

What's Needed for Mentoring Future Leaders: The Connections Between Risk Taking, Living Values, and Radical Listening

L. A. Dewey¹ & Harriet E. Hayes²

¹Washington & Lee University, ²Bridgewater College

Mentoring Gen Z to be effective leaders requires fostering a comfort with the uncomfortable, a willingness to take risks and accept potential failure. Based on our experience teaching Gen Z in the college classroom, and working in mentorship relationships, we propose that the key to developing the skill of risk-taking lies in mentoring individuals to define their values; providing a structure through journaling for mentees to experiment with how values guide actions. We link value identification to listening as an essential component of leadership and offer the method of reflective structured dialogue as a tool for fostering listening skills. The relationship between risk aversion, values, and listening impacts every facet of life and interaction between individuals. Teaching the links between risk aversion, value clarification, and the art of listening is an opportunity for mentorship.

Keywords: risk taking, values, dialogue, leadership, mentoring

Introduction

Gen Z, as students and new employees, are facing many pressures that, in turn, affect engagement, performance, and success. As educators, we are challenged to be mindful of those pressures and to create welcoming, safe environments in our classrooms. The same applies to mentor relationships in the workplace. In both environments, mentors are seeking to better understand what may be holding someone back rather than taking steps forward. Regardless of the context, as mentors, we find ourselves striking the balance between being attentive to someone's fears involving physical or emotional safety or social anxieties and knowing growth can often happen when we confront discomfort.

Literature Review

What follows is a thought piece building on the work of Dewey (2021), which offered strategies for mentoring integrity and helping young people live their values. We intend to link value identification with two additional themes found in the literature on leadership: risk-taking and leaders as good listeners. While these threads have been aptly explored as separate entities, we believe integrating these strands in the literature is essential as we mentor Gen Z. We will link theory and practice by first exploring the risk adverse nature of Gen Z, how values identification can help young people confront discomfort, and lastly how listening is an undervalued yet necessary skill for fostering growth and change. Having laid the theoretical frame, we offer strategies and practices that support mentoring future leaders. The practice component is based on our work as educators who teach private liberal arts college students in multiple sections of classes ranging from 15-30 students each term. The development

of our ideas stems from what we have observed since the return to fully face-to-face instruction post-COVID.

Teaching students and employees the links between risk aversion, value clarification, and the art of listening can strengthen how we mentor Gen Z to be leaders. As both educators and mentors we recognize the benefit of encouraging someone to push themselves into the unknown or try a new experience or a different way of thinking. But our recognition of these benefits leads us to ask what habits or attributes enable an individual to be willing to take a risk? Our emphasis on risk taking is grounded in the research on the skills required of effective leaders. We support that risk-taking is a precursor to innovation and essential for leadership (Fourie, 2022; Singh et al., 2022). Those leaders who effectively take risks are afforded greater prestige by their followers (van Kleef et al., 2021). It is as Mark Twain reportedly quipped: "Why not go out on a limb? That's where the fruit is." In a high risk-taking climate, "people can make decisions even when they do not have certainty and all the information desired. People can and do 'go out on a limb' to put new ideas forward" (Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010, p. 76). We believe it is essential that we mentor Gen Z to be better risk takers.

Gen Z Starting Point

As a cohort, Gen Z tend to be risk-averse. Twenge (2023) discusses a dramatic drop-off, beginning in 2010, of Gen Z avoiding risks and placing "a premium on not being upset or offended by words or experiences" (p. 387). Couple this with a recent study by researchers from Michigan State that tracked people's desire to stand out or be unique from 2000 to 2020 (Chopik et al., 2024). While the million participants represented multiple ages and were not limited to Gen Z, the findings suggest that

people are increasingly more hesitant to defend their beliefs publicly and are becoming more concerned with what people think about them. In higher education, we strive to nurture intellectual curiosity and engagement, and yet students have likely seen little to no modeling of this behavior before coming to our campuses, or joining our communities, or may themselves eschew wanting to stand out and opt instead to play it safe.

(indent) What does a risk-averse environment look like? In higher education, it may translate to students not voicing opinions or responses during a classroom discussion; in the workplace, this same silence may happen during brainstorming meetings. What is lost is creative, productive interactions. We may also see an individual avoiding enrollment in a class due to the reputation of the course (or the instructor) or avoiding potentially uncomfortable clients or constituencies. Instead of directly dealing with a conflict or issue, which may be risky, we have witnessed Gen Z settle for simmering dissatisfaction and off-line complaining. If left unchecked, this can manifest in resistance to change (Jung et al., 2020) and ultimately organizational stagnation because of not making needed adjustments to adapt to current needs. Accepting lower levels of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity inhibits the growth of leaders.

Method

One strategy for mentoring Gen Z students or mentees who are risk-averse is to help them define their values and then to provide a structure so they may experiment with how to live them; in other words, to purposefully use values to guide actions (Dewey, 2021; Smikle, 2019). While ethics refer to rules provided by an external source (e.g., professional codes of conduct), values are deeply personal and can be a source of motivation for our energy and skills (Goleman, 1998). As Friedrich Nietzsche observed, “those people *who* have a *why* to live can bear almost any how” (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. xxii). Coming to terms with a *why* can lead to looking at the larger picture of self-growth, finding a deeper sense of satisfaction, and being more accepting of others, all of which are foundational for growing as leaders. “Surfacing and exploring values is critical because it provides leaders with an awareness from which to operate more intentionally” (Smikle, 2019, p. 2).

A second strategy is to focus on strengthening our skills as listeners. Active listening is a person's willingness and ability to hear and understand, and it is one of those skills that we assume we know how to do and is all too often overlooked or “taken for granted” (Jonsdottir & Fridriksdottir, 2020, p. 185). If listening is talked about, it is usually in the negative context of someone not listening. The outcome of that can range from fraught relationships, to losing touch, “to stagnancy at best and failure at worse” (Jones, 2023, p. 41).

Instead of leaders as listeners, the focus tends to be on leaders as communicators: Are they

good speakers? Can they persuasively convey the message of their vision or tell the story of their brand or even of themselves? While being a compelling speaker is important, listening is imperative. The link between leadership and being a good listener is well studied (Fine, 2022) as deeper engagement enhances understanding which can result in better information (Center for Creative Leadership, 2019). Listening also builds relationships and trust. To do so, Frances Hesselbein (2006), the widely recognized leader of leaders, wrote that the process needs to be circular: “Listening is not a solo performance—it is a connection and is most successful when circular. I listen, you respond; you listen, I respond. And somehow in that magic circle of communication, the messages are heard” (p. 6).

Like any skill, to become better requires practice. In the context of our work, we are most interested in face-to-face oral communication. What do we know about Gen Z in this area? Even before the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, in 2019, adolescents and young adults “spent 25 minutes less a day socializing in person with others than those in 2012 ... That translates to 3 hours a week, 13 hours a month, and 152 hours a year less in the company of others” (Twenge, 2023, p. 409). Any one of us may likely guess the reason: technology. There was less need to be face-to-face with the ease of texting, online gaming platforms, and social media. The data, according to Twenge (2023), shows the largest culprit behind the trend of less socializing is that as of 2012, most teens owned a smartphone. So, while communication still happens, it requires less listening. It shouldn't surprise us that social anxiety increases when we introduce that student into a college classroom, a community town hall, or a corporate meeting room where they are asked to listen and respond, whether to the professor, boss, or other facilitator or to their neighbors and colleagues. Doing so risks embarrassment for any number of reasons, so staying silent is a safer strategy.

In the following sections, we will suggest strategies we have found to support students in becoming less risk averse. While we draw on our experiences from the classroom, these can, with some adjustments as noted, be used in the workplace and in mentoring relationships.

Findings

Connecting Risk Aversion and Values

Journaling can be a powerful tool for the work of self-reflection, which leads to self-awareness, a necessary attribute of emotional intelligence and, in turn, leadership (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017; Tank, 2019). Asking any student – or a mentee or employee – to take on journaling may require combatting skepticism and preconceived notions of keeping a diary and what that means to them. It is worth talking through the difference between self-reflection and what Eurich (2017) refers to as

the selfie syndrome – “an intense self-focus that distorts our ability to see ourselves for what we really are” (p. 83). Journaling is a place for honesty and where growth can occur. “Authentic leadership does not come from the outside in. It comes from the inside out ... All serious leadership starts from within” (Hesselbein & Kouzes, 2012, foreword).

While writing prompts can be structured (e.g., responses to readings, class discussions, current events, etc.) or left open (e.g., reflect on an attribute or skill of leadership you witnessed during the day, something you heard someone say, a question raised, etc.) what matters is to set a schedule for regular entries.

Through Identifying Examples

Once we are in the habit of regular self-reflection, it is time to consider values. There are many ways to launch this conversation, but where you want to land is an understanding of how values define who we are in our deepest nature, not who we think we should be to fit in or to meet someone else’s expectations. Next, have students or mentees identify their three top values (for more explanation on this step, see Dewey, 2021). With three values identified, moving from the theoretical to the practical is essential to reinforce meaning through direct experiential activity (Nash & Murray, 2010). So, ask students to take their top three values and define what each value looks like being lived. For example, if my value is “efficiency,” then I want to look for ways to be more efficient at work as well as at home. At work, this may translate into creating a better project schedule, searching for redundancies, or championing a new workflow. The key is to be as specific as possible. Each choice presents a moment of risk-taking culminating in voicing to others recommended changes and thus actions become a proactive manifestation of values, in this case “efficiency.” Thus, a mentee intentionally begins to live their values.

As students and mentees grapple with values, it is helpful to support them as they clarify definitions, concerns, and contexts. Social risk – loss of status, ostracism, shame – may be what Gen Z identifies most with versus physical risk or even financial or health risks (Fourie, 2022). Ask them to identify an event where they did not take the risk. Write about it (or discuss it in a mentoring situation). Then ask them to consider if they had relied on one of their values. Would that have changed what they said, or did not say, or do? For example, if one of my values is “connection,” would I be more willing to speak up in a discussion or show up at office hours to speak with my professor?

When we apply this to leadership, we ask students and mentees to consider the definition of risk-taking as someone who takes heroic action. This is how we colloquially define a good leader: “somebody who does something for others at great personal risk” (Fourie, 2022, p. 558). What value speaks to this? It may not be one they have previously identified for themselves, so give time

for that process of re-selection. Identify actions and identify decisions—what happens even before the action—leans into Keeney’s (1994) definition of values as “all that you care about in a specific decision situation” (p. 33).

Risk taking requires familiarity with failures. Sometimes when we take risks, they backfire. We fail. What do we do with that? We take ownership of our mistakes, showing we “are only human” (Jones & Lamberti-Henquet, 2021, p. 12). Have them consider an example from their own life, or have them interview someone (or maybe even yourself as a mentor). Schiemann (2016) found that leaders tend to fall into two categories: either they took risks and vouched that those risks stretched them and enabled them to reach new heights, or they regretted not taking more risks (p. 10).

To summarize, mentorship starts with the foundation of self-identified values, identify specific situations they would define as risky, plan what decisions can be made or actions taken to practice embracing what was previously perceived as risky, and reinforce reflection through journaling.

Connecting Risk Aversion to Listening

Through Creating Agreements

As noted above, risk adverse environments are often those classrooms or workspaces where there is a palpable silence during discussions, or discussions include only a small number of voices, and dissenting positions rarely enter the fray. Fine (2022) asserts that there are three barriers to one’s ability to listen: current “discourse” regimes about the self; a fear of misinterpretation and responsibility; and finally, a mistrust in institutions. In the context of higher education, teaching Gen Z to navigate these barriers and risk listening in deeper ways requires introducing new pedagogies. A direct way to challenge current “discourse” regimes in the classroom is to invite students to establish community agreements, or norms, for how conversations will be experienced. Such conversational agreements are also possible in the workplace. For example, it can be as simple as all agreeing to put away technology (e.g., silence rings, phones out of sight, etc.) and not interrupting or talking over someone else (there are many resources for both why agreements are beneficial and how to set them; for example, see Derek Bok Center, n.d., and Frey & Fisher, 2023). Agreements are not top-down declarations of what will or will not be tolerated during face-to-face conversations but rather collaboratively established norms for what allows each participant to be heard. This strategy immediately situates Gen Z’s awareness of themselves as both speakers and listeners—an awareness that allows them to consider how what they say and when they say it impacts others.

Agreements also openly address participants’ fears—fears of misinterpretation, sharing dissenting positions, and getting a concept or idea wrong. Students and mentees establish the norms for how they will both talk and listen

in the classroom or community spaces. The best agreements address observable behaviors, attitudinal dispositions, and expectations for the teacher or mentor as facilitator. In other words, well designed agreements address what people fear most, such as eye rolling, being cut off by those who interrupt, or teaming up against a dissenting position. Such agreements also help us set intentions for our own participation. The students remind themselves and the group that there will be multiple perspectives shared during conversations, and they may need to listen with resilience when they disagree. Finally, agreements empower the teacher or facilitator to hold the group accountable to these agreements and to intervene when there are slips and missteps during conversations. Community agreements are a first step in building trust among a group, whether in the classroom or a business setting. From trust comes stronger relationships, which are “essential to cultivating a positive, collaborative, and cooperative organizational culture” (Wefald, 2022, p. 58). After all, “leadership is not about us. It is more about our relationships than our attributes” (Coulson-Thomas, 2014, p. 12).

Through Structuring Reflective Dialogue

Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) is another powerful tool for teaching listening skills. A trademarked approach developed by the Boston-based organization Essential Partners, RSD fosters a willingness to speak and listen when issues are polarized or risk aversion is most heightened. Essential Partners’ “proven approach helps people live, work, worship, and learn better together. Through richer, healthier, more inclusive dialogue, people strengthen relationships while gaining new insight into themselves and each other as well as the problems they face together” (Essential Partners, n.d., para. 1). RSD inserts intentional opportunities for reflection on a question before one speaks. When a question is posed to a group, the facilitator provides a timed moment of silence for each person to write their own response.

Question design is a critical element of RSD. Individuals learn to move away from questions that are veiled attempts at persuasion, or are simply rhetorical, and instead lean into questions which seek deeper understanding or invite multiple experiences and perspectives. These types of questions are a central part of what enables new ways of listening and speaking. Such questions also allow people to listen to themselves and discover or clarify values that may not have been previously evident. Many of the question arcs in Reflective Structured Dialogues allow participants to both share their experiences and name the values that ground that experience; or enable them to articulate where they feel pulled in two directions and hence experience competing values; and finally, reveal the layers of complexity they live with. In sum, Gen Z learns that how they ask questions is a part of the art of listening.

Consider community leadership efforts to

navigate complex public health issues. Questions that immediately put someone on the defensive: “why don’t you care about protecting the public?” Or “Have you considered the evidence and efficacy of vaccines?” These are very different questions from questions that invite someone to elaborate on how they came to hold their perspective in the first place. Brigham Young University (BYU) researchers (Weaver et al., 2023) explored the use of “reflective structured dialogue as a tool for addressing wicked public health problems.” Being heard and listening in new ways were cited as a core part of why 95% of participants (all of whom were current or recent graduate BYU students) reported enjoying taking part in the conversations. As one participant noted: “I enjoyed being in a setting where people are encouraged to listen to others first without rebutting them. I usually do not talk about these kinds of topics due to being anxious about negative responses” (Weaver, et al., 2023, pp. 5-6). Learning to listen with openness and curiosity requires intellectual humility and a willingness to accept that one may have an incomplete understanding of the issue, problem, and, therefore, what solutions might be possible.

Gen Z can also learn to listen not simply for the details of an experience shared by a peer, colleague or client, but for emotions, risks, values, hopes and goals shared by one another. Such skill building, whether in the classroom or in a mentor relationship, helps individuals practice listening as leadership, or as Fine (2022) puts it: “The challenges of forging relationships, of changing pernicious institutional practices, of making the effort to understand and be understood, of honestly exploring what one another hopes in the context of leadership relationship grounded in empathetic listening” (Fine, 2022, p. 39).

To summarize reflective structured dialogue not only helps students and mentees discover their core values but emphasizes that listening is a central part of community building. As our students learn a new way to craft community in the classroom, we mentor students to be open to risks. As students see listening as a skill to learn and practice, they discover it is essential to leadership. They recognize that “listening demonstrates respect, builds empathy, allows us to be open to learning others’ perspectives, and provides opportunities to strengthen relationships and ultimately develop better approaches to challenges” (Jones, 2023, p. 41).

Discussion

By integrating the theoretical threads of risk-taking, values identification, and deep listening, we are suggesting that they are intertwined for mentoring leadership. Additionally, focusing on the links between these threads, people in general, and Gen Z in particular, will be more willing to take chances, to listen to themselves, and become more empathetic leaders. Helping someone learn to be conscious of the choices they are making,

and the values that guide those choices, enables them to both know themselves and discover how effectively they are able to engage with others. Likewise, it redefines risk-taking as a responsibility to act with others. As Fine (2022) puts it, “If we do not make an attempt to engage with others, then we can avoid the dilemma of misinterpretation. A lack of engagement means no one is called upon to exercise any sort of ethical duty to exercise change” (p. 39).

The willingness to exercise change is perhaps the most challenging process to teach as it requires flexibility of mind, knowledge, a recognition of past experiences, and biases – in short, authentic openness. In an interview with *Time* magazine in 1969, Abraham Kaplan, a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, described true dialog as, “I don’t know beforehand what it will be. I don’t know beforehand who I will be, because I am open to you just as you are open to me” (Behavior, 1969, para. 5). In other words, true dialogue is “serious listening—listening not just to the other but listening to oneself” (Behavior, 1969, para. 5).

When we are working with Gen Z to help them identify their values, they discover that listening to oneself requires a mindfulness to which they—or even we—may not be accustomed. Hesselbein (2006) refers to it as listening to “whispers,” one of which is hearing our own body speaking. She refers to two others:

Second, there are whispers of the heart—of all the people we love, who love us, of our relationships. Third, there are whispers of the spirit—quiet whispers that comfort, heal, and inspire. When we ignore these [three] whispers, our lives are diminished. We never reach the levels we could in understanding ourselves or in strengthening our relationships. (p. 6)

This type of proactive engagement, as Kashdan and McKnight (2009) suggest, contributes to defining a sense of purpose in life so that we are not behaving contrary to our values. Doing so, suggests Schiemann (2016), can be debilitating. When considering how this may affect success, a recent survey found that six in 10 employers have already fired recent Gen Z college graduates with half saying this is due to their employee’s lack of motivation or initiative, with a lack of professionalism coming in closely behind (Intelligent, 2024). While the data does not show whether these firing rates and perceptions represent a significant change or a continuation of existing trends, it demonstrates there is more we need to do in higher education to prepare our graduates for entering our global society through more intentional mentoring. Without this guidance, our students and mentees may be caught in a dysfunctional cycle: unless we know what we stand for, we are less inclined to take risks. Being hesitant to take risks, we are less likely to engage. Avoiding engaging with others’ ideas or positions through dialogue, we are less likely to be able to

test ourselves and discover what matters most.

The relationship between risk aversion, values, and listening impacts every facet of life and interaction between individuals. This is the opportunity for mentorship. A mentor guides another in identifying values and holding them accountable to connecting those inner values outward through their decisions and actions. A mentor can also model listening and structuring dialogue to give space for individuals to take risks, to be open to hearing others, to seek understanding of differences, and to be willing to speak up and share their own lived experiences with equal measures of patience and self-confidence. This type of exchange is beyond what we typically call “communication” and what Kaplan calls “communion” (Behavior, 1969, para. 5). The growth that a mentor helps inspire is dependent on both the Latin and Greek etymologies of the word communion. There is a mutual participation in the process between self and others, and the jointly contributed gift that comes when we grow into our best selves.

Conclusions and Future Research

We recognize that any good thought piece must also be grounded in an assessment of the strategies and practices proposed. As we hope we have demonstrated, to date such research has only addressed risk aversion, values identification and listening as disparate leadership skills and habits. The practices we have shared in this paper, weaving together different strands of leadership traits, reflect what we have done in our classrooms based on our observations. We recommend future research assess the aforementioned strategies as an integrated set of effective mentoring tools. Some of this research is well suited to classrooms but might equally be applied in the workplace. Pre- and post-self-assessments by mentees could measure changes in risk-taking, value identification, and listening skills and habits over time. A case-study approach might illustrate the impact of these mentoring strategies. A multi-method approach that captures both qualitative and quantitative data is essential for assessing the impact of these mentoring practices.

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Author Biographical Sketches

L. Ady Dewey, MA, is the Reynolds Visiting Professor in Strategic Communications at Washington and Lee University. Ady began teaching full time in 2015 after a 30-year career as a speechwriter and strategic communications consultant in New York and Washington,

D.C., bringing her experiences in leadership, organizational development, and public relations to the classroom. She has a Bachelor of Science in education from Virginia Tech and a Master's degree in public administration from the University of Pennsylvania.

Harriett E. Hayes, PhD, is the Lawrance C. and Carmen C. Miller Chair in Ethics, Associate Professor of Sociology, and Dean of the Rhodes School of Arts and Humanities at Bridgewater College. "Betsy" was a co-principal investigator on a multi-year, multi-institutional grant, "The Dialogic Classroom: Teaching for Humility and Civic Engagement" funded by the Humility and Conviction in Public Life Project at the Humanities Institute at the University of Connecticut and the John Templeton Foundation. Betsy's engagement with reflective structured dialogue began when she was collaboratively designing Bridgewater College's 2012 quality enhancement plan titled "Academic Citizenship." She and her colleagues were looking to build a program that would foster students' skills in civil discourse, perspective-taking, public reasoning, and self-authorship. This effort connected Betsy to the seminal work of Essential Partners in Boston, while also drawing on Betsy's own research and expertise in group dynamics and the sociology of education.