

UNLEASHING PASSION,
PURPOSE, *and* PERFORMANCE *in*
YOUNGER GENERATIONS

Answering

Why

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Introduction

Did you ever inch out on what looked like a sturdy tree branch only to realize it wasn't as strong as you had thought? You might have just been pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone for some excitement. Little did you know that lurking below the surface of the limb was a crack that would soon broadcast a thunderous creak—and you would face the imminent disaster of plunging downward in a life-threatening fall unless you took action.

In this book I use a creaking-branch metaphor that comes from a childhood experience when I was climbing high in a tree and suddenly heard the branch beneath me start to creak and give way. In that single heart-stopping moment, I learned to do three things: focus, plan, and take action to get to safety.

Focus happens when we experience a serious fear of loss or a sense of urgency, when there is something we desperately want and are in danger of losing. When that happens, we find the ability to laser-focus and prioritize the thing we want, whatever it may be.

Strategic planning follows hard on the heels of focus. This is the stage where we formulate our next steps to alleviate that fear of loss.

As human beings we are constantly strategizing, making plans, and solving problems; it is inherent to the way we think and organize our lives.

Action is where we implement our strategic plan by taking the actual steps to put our plan into motion.

Life is not so different from tree climbing. When we're standing out on a limb as we live our lives, when things appear to be going well and on track, hearing a "creak" can announce that something is about to change in a big way. This sense of urgency triggers us to focus on the challenges at hand, strategically plan a new direction, and take action—in fact, dramatic action—to avoid that dangerous plummet.

There is an upside to branch-creak moments. Hearing the branch creak can be an amazingly effective motivational tool. It is during these critical experiences in life that real change is possible because they cause us to focus, plan, and take the necessary action to achieve decisive goals and keep from falling. Growth happens when we step outside our safe space. It rarely happens when we are feeling secure. Hearing a terrifying branch creak in our life is actually a valuable experience because it energizes us to move in a different direction toward a positive result.

Whether you recognize it or not, the branch is creaking in America when it comes to engaging the younger generations and preparing them to successfully enter the workforce. There are some six million open jobs in our country right now—and no one qualified to fill them. We're facing a crisis in both the education system and the arena of workforce development, and it's critical that we focus, plan, and take action before the branch truly breaks.

Let me explain.

The Branch Is Creaking

There is a huge generational shift happening in the United States. The baby boomers, the largest generation ever born in the United States, are retiring, leaving vast numbers of unfilled jobs in many critical economic sectors. As the economy grows into the future, the need for those jobs will only increase—a great opportunity for pretty much anyone currently under the age of 40, right?

Yet the truth is that due to false perceptions, outdated stigmas, and what I like to call the *Awareness Gap*, many of today's young people aren't interested in those open jobs. The six million jobs I'm talking about are middle- to high-skilled, living-wage positions requiring significant training in high-tech environments using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques for fields like advanced manufacturing, construction, healthcare, engineering, aviation, and many others. Sounds pretty cool, doesn't it? Not to many of today's young people. Between false perception and big-picture reality is the Awareness Gap. And the resulting national skills gap crisis in our country is only getting worse. Mark Drury, the vice president of business development with Shapiro & Duncan, Inc., a mechanical engineering and construction company based in Rockville, Maryland, told me that his company can't even chase all the opportunities available to them because they can't find enough qualified people. "We are extremely busy, and the biggest threat we face is not being able to achieve our strategic goals because of the lack of human capital in our industry," Mark said. "We are struggling to find enough qualified employees to tackle what we already have in the pipeline. We can't begin to take on the workload that is currently on the market without adding additional capacity and by increasing the strength of our most important resource—human capital. We have to increase awareness among young people, parents, school systems, and communities about the impressive careers available in this and many other fields."¹

The lack of interest in these six million open jobs is a paradox since most of the younger generations aren't sufficiently engaged in their current profession. Some 55 percent of young people report feeling unengaged at work.² Perhaps even more alarming, some 66 percent expect to leave their current positions by 2020.³ Two-thirds of the largest working population are planning to leave their current jobs—wow. Alarms should be sounding off everywhere. Why do we have this disconnect?

One answer is that many young people don't want the same kinds of jobs their parents or grandparents had. They aren't as motivated by the safety and security of a good job. Rather, they want a job that has purpose—that means something. They want a job that rewards them with experiences rather than just money, even as their college loan balances balloon. (At last count, some 42 million Americans currently have student loans, with more than 5 million at least 90 days behind on payments.⁴) And they also want to know why a work process or activity is important. Why should they do it this way or that way? Why is a particular step important in the grand scheme of things? This inquisitive nature started at birth and has been nurtured, praised, and stimulated throughout their lives. It should come as no surprise that younger generations want things explained, spelled out, and clear—that is exactly how we reared them. That's why I've come up with a new name for today's young people to help frame this challenge: *the Why Generation*.

The Why Generation encompasses both Generation Y (the millennials) and Generation Z (currently the youngest generation). These cohorts approach education, careers, and everything else in their lives with a strong desire to understand the purpose behind what they do. "Because I said so" is not enough of a reason anymore, and we feel this shift in the classroom dynamic, in workplace interactions, and in every conversation we have with today's young people. The Why Generation asks a serious question. Do we have the answer?

There's another side to all this inquisitiveness. In their quest for purpose and meaning, young people today wind up job-hopping in search of the perfect fit, which creates friction and even resentment among those trying to fill those jobs. Today's managers and educators, who come from every generation, now label young people as entitled, unfocused, and even lazy. (Some young people even say that about themselves!) They ask why young people act this way. Why can't they be more like us? Add it all up, and you have a lot of people urgently asking why we're experiencing these problems and how we can better connect with and unlock the potential of tomorrow's workforce. We're having a national branch-creak moment.

We have some 100 million talented members of the Why Generation seeking reasons and purpose and another 220 million people in older generations struggling to provide reasons and purpose. We need to find those answers. Our nation is increasingly suffering from the aptly named skills gap I mentioned earlier. Millions of jobs in sectors crucially important to our economy and society are open, and we have no one with the right skills—or even the desire—to fill them.

Are we sure we are truly preparing the Why Generation for the opportunities ahead? What help can we provide them in the classroom and beyond in terms of education and workforce development? Do we need a better approach?

The branch is creaking. Time to focus, plan, and take action. Now is the time to embrace meaningful strategies to empower and engage the young people of the Why Generation and help them fulfill their vast potential.

Why I Hear the Branch Creaking

I am the founder of a company called TFS, which works with businesses and schools across the nation to help them attract and retain significantly more of the right employees or students, in the right

positions or programs, for the right reasons. I am also the father of two members of the Why Generation, my sons Matt and Nick, who have provided me with plenty of experiences and stories to share as I travel North America delivering keynote speeches and coaching my clients. My message is all about how to recruit, retain, and motivate what I believe to be one of the greatest generations—yes, today’s young people—to greater performance in their educational programs and careers.

At TFS, we work with employers, universities, community and technical colleges, career centers, unified and comprehensive school districts, and many statewide and international educational organizations to help improve performance with the Why Generation. Our overarching mission is to share and support our clients’ passion for making a difference.

To that end, I collaborate with a talented group of professionals who share a common vision for changing the education and workforce development sectors for the better. I am extremely proud of the work we do and the impact we are making nationwide. It’s a much-needed service we provide. In my travels, I constantly hear these questions:

- What can we do to reach today’s young people and motivate them to higher performance in their careers and all other areas of life?
- Why do the younger generations act the way they do?
- How can we overcome generational differences in the workplace?
- Why do we need to change the educational and workforce development paradigm in the United States?
- How can we improve employee retention and performance?

- Why is our national skills gap expanding, and how can we close it?

Differences in worldviews, habits, perspectives, and values between generations—or as I call them, *Generational Rifts*—are nothing new. But what is new is the alarming rate at which our country's skills gap and college debt burden are expanding. While many factors are at play in this national crisis, many experts believe that the radical differences between today's younger and older generations are among the most significant causes. Yet looking at it solely as a generational issue misses the key point.

What worked in the past to educate and train young people isn't working anymore. Business and industry's desperation for skilled workers has its roots in our educational system and even in our parenting.

We face a national epidemic of rising college costs, decreasing degree-requiring jobs, and employer frustration with the younger generations in the workplace. Yet we continue to rely on an outdated educational and workforce training system that was developed 50 years ago. Declining educational funding is another huge challenge for schools—another branch creak—as they are being forced to do more with less each year. The critical topic of career development has been drastically cut or even eliminated in many cases. And yet we're puzzled about why our young people are underemployed.

Young people have changed, and we need to change how we connect with them. The question shouldn't be just about getting young people ready for college. Rather, it should be about preparing them for careers for which college is one of many available options. I'm a huge fan of going to college if the career you want to pursue requires a degree. But contrary to what many young people today are told, going to college is not the only means to a successful career and lifestyle. To have a great career and life, you can certainly pursue a

PhD. But you can also get a two-year degree, earn a certification, acquire a license, or complete an apprenticeship. That's not a message our young people hear anymore—and that needs to change. In short, what got us here won't get us where we need to go. We need to change course if we are truly interested in unlocking the full potential of the coming generations.

The members of the Why Generation have immense potential to change the world for the better. And they want to do just that. They're tenacious and talented, and when they find a cause they believe in, they give it everything they have. Yes, they're different from older generations. But might that be a good thing? If we adjusted our viewpoint a bit, couldn't we begin to see their perceived weaknesses as strengths instead? What if we began to think of this moment in our history as a branch-creak opportunity to rethink our approach to education and workforce development?

After all, responsibility for the future of our great nation currently lies with our largest generation, the baby boomers. I think we can all agree that we want our kids and young people to strive for maximum performance in every area of their lives (motivated by their own unique interests, talents, and abilities). Our schools and communities have a big role to play in that goal. We also want Why Generation workers to help shrink the skills gap for employers, clients, and shareholders because our national economy hangs in the balance. It's clear that we need to make major changes on a national scale to achieve these goals. The good news is that we've done things like this before.

When Our National Branch Creaks

Americans have experienced countless events that have caused our collective branch to creak. Each instance forced us to focus, plan, and take action—sometimes massive action on a national scale. Today

our growing skills gap, misaligned education system, and college debt epidemic are creating yet another branch-creak opportunity for our nation to step up and overcome the difficulties standing in our way.

World War II is an example of a national crisis that motivated an entire generation to rise to the challenge and make tremendous sacrifices to protect the United States and our allies. The actions of those Americans, both in battle and at home, inspired author and former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw to label them the greatest generation. This generation also overcame the ravages of the Depression and is largely responsible for making the United States a global superpower. And they did it by having a shared purpose, a shared responsibility, and a shared vision sparked by a national branch creak.

Another national branch creak came in the wake of October 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, a 23-inch-diameter radio pulse satellite that achieved low Earth orbit lasting 92 days and 1,440 orbits. It was visible worldwide and its radio pulse signals could be heard from Earth. In America, the launch created fear that the Soviets could one day dominate space flight to increase spying capabilities and perhaps launch weapons proficiently from a tactical space platform in orbit above the United States.

This realization—or branch creak—caused a powerful fear of loss and sense of urgency to beat the Soviets in the domination of space, which naturally became the next frontier. It accelerated the rising tensions of the Cold War and created the Space Race, culminating in the July 20, 1969, landing of Apollo 11 on the surface of the moon. The focus, planning, and action that followed Sputnik's historic voyage changed our world forever and spurred decades of high-tech innovations unparalleled in history. We owe much of our sophisticated technology today to the advancements that took place during the 1957 branch creak that fueled the Space Race.

As I think of these events, I'm reminded of Homer Hickam,

whose life was the basis for the movie *October Sky*. As a teenager growing up in Coalwood, West Virginia, Homer was inspired to build his own rocket after seeing Sputnik magically sail across the night sky. If he was successful in building and testing a homemade rocket—no small feat—he could enter it in a state science competition and possibly receive a college scholarship, which would mean his escape from a life spent working in the coal mines. I remember one scene in particular that beautifully illustrates the personal branch creak in his life and how the “want-to” created the “how-to” for him to achieve this goal (a concept we’ll explore further). Eagerly questioned about his chances of entering the science competition, Homer’s teacher Miss Riley says, “Well, maybe it’s not for you.” “Well, what do you mean?” he asks. “Homer, you got a great mind. But science requires math . . . which has never been one of your favorite subjects.” His response: “I’ll learn the math, I’ll do whatever it takes.” And he does.

Homer Hickam went on to build his rocket, win the science competition, go to college, and become a NASA engineer. When faced with a branch creak that brought a fear of loss and sense of urgency, he found a way to overcome the obstacles and make his dreams a reality.

Sputnik changed everything—for individuals like Homer Hickam and for our country as a whole. What was initially seen as a significant challenge to our way of life in fact spurred the action that led to the astonishing success and advancement we have enjoyed in space exploration and discovery.

As Homer Hickam and our entire nation learned, hearing the branch creak is not something to be feared. On the contrary, it is something to be embraced as a significant opportunity to focus, plan, and take the necessary action that may change the course of history, as it did in the Space Race throughout the 1960s.

In other words, if we want to overcome our current national

branch creak, it's time for us to focus, plan, and take action. It's time to unleash the power of younger generations to achieve the performance and success they are capable of—in every area of their lives. And it's time to show them why.

What's Next

As a way to help you understand the challenge we face in connecting with and unleashing the full potential of the Why Generation, I've divided this book into three sections:

SECTION ONE: FOCUS ON THE CHALLENGE

In this first section, we'll talk about why the skills gap exists—and continues to grow wider—and how we need to overcome our biases and misconceptions about young people to help close it. We'll also discuss who the members of the Why Generation are and why they think and act the way they do as a way to understand their strengths, as well as their weaknesses.

- Chapter One: Closing the Skills Gap
- Chapter Two: Overcoming Generational Rifts
- Chapter Three: Getting to Know the Why Generation

SECTION TWO: PLAN FOR EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE

Once we know who the young people of the Why Generation are, we'll dig into why they are missing the massive opportunity before them. We'll also discuss key tools that I use to help young people rethink what they want from their lives and careers.

- Chapter Four: Why the Why Generation Doesn't Hear the Branch Creaking
- Chapter Five: Finding the Light at the End of the Tunnel
- Chapter Six: Bridging the Awareness Gap
- Chapter Seven: Building a Competitive Advantage

SECTION THREE: TAKE ACTION ON THE PLAN

Our current educational and workforce development system is broken because it doesn't connect learning with a larger purpose for young people today. But we can change that. I offer some advice and tips educators, employers, and even parents can use to unlock the full potential of the Why Generation.

- Chapter Eight: Education with Purpose; Employment with Passion
- Chapter Nine: Strategies and Tools to Connect and Empower

CONCLUSION: THE WADE FACTOR

I will wrap up the book on an inspirational note by showing what can happen when we implement the key points I've shared throughout the book. These principles are producing results for teachers, administrators, parents, employers, managers, and many others around the country. And now they can help transform your paradigm.

Are you ready? Let's step out on a limb together.