X picked as a nickname for a group that seemed hesitant to be defined
  - Parents of Gen Z entering College today
- Baby Boomers: Born 1946 to 1964
  - Born after WW II, ended with the emergence of the birth control pill in 1964
  - Approximately one-third of the current US population
- Traditionalists or Silent Generation: Born 1928-1945 and before
  - Were children of the great depression and WW II
- G.I Generation: Born 1901-1928
  - Often called “the greatest generation” this generation fought in WW II

## **Images**

We have watched technology define communication styles over the last decade or so. While many of us may fondly remember the formality of the business letter, the recent generations have quickly moved from business letter to email to text to images (emoji’s). What this evolution shows us is not only a casualness, and separation of style from other generations’ long held traditions, but also that speed and the ability to interpret differently are important to this generation. We may remember (and believe in its truth) the expression that a picture tells a thousand words, but it would have never occurred to most of us to use a smiley face in correspondence to show our appreciation.

Nevertheless, in this always connected generation, images are the communication language of choice. If we want to connect with this generation, and to teach them, we must adapt to their learning and communication style. We are not suggesting that we all must drop our traditional

modes of communication and teaching, and pick up text messaging as our teaching method. What we are suggesting is that we must realize the real value, strength and purpose of imaging and use that to our advantage when promoting the lessons of maritime leadership. And the most powerful image we have is not on a cellphone or computer or social media page – it is ourselves.

Our students must look at us and see the traits we try to imbue in them, those of a strong and effective maritime leader, such as those stated above; one who is ethical, responsive and goal-oriented, who strives for excellence, demonstrates integrity, and is confident, ever-learning and adaptive. Our students learn from us every day – inside and outside the classroom - so we must practice this every day, in the significant and in the simple decisions we make every day – the way we dress, talk, act, work and play.

And if and when we fail to show those traits, they must see us take responsibility for our actions. When our students see in us the example of what they need to be, then they will trust and respect us, and allow us to influence them in positive ways. Then we can become mentors, and then, and only then, can we teach them.

What can we do to really mentor and teach our students? Tim Elmore has been studying and writing about the younger generations in books and blogs for some time. In his book, *Generation i-Y* (2015), he suggests we as mentors need to be “velvet covered bricks.” Velvet on the outside – responsive, accepting and supportive, while hard as a brick on the inside – lead by principles, set boundaries, and hold them to standards. He provides six strategies to bring out the best in leadership skills of this new generation.

- Cultivate a relationship
- Earn the right to be heard
- Communicate belief
- Teach like a mentor
- Remove the fear of failure
- Challenge them with hard assignments

## **Little things are important**

In many ways, the role of a mentor is akin to being a coach. John Wooden, perhaps the most famous and successful college basketball coach in American history, always started from the basics to provide the fundamental skills to be a great basketball team. In his book, Wooden (1997) recalls that on the first day of practice, he would teach his players how to put on their socks. As players complained about this basic lesson, he told them that a rolled sock could lead to blisters, which could lead to performance issues for an individual player, which could lead to the overall performance of the team. Leadership is part of being an effective player on a team, and it starts with the way one prepares for his or her position.

## **Mindset**

In her best-selling book titled “*Mindset*”, Dr Carol Dweck (2016) discusses whether success (or failure) in areas such as art, math and sports are due to an innate natural ability or a function of mindset. Her research has shown that those with the *growth* mindset, those who strive for excellence, and are motivated by getting better, rather than by the fear of failure, are those who reach their highest potential – the greatest level of success. We must show our students, that regardless of their self-perceived talents and strengths or weaknesses, they all have the potential to be leaders in our maritime industry, and keep motivating them to become so. Our industry requires this of us as maritime educators.

The qualities defined in the Maritime Model of Leadership are not going away with the coming of the newest generation. In fact, they are possibly more important for our future leaders to possess as they break into an industry that is rooted in these traditions with future employers who value these qualities. As current educators, we primarily find ourselves as members of the Baby Boomer & Generation X generations. We tend to see the world in binaries; black or white, conservative or liberal. As discussed above, the younger generations seem to enjoy paradoxes and fluidity. They seem to combine worldviews and they resist forces that push them into predetermined molds. Thus, the question of how to teach these qualities to the younger generations persists. Since the mindset of the student has changed since we were students, it is important then for our teaching strategy to

change as well. Along with the growth mindset, we suggest combining Leonard Sweet's EPIC style of preaching with Tim Elmore's "Seven Steps for Leading When You Can't Understand Them" in order to achieve success.

## **EPIC Model**

Leonard Sweet (2015) introduces the idea of EPIC preaching as a realization that traditional methods no longer reach the younger generations. In the twenty-first century, which he says is full of "chaos and paradox", he challenges us to step outside our comfort zone and grow in order to reach our current audiences. In a similar fashion, educators must grow and adapt their ways of teaching in order to reach today's students. Sweet's EPIC model can be very transferable to the field of education and is explained below.

### **E - Experiential**

"What rational was to the Gutenberg world, experience is to the Google world" (Sweet 2015, p. 44). Today's students are not engaged by lecture; they are seeking a true hands-on experience. They are looking for a guide, not a lecturer. This can be achieved by creating environments where students can truly engage with the lessons we are trying to convey. An example would be creating leadership opportunities that match their skill and knowledge level. These opportunities can scaffold up in scope and responsibility as more knowledge is gained, but it gives them a safe environment to experiment with what they have learned.

### **P - Participatory**

"While experience can sometimes be passive, participation turns people into active agents of initiation and response" (Sweet 2015, p. 51). Students support what they help to create. Providing students with opportunities to practice what they are learning or to help drive decisions will allow them to take ownership and be more invested. Examples range from letting students vote on an issue to giving them the opportunity to sit on a campus-wide committee to giving them the opportunity to teach/facilitate a topic with which they can connect.

### **I - Image Rich**

“One of the shifts we need to make... is to realize that the power isn’t in the words – it is in the images, the stories” (Sweet 2015, p. 56). Today’s students have always known a world full of images and stimulation. They have never known a world that did not include the TV or the computer. As the saying goes, “A picture tells a thousand words” and in the world of social media, imagery is what invites people to participate. Here, an example would be infusing graphics into worksheets to break up text or videos into presentations. This will allow the students to make sense of the information in a way that makes more sense to them.

### **C- Connected**

“Invite people to connect with each other so they can better understand” (Sweet 2015, p. 59). Today’s students are constantly connected – to each other and the outside world. They are used to being able to share their thoughts and opinions. Engaging students in the conversation and creating ways for them to share their ideas can help them connect to a topic and the people around them. An example would be providing opportunities for students to process new information in a smaller group. As a part of a workshop, rather than having one person talking the entire time, break it up by asking the students to form small groups and discuss the larger topic. To keep them focused, this could involve providing some probing questions or asking for an outcome. This allows them to bounce ideas off of one another, have an active role in where the conversation is going, and feel connected with those around them.

All four of Sweet’s tenants are equally important in shaping a transformational learning environment, but they are nothing if you yourself cannot connect with your students. Tim Elmore (2017) posits that each generation has difficulty relating to the next and that it can be difficult to relate to younger generations when you don’t truly understand them. Elmore believes that there are seven steps to leading those you don’t understand, specifically the coming generations, which are outlined below.

- Give Them Slack: Allow them to express themselves in innovative ways
- Don't Freak Out: Freaking out at their seemingly odd choices shuts them off
- Affirm what you can: Find the positive elements of their identity that you can affirm and give them 100% of your attention
- Call Out What is Harmful: Help them discover which expressions and choices may be harmful
- Offer the Long View: Help them recognize the long-term implications of poor decisions
- Help Them Focus: Help them discover their best self by equipping them to focus on their unique style, talents, and strengths.
- Tell the Truth: Never sacrifice a truthful, genuine conversation in fear of not connecting

How then do we combine all of this in order to bridge the gaps between today's students and ourselves? We become aware and even more intentional. We must recognize how we are different and how we similar from those we are teaching – and we need to use both to our advantage. We must look to provide leadership opportunities that are appealing to the upcoming generations and get them involved early. We must be willing to step outside our own comfort zones and meet them where they are.

## **Conclusion**

In his book, "Lincoln on Leadership", author Donald Phillips (1992) breaks down the leadership attributes of one of America's greatest presidents who led America through one the most troubling times in American history. He divides the book into four sections, each which prescribe those important leadership areas that we, as mentors and "images" to our students must follow if we are serious about preparing them for the maritime industry. These sections are; People, Character, Endeavor, Communication. Using some of the methods discussed above, and focusing on how we treat people, the character we embody, the goals we endeavor to reach, and the manner in which we communicate to our peers, subordinates, and supervisors, will allow us to be the "images" seen by our students regarding how to model maritime leadership.



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