At the Crossroads of Entitlement Avenue and Litigation Way: A New Challenge for 21st Century Management

Marvin Karlins, Ph.D.
Robert F. Welker, Esq., JD
MUMA College of Business, University of South Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

In the past decade an increasing percentage of under-prepared students with over-the-top expectations have entered American colleges and universities which pressure faculty to “pass them along” for financial reasons and fear of litigation. The result is a “perfect storm” of 21st century graduates who are ill prepared for the business world, where failure is a possibility and hard work is expected for continued employment. The implications of this transition are examined in this paper.

As University professors with a combined total of over 100 years of teaching, we have witnessed first-hand the evolution of higher education and the students who chose to pursue advanced degrees. In general, this evolution has not “evolved” in the sense of a positive progression but, rather, regressed in several critical ways:

(1) Many students attending institutions of higher learning are less prepared to meet minimum performance requirements, as they have been “passed along” through K-12 without learning the requisite skills (knowledge and study habits) necessary for academic success at the college/university level.

(2) These students have been products of an academic culture which discourages teachers from using discipline and failing grades to reflect the true student behavior they observe in the classroom. At the same time, many K-12 schools have de-emphasized competition, focused on student “feelings” rather than student performance, and been pressured to promote academically unready students to meet quotas and conform to a “no student left behind” philosophy.

(3) Growing up in a litigious culture (where attorney advertisements encourage legal actions) these students—and a growing number of “helicopter parents”—see the threat of legal action as a reasonable strategy to get what they don’t deserve. Such tactics, oftentimes totally unjustified, frequently achieve their objective, because academic administrators would rather settle the case in the student’s favor than face the possibility and cost of arguing the case in a court of law.

(4) Colleges and universities have dealt with the challenges of 21st century students not with resolve but retreat. This is seen, most obviously, in grade inflation and a relaxing of standards for entering and graduating institutions of higher learning. The uglier and not-to-be seen side of this retreat is far more insidious. Faculty at many institutions are encouraged to give their students passing marks (even if not deserved) because state legislatures provide cash-strapped colleges/universities with more money the faster their students graduate. Adjuncts (college/university teachers who hire on to conduct one or two courses), who are not eligible for tenure or even the expectation of continuing employment, have been known to give higher grades and overlook student misbehavior in the hopes of getting better student evaluations...a critical factor in whether they get rehired. Even tenured faculty are discouraged from giving failing grades to students who earned them, particularly in programs...
that bring in extra money for the institution they are attending. The authors are personally aware of four different times where a faculty member has been told to either give better grades to their students or they would be removed from teaching in the program. Finally, penalties for academic dishonesty have been watered down at many institutions of higher learning, encouraging student cheating and plagiarism. Even at schools where some reasonable standards of punishment exist, the efforts required of the instructor to bring an academic dishonesty case forward are so immense, the behavior is often “overlooked” or settled informally between the teacher and student (translation: a plea bargain where the student gets a less stringent penalty for agreeing not to take issue with the charge).

The consequences of this educational “upbringing” is to encourage individuals who have passed through the system to feel a sense of entitlement (“I deserve what I want even though I haven’t put in the required effort to justify it”) and a willingness to be litigious: aggressively challenge anything they disagree with, knowing full well that such an approach usually works in their favor (even when they know they’re wrong).

So, how does this educational process impact the 21st century manager? If he or she is not prepared to deal with the products of this Brave New Education, there will be a serious disconnect between employee and employer. And for the newly-minted graduates who has grown accustomed to 21st century American education, there will be a very rude awakening when it comes to keeping and moving upwards in their chosen jobs/professions.

The so-called “safe zone” that institutions of higher education have become in 21st Century America are antithetical to the capitalistic system of business practiced in the country. Imagine the first-time-on-the-job college graduate being called out for a mistake, or faced with real competition from colleagues or rival businesses. Imagine a manager who, supervising a newly-hired graduate, is astonished to observe an individual who assumes he or she can get by with minimum effort and, if challenged, is surly and even litigious in response.

What one has, basically, is culture shock. Two different cultures, two different expectations, too many differences.

Is there a solution to this conundrum? We believe so, but it will require some retooling and patience on both sides of the work equation. An increasing number of individuals who enter the workplace for the first time and have been products of 21st Century American education are going to have to learn that failure is a possibility, hard work a reasonable expectation and that competition is a workplace reality. Managers who are charged with overseeing newly-graduated hires need to work diligently and patiently to introduce the “new business culture” to their subordinates, recognizing that it is not easy to reshape beliefs and behaviors that have been solidified over a lifetime. Oftentimes, organizations will be required to set up remedial and/or training programs to prepare employees to perform functions they should have mastered in school (but didn’t for reasons already mentioned). There will be a necessary and, in some cases, protracted period of adjustment that should both be expected and tolerated. Today’s high school and college graduates are not intellectually inferior to their 20th Century counterparts, they have simply been educated in a manner which is incongruent with the expectations of corporate America. The good news is: that means they can be reeducated to perform in a manner which is appropriate in the business world. The bad news is: it’s going to take time and effort. Being aware of this education/business problem is the first step in solving it which, in the final analysis, was the reason we wrote this article.
REFERENCES


