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Leonard Wong

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Strategic Insights: Letting the Millennials Drive

May 2, 2016 | Dr. Leonard Wong

In the preface to the Army's Operating Concept, General David Perkins, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, counsels that as the Army prepares for the future, "We must not be consumed with focusing solely on avoiding risk, but build[ing] leaders and institutions that recognize and leverage opportunities."¹ Indeed, the complex world in which the future force will operate demands that the junior leaders of today—the Millennials—be developed into tomorrow's future leaders capable of exercising aggressive, independent, and disciplined initiative. Today's Millennials, however, are coming out of an American society that has become increasingly uneasy about potential danger and progressively intolerant to risk.

For example, in days gone by, a driver's license was a traditional rite of passage in the journey to becoming an adult. It was a tangible symbol of freedom and independence that gave teens the ability to get themselves to a part-time job, get home from sports practices, or just cruise around on Friday nights. Even if the likelihood of buying their own car was near zero and the family car was mostly off limits, teens still worked diligently through the process of getting a license regardless.

Not so today. There has been an incredible shift in this country in the percentage of young people obtaining their driver's licenses. For example, in 1983, 46.2% of all 16-year-olds had a driver's license. In 2008, the percentage had dropped to 31.1%. By 2014, astonishingly only 24.5% of 16-year-olds had a license²—that's a 20% drop in the last three decades. Similarly, the percentage of American high school seniors who reported having a driver's license declined from 85% in 1996 to an unbelievable 73% in 2010.³

Of course, some explain this trend by pointing out that Millennials these days have less incentive to travel because they are constantly tethered to their smartphones and can easily stay in touch with peers through social media. However, past generations of teens were also glued to screens (but on TVs) and also had phones (albeit antiquated landlines), but that didn't stop them from getting their licenses as soon as possible. Others point to the growth of graduated licensing programs that require more driving experience before teens can obtain full driving privileges. True, but even these programs and their added conditions do not prohibit young people from getting their licenses at age 16. Finally, some will blame the economy and the cost of insurance as insurmountable obstacles in the pursuit of a license. While the economy is certainly a factor, analysis of another youth transportation trend suggests that perhaps a more subtle shift in parental attitudes is at play.

A recent national survey conducted by YouGov, a global research company, found that 8% of Americans do not know how to ride a bicycle. While just 5% of those 55 and older lack that skill, a surprising 13% of those 18 to 34 do not know how to ride.⁴ Why is learning how to ride a bike—a key initiation rite for nearly all children—becoming a less universal experience for the Millennial generation? Laying the blame for this trend on increased technology or tightened budgets in a tough economy is not so easy. Our society’s approach toward developing young people has fundamentally changed. It appears that fewer of today’s youth are learning how to ride a bike—or how to drive a car—because of two underlying reasons.

First, as a society, we are becoming increasingly risk averse. The thought of an impetuous child guiding a two-wheeler unsteadily around the block (even wearing a helmet) or a headstrong adolescent sitting behind the wheel of the family car (with tunes blaring) brings to mind the possibility of ill-advised decisions, potential kidnappings, avoidable crashes, and inevitable heartache. Never mind that improved vehicle designs and safety technology have brought auto fatality risks to record lows⁵ or that the chance of getting abducted by a stranger is about the same as getting struck by lightning.⁶ More and more parents, after surrendering to fear and anxiety, are convincing their children to either postpone or evade altogether the hypothetically dangerous acts of riding a bike or driving a car.

Second, because youngsters still need to get to their daily soccer practices or weekly Scout meetings, many parents have discovered a simple way to avoid the nerve-wracking anguish of allowing their children to ride or drive themselves: *Drive for them*. Anyone who has spent hours running behind a wobbling child trying to balance a bicycle or found themselves searching for an imaginary brake pedal while riding with a student driver is familiar with the agony of equipping young people to ride or drive themselves. Many parents have decided that it is far easier to personally chauffeur their kids around than to undergo the torment of training them and then sending them off into unseen perils and hazards. As a result, Millennials are less likely to conquer challenges like balancing a bike or operating an automobile simply because many of today’s fearful parents are finding it less distressing if they just step in and drive for them.

It would be naive for Army leaders to believe that they are immune to the undercurrent of these societal trends—not the trends in driver’s licenses or bike riding—but the reluctance of older generations in allowing the Millennial generation to step up and lead. Despite the recent heavy emphasis on instilling the “power down” tenets of Mission Command on the force, the Army’s culture still reflects some of the same societal unwillingness to allow Millennials to be independent and self-sufficient.

For example, the 2013 Chief of Staff of the Leader Development Task Force surveyed the entire Army and found that only 42% of officers believed that their higher headquarters underwrote prudent risk during deployments. The Task Force also reported that only 49% of officers believed that higher headquarters encouraged disciplined initiative. Importantly, the Task Force noted that junior officers held significantly more pessimistic views concerning their ability to exercise initiative or take risk compared to senior officers.⁷ Likewise, the 2014 Annual Survey of Army Leadership conducted by the Center for Army Leadership found that 41% of junior NCOs did not believe that they were empowered to make decisions at their level and only 59% were satisfied with the amount of freedom they had in conducting their duties.⁸

Army senior leaders often hold the same reservations as that of society about letting the Millennials make their own decisions; the fear of negative outcomes and the knowledge that a lot of headaches could be avoided if they just did it for them. Although the fear often centers on the possibility that junior leaders may waste precious resources, leaders in uniform may also experience an unspoken uneasiness that a subordinate's failings may reflect poorly upon the senior leader's tenure. In a downsized, more competitive Army, the last thing a senior leader needs is a career torpedoed by a junior leader's well meaning—but flawed—exercise of initiative. Why let a junior leader stumble through the planning, execution, and evaluation of an event when the staff and more senior leaders have the knowledge and expertise to do it better? However, before senior leaders nudge those Millennials aside and slide into the driver's seat themselves, it might be worthwhile to hear the rest of the societal story on Millennials and driver's licenses.

Many experts expected the downturn in American youngsters getting their licenses to have a corresponding decrease in fatal crashes involving 16-year-olds. With fewer immature drivers on the road, it was predicted that young lives would be saved. Indeed, a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* analyzed fatal crash data and found that the number of fatalities of 16-year-old drivers did drop dramatically between 1986 and 2007.⁹ Even though there were fewer fatal crashes among 16-year-old drivers, there was also a disturbing side effect—more fatal accidents involving 18-year-old drivers. In the words of Scott Masten, the study's lead author and a researcher with California's Department of Motor Vehicles, "I was actually bummed by my own findings—to find out we're offsetting the benefits" of saving 16-year-old lives by losing almost as many 18-year-old lives.¹⁰

It turns out that obtaining a license in most states requires a 16-year-old to have 30 to 50 hours of supervised driving experience with an adult. That is 30 to 50 hours of someone sitting white-knuckled in the passenger seat, furtively eyeing the speedometer, mentally dodging mailboxes, and offering needed advice whether welcomed or not. On the other hand, an 18-year-old walking into the DMV is not required to have any supervised driving hours, driver training, or driver education to get their license. The findings suggest that a deadly consequence of parents encouraging their teens to delay the licensing process by driving for them is the tragic loss of 18-year-old drivers who hit the highways with little to no supervised driving experience.

The takeaway for Army leaders is clear. While it may be risky, uneconomical, and nerve-wracking to watch junior leaders struggle through formidable challenges, stepping in and doing it for them is not the answer. Nor is totally stepping back and letting them sink or swim. Instead, the hard work of an Army senior leader consists of guiding junior leaders in developing the confidence, resourcefulness, and determination needed to lead in an uncertain and ambiguous world. Of course, the ride might be bumpy and exhausting. And yes, there is a chance that a junior leader's shortcomings may tarnish a senior leader's standing. But the true legacy of a good Army leader is not that everything was done to perfection, but rather that the next generation of leaders is prepared to lead the formation in the tough times ahead. So, have a seat, buckle up, take a deep breath . . . and hand them the keys.

ENDNOTES

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