

Why is the truth so hard to find?

The challenge of seeing the world from a Post-modern perspective

By Michael McQueen



If there is one question that defines Generation Y most accurately it would have to be 'WHY?'. This is a generation who question everything... protocols, expectations, rules. Nothing is sacred and beyond questioning. Nothing is assumed. Perhaps it is no surprise that some have gone as far as to rename this group 'Generation Why'!

If you are like most parents, teachers and employers I speak to, you may be surprised to learn that the 'why' question this group ask so frequently is not necessarily a belligerent, rhetorical question. Nor is it necessarily a challenge to your authority or the status quo. It is in most cases a genuine question that comes out as an approach to life, learning and truth that is different to that of previous generations.

Generation Y are a group whose worldview is described as Post-modern when it comes to epistemology. Epistemology is the study of how we come to *know* something and for a Post-modernist, truth is not absolute but rather it is *relative*. In other words, post-modernists don't see the world as black and white but rather as varying shades of grey. Every individual's version of 'truth' is based on their unique perspective, experiences and story. As such, even two mutually exclusive versions of truth can be accepted as equally valid.

This stands in stark contrast to the Modernist worldview held by the majority of this group's parents and teachers... an approach which revolves around the notion that there *are* absolutes in life; black and white, right and wrong.

For Modernists, the pursuit of truth is linked intrinsically to morality and the driving question in learning is 'why should I listen to what you are saying?' Authorial intent and the credibility of the individual imparting the information and 'truth' is vital for Modernists. Placing a great deal of emphasis on outward symbols of credibility (the letters after your name, where your office is in the building, or the robes that represent your position or title) they want to see statistics, data, research and empirical evidence so as to be convinced.

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If there is one word that defines a Modernist, it is the one they use most frequently - should. This one word is responsible for an enormous amount of inter-generational conflict as it places a judgement on something that could otherwise be seen as neutral. In other words, this is how you *should* think, what you *should* believe, what you *should* say, how you *should* act.

To a Modernist, 'should' is an entirely appropriate word to use when prescribing the response to or actions of another. After all, if something is axiomatically correct and proper, then to hold an opinion or have a perception otherwise must be incorrect, misinformed or just plain wrong.

Of course, the challenge arises when this paradigm comes into contact with the Post-modern generation for whom the word 'should' does not resonate.

For the Post-Modernist, the very suggestion that your version of truth is more valid than theirs – or even worse, that they are wrong – is dismissed as naivety or arrogance. ‘Should’ therefore holds no relevance. The moment you start ‘should-ing’ on Generation Y, they will switch off or ask the defining question: WHY.

This is not to say that young people will automatically dismiss the ideas, insights and opinions of older generations. They *are* willing to listen to your version of truth. However, this is not to gain an understanding of what is black and white, but rather to expand their shades of grey.

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Reconciling the differences between a Modernist and Post-modern worldview is set to be a flashpoint of conflict and tension in the coming years. It is no longer enough to fall back on the assumptions and foundations of morality and truth that society has always taken for granted. Everything is going to be questioned and tested by the next generation. Nothing, it seems, is sacred.

Responding to the question of why in a reasoned and respectful way is critical to engaging this group. If you simply dismiss this group when they ask why and see it as an irrelevant, irreverent or disrespectful challenge to your authority, engaging with Generation Y will be the farthest thing from your reality.

This is a generation who really do want to understand. They want to know why you believe what you believe – not so they can be persuaded to necessarily agree, but by a genuine desire to understand your version of truth that will inform and enrich their own. They may come to agree with you but that has to be a personal decision resulting not from persuasion or manipulation but rather a new and broader perspective.



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Having presented to over 140,000 people across 5 continents since 2004, Michael has his finger on the pulse when it comes to emerging trends shaping business and culture.

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