

Kristin Scroggin,
genWHY Communications



THE CLASSROOM-TO- WORKPLACE PIPELINE:

HOW EDUCATIONAL CHANGE RESHAPED GENERATIONAL EXPECTATIONS AT WORK



**Insight
Brief
001**

2026

THE CENTRAL IDEA

Generations were not only raised differently. They were educated differently, under different expectations about authority, collaboration, feedback, accountability, technology, and support.

We may be looking in the wrong place.

Every conference eventually reaches the same question. “Why do younger employees expect so much feedback, clarity, flexibility, and input?”

The answers I’ve heard from others make me uncomfortable. “They are entitled”. “They need too much praise”. “They just do not want to work.” I would like to challenge those perspectives today as a researcher and generational expert.

To understand today's workforce, we have to go back to the place where most employees spent thousands of hours before they ever showed up for a first job: the classroom.

For nearly a century, American schools have operated as one of the country's largest social experiments. We changed what teachers were expected to do and what students were expected to contribute. We radically revised how progress was measured. We put rubrics, syllabi, computers, and iPads into students’ hands and changed not only how they learned, but who they considered to be the expert in the room. Those educational choices did not just disappear when students graduated. They came to work and adulthood with them.

THE FINDING

Employees aren't just bringing different personalities to work. They're bringing different expectations of what good leadership and success should look like built in their K-12 classrooms.

What this brief explains

This brief traces the major educational shifts that shaped today's workforce, explains how those shifts may appear at work, and gives leaders a practical way to respond without lowering standards or stereotyping employees.

Five employees. Five different classrooms.

Imagine hiring five employees. One learned mostly in rows, listening to an authority figure and working independently. Another was encouraged to ask questions and speak up. A third spent much of the school day in groups. A fourth learned through rubrics, benchmarks, drafts, and progress checks. The youngest may already treat videos, search engines, and AI as normal learning partners.

Now imagine expecting all five to approach authority, teamwork, feedback, questions, and problem-solving in exactly the same way.

Generations were not just raised differently. They were educated differently.

School does more than teach reading, writing, and math. It shapes how we see the world long before we ever step into our first job. It influences what we expect from authority, what we believe good teaching looks like, and even how we think progress should be measured.

That doesn't mean school explains everything about generational behavior. It doesn't. Families matter. Life experiences matter. Personality matters. Bias matters. Access to resources and socioeconomic status matters. But education is one of the largest shared experiences a generation has, and it's surprisingly absent from most conversations about why people work the way they do. When President Jimmy Carter signed the Department of Education Organization Act on October 17, 1979 and curriculum choices became the responsibility, not of the school, but of the Federal Government.

THE CLASSROOM EFFECT

The Classroom Effect is genWHY's framework for understanding how repeated educational experiences may become default expectations for how work should be explained, organized, reviewed, supported, and improved.

The revolutions did not replace one another. They stacked.

Educational change did not happen in one clean sweep. It arrived in waves. Each wave attempted to solve a real problem, and each added another expectation to the classroom.

Educational era	Primary question	What students practiced
Teacher-centered learning	How do we transmit knowledge?	Listening, memorization, individual work, deference to expertise
Self-Esteem, confidence and participation	How do we build confident learners?	Speaking up, asking questions, positive reinforcement, emotional safety
Collaborative learning	Do students learn better together?	Group problem-solving, peer input, shared responsibility, discussion
Accountability and measurement	How do we ensure every student succeeds?	Rubrics, benchmarks, testing, intervention, visible progress
Digital and personalized learning	How do we prepare students for a connected world?	Search, technology, asynchronous learning, personalization, rapid access

The important thing to remember is that these educational revolutions didn't replace one another. They stacked. Confidence didn't disappear when collaboration was introduced. Collaboration didn't end when accountability became the focus. Each new movement added another layer to the classroom experience.

That means generations weren't educated under a single philosophy. They experienced different combinations of these educational shifts and to very different degrees.

When you begin looking at **how much** of each educational movement a generation experienced, a clearer picture starts to emerge. Some generations spent only a small portion of their education under a particular philosophy. Others spent nearly their entire K-12 experience immersed in it.

The chart below illustrates that progression. It isn't meant to place generations into neat boxes or suggest every student had the same experience. Instead, it provides a framework for understanding the educational environment that shaped each generation. As leaders, that perspective can help you better understand why employees may approach communication, feedback, collaboration, and accountability differently, and how to adapt your leadership without lowering your expectations.

How Strongly Did Each Cohort Experience These Movements?

Educational movements overlapped. Exposure increased over time.

COHORT	SELF-ESTEEM MOVEMENT Positive Reinforcement & Emotional Safety	COLLABORATION / STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING Group Work, Discussion, Projects, Teacher as Facilitator	NCLB / RUBRICS / ACCOUNTABILITY Testing, Rubrics, Learning Targets, Data, RTI, ESSA
1946–1955 Boomers	○ Very little	○ Very little	○ None
1955–1965 Flower Children	● ○ ○ ○ Small amount in later years	● ○ ○ ○ ○ Minimal	○ None
1965–1977 Gen X	● ● ○ ○ ○ Moderate (especially younger X)	● ● ○ ○ ○ Beginning in high school/college	○ None
1978–1984 Xennials	● ● ● ○ ○ High	● ● ● ○ ○ High	● ● ○ ○ ○ Small to Moderate
1985–1994 Millennials	● ● ● ● ● Very High	● ● ● ● ● Very High	● ● ● ○ ○ Moderate to High
1995–2005 Gen Z	● ● ● ● ○ High	● ● ● ● ● Very High	● ● ● ● ● Highest
2006–2019 Alpha	● ● ● ● ○ High	● ● ● ● ● Very High	● ● ● ● ○ ESSA Version (post-NCLB)

EXPOSURE SCALE:



None



Very Little



Moderate



High



Very High



Highest



Each generation experienced a unique combination of these movements. **Leaders must adapt to lead them all.**

THE RESEARCH STORY

The teacher stopped being the only person allowed to be an expert.

Traditional classrooms, primarily experienced by Traditionalist, Baby Boomers, and the first half of GenerationX, were built around knowledge transmission. The teacher held the information. Students listened, practiced, memorized, and waited for evaluation. That approach built respect for expertise, patience with delayed feedback, and comfort with independent work. If you failed a test that was it. You must be incapable of learning. D- See me after class.

Then the role of the learner began to change. The self-esteem movement and related shifts in classroom culture emphasized confidence, positive reinforcement, participation, and emotional safety. Students were increasingly encouraged to ask questions, contribute ideas, and believe their perspective had value. Suddenly maybe it wasn't that student couldn't learn. Perhaps they needed additional encouragement and someone to believe in them so they didn't just give up when times were hard.

There is an important correction here. Research does not support empty praise as a reliable path to achievement. The stronger evidence supports feedback tied to effort, strategy, persistence, and improvement. In other words, confidence helps most when it is connected to growth and

competence. Essentially, the heart of the self-esteem movement was pure; as with many things in culture, it was perhaps taken too far.

WHAT CHANGED AT WORK

An employee who was trained to ask questions and participate may not view speaking up as disrespect. They may see it as active engagement. A leader trained in a more traditional system may hear the same behavior as challenging authority.

Evidence base: California Task Force (1990); Baumeister et al. (2003); Mueller and Dweck (1998); Dweck (2006).

THE RESEARCH STORY

Collaboration changed the meaning of a “good student”.

For older generations, “good students” were often quiet, attentive to the teacher, prepared, and able to complete work independently with only the rare distraction. Cooperative and active learning expanded the definition of “good”. Suddenly “good students” could also be the person who contributed an idea, helped a group solve a problem, explained a concept to a peer, or brought another perspective into the room. Rooms currently judged as being well-behaved because the teacher was able to maintain silence suddenly exploded with the sound of children’s chatter.

Well-designed collaborative learning has a strong research base. The key phrase I want you to pay attention to here is well-designed. Productive collaboration includes clear goals and individual accountability. It is not simply putting four people at a table and hoping something useful happens and someone magically completes the project.

This shift changed the teacher's role too. The teacher increasingly became a facilitator, coach, and designer of the learning experience, not only the person delivering the answer. Many people could know the answer, even the 8-year-old sitting beside you.

WHAT CHANGED AT WORK

Employees who were rewarded for contribution and group problem-solving may expect leaders to ask for input before making decisions. When they “get stuck” they’re more likely to find a peer who can help them work through it. This does not mean every decision should be made by consensus. It means leaders need to explain when input is useful and who owns the final call.

Evidence base: Bonwell and Eison (1991); Johnson and Johnson (1989); Slavin (1995); Prince (2004); Freeman et al. (2014).

No Child Left Behind made visible progress mandatory.

In January 2002, No Child Left Behind was signed into law and became a major pivot point in American education. The central promise was that every student, in every school, would have a measurable opportunity to succeed.

Federal money came with federal accountability. Schools were expected to prove they were getting results for the students. America's annual testing became a major part of that effort. Suddenly, schools were required to report outcomes in much greater detail and experienced penalties for not meeting benchmarks. Over time, school and state-wide report cards had yearly progress measures that became part of the national conversation, and intervention plans emphasized evidence-based practices.

NCLB did not invent every test, rubric, or classroom progress check. It did intensify a culture in which schools had to prove that learning was happening. Teachers became responsible not only for teaching content, but for tracking progress, documenting growth, and responding before final failure.

For students, success became more visible, tangible, and most of all, frequent. They increasingly saw learning targets and grading criteria prior to beginning any project. Every assignment was based on benchmark data, drafts, and intervention plans to ensure people at every learning level had a chance to succeed. The system was imperfect, and its unintended consequences were significant, but it trained a generation to expect that progress would be measured and discussed prior to any final assessment.

WHAT CHANGED AT WORK

When employees ask, 'How am I doing?' they may not be asking for applause. They may be asking for the progress information they were trained to use. To a leader raised on delayed grading and annual reviews, that request can sound needy. To the employee, silence can feel like missing data or worse, disappointing your superior.

Evidence base: No Child Left Behind Act (2002); U.S. Department of Education (2002); Dee and Jacob (2011); Shute (2008); Yao et al. (2024).

Then learning moved onto a screen.

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESS) retained annual testing but gave states more authority over how accountability systems were designed. As it was signed into law, schools were moving deeper into digitally connected and highly personalized learning.

Chromebooks, learning management systems, online grade portals, Google Classroom, instructional videos, and eventually AI changed access to information. Students no longer had to wait for one adult to provide every answer. They could search, replay, and teach themselves.

COVID accelerated that shift almost overnight. It also exposed its limits. Remote learning increased familiarity with digital tools and asynchronous work, but many students struggled with comprehension, motivation, access, and self-direction. The experience was not simply a success or a failure. It created a generation with a complicated mix of digital confidence and uneven independence.

COVID also brought parents closer to the daily mechanics of school. Many parents became more involved in the day-to-day of school. They monitored assignments and communicated with teachers. Additionally, they began to advocate during conflict. That increased support for some students, but it may also shape future expectations about how much help an institution should provide when something goes wrong.

WHAT CHANGED AT WORK

Younger employees may expect information to be searchable, training to be available on demand, and answers to arrive quickly. They may also need more deliberate coaching in conflict, judgment, and independent decision-making than their technical comfort initially suggests.

Evidence base: ESSA (2015); U.S. Department of Education technology plans (2010, 2016, 2024); GAO (2022); NCES technology support data.

HOW IT SHOWS UP TODAY

What some leaders call a flaw may actually be an expectation mismatch.

What a leader may think	What may also be happening
They need too much praise.	They are looking for useful progress information, not constant celebration.
They want a rubric for everything.	They want success defined before they are evaluated.
They challenge every decision.	They were trained to participate and ask why.
They cannot work alone.	They may have had fewer chances to practice unstructured independence.
They expect answers immediately.	They learned in an environment built around instant access and searchable information.
They involve other people too quickly.	They may have learned that support and advocacy are normal parts of solving problems.

This reframing does not excuse poor performance. If you have an employee who demonstrates weak judgment, intentional avoidance, or disrespect, something should be done immediately. However, this reframe does improve diagnosis. A leader can hold a high standard more effectively when they know whether the real problem is capability or simply an expectation that was never translated.

Clarity is not coddling. It is the beginning of accountability.

WHAT LEADERS SHOULD DO

Translate the workplace instead of demanding mind-reading.

Start by understanding that everyone in your office was likely trained under different learning rules and expectations. Work to better define success before you evaluate it. Explain the outcome and the quality standard. Be clear around the deadline, possible constraints, and who owns the final decision. Ambiguity is not the same thing as empowerment.

Next, shorten the feedback loop. A quick course correction early in a project is more useful than a detailed explanation after the work has already failed. Feedback after failure feels a lot more like judgment. Feedback before failure is development.

Leaders also need to teach independence instead of merely demanding it. Instruct employees when they should research, decide, ask, or escalate. Give them guardrails, then allow them to make thoughtful mistakes inside those guardrails.

Collaboration needs boundaries too. Invite input when it can improve the decision, then clearly close the decision. A workplace can value participation without turning every choice into a vote.

Finally, make knowledge easier to find. Capture expertise in examples, short videos, checklists, and decision guides. Younger workers are comfortable learning from searchable systems, and organizations cannot afford to let critical knowledge walk out the door at retirement.

THE LEADERSHIP SHIFT

Stop asking, 'Why do they not already know this?' Start asking, 'Have we clearly taught how success works here?'

Every educational era built a strength and created a tradeoff.

- Teacher-centered systems built discipline, independence, and respect for expertise. They could also teach people to remain silent even when authority was wrong.
- Confidence-oriented systems expanded participation and emotional safety. They sometimes confused encouragement with competence and realistic expectations.
- Collaborative systems built communication and teamwork. They sometimes blurred ownership and responsibility.
- Accountability systems made progress visible. They sometimes narrowed attention to what could be measured and quantified.
- Digital systems expanded access and adaptability. They can also weaken persistence and judgment when tools replace thinking, instead of supporting it.

The goal is not to decide which generation received the best education. The goal is to understand what each person may have been trained to expect, then build a workplace where those expectations are made visible and useful.

RESEARCH BOUNDARY

The educational shifts described in this brief are well documented. The workplace connections are an evidence-informed genWHY framework, not proof that schooling alone caused adult behavior. The next stage of this research should directly test the relationship between educational experiences and later workplace preferences.

The question is not, "Why can they not work like we did?" The better question is, "What were they trained to expect, and what must we teach now?"

SELECTED SOURCES

Research supporting this brief

- Baumeister, R. F., et al. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(1), 1-44.
- Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub. L. No. 114-95 (2015).
- Freeman, S., et al. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in STEM. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(23), 8410-8415.
- Johnson, D. W., and Johnson, R. T. (1989). Cooperation and competition: Theory and research.
- Mueller, C. M., and Dweck, C. S. (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1), 33-52.
- National Research Council. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110 (2002).
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223-231.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology. (2010, 2016, 2024). *National Educational Technology Plans*.
- U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022). *Pandemic learning*, GAO-22-104487.
- Yao, Y., et al. (2024). The impact of formative assessment on K-12 learning: A meta-analysis. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 29(7-8), 452-475.

Source note

This working draft also draws on Kristin Scroggin's complete No Child Left Behind presentation transcript and the GenerationWHY 2026 manuscript. Those sources provide the original narrative, examples, and genWHY interpretations. External sources were used to verify the educational history and research claims.