

All in the Family

Throughout history the established generation has insisted on its privilege of grumbling about the younger generation disrespecting the norms of their elders. Or as Archie Bunker somewhat inarticulately expressed it to Meathead, “Geeze.” Throughout history those who will inherit the future have insisted on their privilege of grumbling about how conditions are changing and the old norms need a dust-up. Why should it be any different today in dentistry?

Before we had fake news, there was an urban legend that beginning dentists are unethical because of their heavy educational debt. There are not published studies confirming this claim. The average age for disciplined licenses for both physicians and dentists in California is in the mid-50s. A research paper published in this journal in 2002 found no connection between debt and “non-traditional treatment plans.” Educational debt plus interest have risen by an average \$5,800 each year since 1985. But during the first two-thirds of this period it was a constant three-quarters of general practitioners’ net income for a single year, which was rising at almost double inflation. What changed in about 2005 when the rumors linking educational debt and unethical practice began to surface was that dentists’ earnings went flat. Cheating in dental schools has been about 70% recently, compared with the low 90% range in the 1980s.

The times changed for everyone. All of dentistry is becoming more commercial, privileging ICD codes over care, membership in organized dentistry is declining while fictitious business names proliferate, dentists say they create smiles rather than health, more and more they look to vendors rather than colleagues for values. Ethics is too often defined as coming close enough to minimal compliance with the law. Both the established profession and the “new dentist” see that, but each gives it a different. The established profession holds that no change in professionalism is necessary; the younger dentists believe overlooking change is no longer an option.

Hot sellers in the bookstores these days are titles advising managers how to deal with younger workers. Tellingly, there are few books going the other way, presumably because Millennials get their information from other sources. The young ones are characterized as “selfish,” “now-oriented,” “FOMO – fear of missing out,” “team-oriented,” and participating in the social cause *de jour*. I recall when Baby Boomers were labeled “entitled,” “smug,” “driven,” and “excepting to live (practice, and retain control) forever.” Both characterizations have sufficient truth, and both are inadequate because they assume intergenerational difference are a function only of a collective personality. Groups, including generations, respond based on where they stand relative to changing conditions and what others like them are doing.

Gen-Xer’s grew up playing *The Legend of Zelda*. It is grounded in the classic myth of a solo hero saving the princess in distress by overcoming obstacles to acquire “powers” and move to new levels. Baby-Boomer parents approved of the mission. After all they were moving through the chairs in organized dentistry and building secure futures “for their families.” What was objectionable was the virtual nature of Gen-Xer’s participation. Success was possible without the blessing of authority.

Millennials cut their teeth on *SimCity*. This is a MMO (massively multiplayer online game), where a huge virtual community interacts in real time to build worlds that are individually satisfying. The goal is personally defined, the rules are few, and outcomes are determined by what one does in the context of what others are doing. Unenforced rules are just PR slogans. Communities emerge based on local

interactions and they change shape quickly. That sure puts a stick in the spokes of large organizations' top-down strategic planning.

Nubs:

1. Those in charge will find it futile to ask why the rising generation is uninterested in playing the old game.
2. Group behavior today is based on local interactions as power shifts to the masses.
3. Ten years ago we should have been worrying about membership; today we should try to understand what it means to be a dentist.