

## Generational Differences About Ambiguity

**Author :** Margaret Henderson

**Categories :** [Leadership Development](#), [Organizational and Personal Leadership](#), [Tools and Practices](#)

**Tagged as :** [ambiguity](#), [frustration tolerance](#), [helicopter parent](#), [leadership development](#), [millenials](#), [provide examples](#)

**Date :** June 9, 2016

Feedback received in a routine graduate course evaluation generated a process of reaction and curiosity in me recently, all of which led to an insight that will be useful in the future as I work with and teach Millennials.

**The question posed: “What changes in the material, if any, do you feel might strengthen this course?”**

**The response from the student: “Including sample papers for all assignments.”**

**Seriously?** My initial interpretation of the comment generated negative speculation (and just a bit of sputtering outrage) about the student’s work ethic. My exploration of the underlying motivation for the comment, however, convinced me that it likely had originated with generational differences in our comfort levels in managing ambiguity.

I truly believe this student – whoever it was - would not see any relationship between this request for sample papers and the concepts of “cheating” or “do original work” or “figure it out yourself.”

Instead, this student – who already has a specific rubric for distinguishing between grade levels of work – was likely simply trying to eliminate the guess work about what “good” papers look like for each assignment in the course.

**Ambiguity seems to make the youngest generation in our workforce uncomfortable, which makes sense, considering they tended to be raised with scheduled lives, with clear definitions of progressive achievement.** Word on the street, for example, is that they really dislike ambiguity in terms of the timeline and expectations for professional advancement.

Also, given the power of Google, hardly anything is uncharted territory any more. Sample policies, interview questions, strategic plans, or salary ranges are readily available. Keep adjusting the search terms and clicking on links, and we can find examples of what is *successful*, *true*, or *normal* somewhere else.

The immediacy of technology makes instant gratification the norm and patience unnecessary, as is expressed in the following quote:

- [“The era of instant gratification has led to a decrease in what therapists call “frustration tolerance.” This is how we handle upsetting situations, allow for ambiguity, and learn to navigate the normal life circumstances of breakups, bad grades, and layoffs.”](#)

So what are the implications for me as a teacher, given that I am not willing to become the professorial equivalent of a helicopter parent? Clearly I need to express the interests that underlie my position that students do original work. Also, I should make any boundaries clear, letting them know when sharing or seeking information about the work of others is encouraged, limited, or prohibited.

I also need to coach students in working through any frustrations that emerge when creating an original work. I truly do understand the range of negative reactions that can emerge when taking the first step into the unknown in project development of any kind. Life experience provides plenty of opportunities to learn how to manage that awkwardness. Apparently I underestimated how strange and wrong that discomfort feels to others. Now that I know that, I can deal with it.

**We cannot eliminate ambiguity in the public sector.** Figuring out how to please elected officials or voters or residents is full of variance. **Definitions of “success” are frequently offered reactively rather than proactively.** *“We know what we like when we see it.”*

To thrive, we must adapt to the fact that we will not always – maybe rarely - have the quantity or quality of information, or the certainty, we desire. We need to spend time uncovering facts and eliminating clutter so that we can make the best decisions and generate the best results possible. **Not all of us enjoy that initial phase of discovery, trial, and error, but we all have to learn how to navigate it.**

As managers and leaders, we are not able to eliminate ambiguity – nor should we, necessarily - but we can certainly allow time for the questions and answers that surface the elements of “success.”