

DECONSTRUCTION PROJECT AND CASE STUDY

“The Most-Praised Generation Goes to Work”

by Jeffrey Zaslow

Email Interviews Conducted between
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Information Gathering

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Introduction – Article Selection Process

Initially, I was looking at a number of articles from several different publications that I had found on the social news sites that I browse each day. In my memo to the instructor, I had indicated interest in a group of stories ranging from Environmentalism to the redesign of the Internet. Upon closer inspection, one of these stories was not of the desired format for the assignment, and the others were not turning up any results for the reporter's contact information.

Earlier in the semester, I had been required to purchase a subscription to *The Wall Street Journal* for an economics class, and logged into my account there. After looking through recent articles, I found two potential candidates: an article entitled "Like That Album? Buy It Again, and Again....," by Ethan Smith, and the article that I ended up using, "The Most Praised Generation Goes to Work," by Jeffrey Zaslow.

The Wall Street Journal makes it very easy to get in touch with an article's author, as there is contact information and an email address included at the end of the majority of their articles. I sent an email to both Smith and Zaslow asking if they would be willing to participate in the assignment. They both responded within 12 hours and both expressed interest in helping me. At this point I had a problem, as I now had two authors competing for selection. I had no preference, as I liked both of the articles equally, so I decided to go ahead and work with both authors. I worked on the questions and contacted them both again, planning to simply eliminate one article before submission or to turn in both in hopes of a better grade. In retrospect, I am glad that I did contact them both again, as Smith never got back to me.

Author Analysis – Jeffrey Zaslow

The Wall Street Journal is primarily a business journal that has a circulation of nearly 2 million people and is one of the largest circulated newspapers in the world. It is owned by Dow Jones & Company and was founded in 1889. The publication has won Pulitzer Prizes 33 times and due both to its size and reputation, it represents a strictly unbiased opinion.



Jeffrey Zaslow has been a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal* from 1983 to 1987 and from 2001 on. He has also worked at the *Chicago Sun-Times* and at *USA Weekend* from 1994 to 2002. He graduated from Carnegie-Mellon University in 1980 with a degree in creative writing and has since written three books. In 2000, Zaslow received the National Society of Newspaper Columnists' Will Rogers Humanitarian Award for public service. His articles for *The Wall Street Journal* appear in the Personal Journal section and he describes his work as focusing on "life transitions."

Interview with Zaslow

QUESTIONS REGARDING THE ARTICLE

1. *What are some of the reasons that you chose this topic to write about? In other words, what was your inspiration for the article?*

Stories have been written about how our culture overpraises children these days. I wanted to report on what happens when those kids grow up.

2. *Did a news release or advertisement play any role in your decision to write about this subject? (May or may not apply.)*

No

3. *How did you pitch your story to your editor/boss? Were there any compromises made about the subject?*

At the WSJ we do proposals of about a page in length. I did this for my editor of Weekend Journal and he was very receptive. In the end, he wanted me to hone the piece more toward praise at work rather than praise in general.

4. *Did anyone help you locate information that pertained to the story or sources to interview, e.g. researchers, librarians or other journalists?*

I did a lot of interviewing and researching, and consultants helped me find companies engaged in praise issues.

5. *What are some things that took place during the gathering of information for the story that may not be apparent on the surface? What extra work did you do that cannot be discerned merely from reading the article?*

I spoke to a bunch of companies and sources that didn't end up in the story, but that's always the case with WSJ pieces. We report 120%.

6. *When did you know what kind of audience you were writing for? What are some specific things that you were mindful of during all parts of the reporting, based on knowing the intended target audience?*

Our audience is about 75% male, and tends to be over age 45. So I'm writing more to bosses than to young workers in this particular article.

7. *How long did the following stages of the story take: researching/reporting, writing and editing?*

The piece took me about 3 weeks to report and write. I also had to spend a day and a half rereporting and rewriting to get more workplace examples for my bosses.

8. *How did you locate and get in touch with the human sources for this article? What was the primary way that you recorded the information they gave you (recording, notes, video, ...)*

I did the interviews by phone in this case.

9. *What other information would you have liked to have for the writing of the article and why would it have been important?*

I would have loved survey data about praise in the workplace or society these days. The closest data I found was about narcissism.

10. *Are there any other questions that need to be answered about the creation of your article to aid in its understanding as a whole?*

No, there aren't any other questions I can think of.

QUESTIONS ABOUT INFORMATION GATHERING IN GENERAL

1. *Do you have any advice for journalism students about using search engines or other online sources to locate information? Are you aware of, or have you ever used article databases, such as Lexis-Nexis, to research and find information for your articles?*

I use the WSJ Factiva system for initial research which is very good. I like cruising the internet for info, but know I must verify anything I find there.

2. *Are there any interviewing techniques you use that tend to elicit good, useful information from your sources? Examples could include silence, feigning misunderstanding, being unexpectedly knowledgeable about the subject at hand, vague questioning, etc.*

Yes, I often stop talking which makes an interview subject feel the need to keep talking. I also ask everyone if they know anyone else who might be able to weigh in on a subject.

3. *What role does research and information gathering typically play in your writing process?*

A huge role. As I said, at the WSJ we over-report everything.

4. *How do you go about evaluating the accuracy and validity of information you gather for your articles?*

I put a check mark on every sentence in the final draft before signing off on it with editors. The check mark is a note to myself that I know where I got the info, that it is spelled right, and that it has been verified as correct.

5. *Do you have any advice [regarding any subject area] for college students planning to go into the communications field?*

You should be reading newspaper and magazines every day, or else you won't be the journalist you hope to be.

The Most-Praised Generation Goes to Work

Uber-stroked kids are reaching adulthood -- and now their bosses (and spouses) have to deal with them. Jeffrey Zaslow on 'applause notes,' celebrations assistants and ego-lifting dinnerware.

By JEFFREY ZASLOW

April 20, 2007; Page W1

You, You, You -- you really are special, you are! You've got everything going for you. You're attractive, witty, brilliant. "Gifted" is the word that comes to mind.

Observation/
Opinion

-

Childhood in recent decades has been defined by such stroking -- by parents who see their job as building self-esteem, by soccer coaches who give every player a trophy, by schools that used to name one "student of the month" and these days name 40.

Observation

Details concluded
from various
interviews

Now, as this greatest generation grows up, the culture of praise is reaching deeply into the adult world. Bosses, professors and mates are feeling the need to lavish praise on young adults, particularly twentysomethings, or else see them wither under an unfamiliar compliment deficit.

Observation/
Opinion

Details concluded
from various
interviews

Employers are dishing out kudos to workers for little more than showing up. Corporations including Lands' End and Bank of America are hiring consultants to teach managers how to compliment employees using email, prize packages and public displays of appreciation. The 1,000-employee Scooter Store Inc., a power-wheelchair and scooter firm in New Braunfels, Texas, has a staff "celebrations assistant" whose job it is to throw confetti -- 25 pounds a week -- at employees. She also passes out 100 to 500 celebratory helium balloons a week. The Container Store Inc. estimates that one of its 4,000 employees receives

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Burton De La
Garza, owner of
the Scooter Store,
and with Katie
Lynch, the
confetti thrower

praise every 20 seconds, through such efforts as its “Celebration Voice Mailboxes.”

Certainly, there are benefits to building confidence and showing attention. But some researchers suggest that inappropriate kudos are turning too many adults into narcissistic praise-junkies. The upshot: A lot of today’s young adults feel insecure if they’re not regularly complimented.

America’s praise fixation has economic, labor and social ramifications. Adults who were overpraised as children are apt to be narcissistic at work and in personal relationships, says Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University. Narcissists aren’t good at basking in other people’s glory, which makes for problematic marriages and work relationships, she says.

Her research suggests that young adults today are more self-centered than previous generations. For a multiuniversity study released this year, 16,475 college students took the standardized narcissistic personality inventory, responding to such statements as “I think I am a special person.” Students’ scores have risen steadily since the test was first offered in 1982. The average college student in 2006 was 30% more narcissistic than the average student in 1982.

Praise Inflation

Employers say the praise culture can help them with job retention, and marriage counselors say couples often benefit by keeping praise a constant part of their interactions. But in the process, people’s positive traits can be exaggerated until the words feel meaningless. “There’s a runaway inflation of everyday speech,” warns

Observation

Details concluded from various interviews

Interview

Telephone interview with Jean Twenge

Interview

Telephone interview with Jean Twenge

Interview

Telephone interview with Linda Sapadin

Linda Sapadin, a psychologist in Valley Stream, N.Y. These days, she says, it's an insult unless you describe a pretty girl as "drop-dead gorgeous" or a smart person as "a genius." "And no one wants to be told they live in a nice house," says Dr. Sapadin. "'Nice' was once sufficient. That was a good word. Now it's a put-down."

The Gottman Institute, a relationship-research and training firm in Seattle, tells clients that a key to marital happiness is if couples make at least five times as many positive statements to and about each other as negative ones. Meanwhile, products are being marketed to help families make praise a part of their daily routines. For \$32.95, families can buy the "You Are Special Today Red Plate," and then select one worthy person each meal to eat off the dish.

But many young married people today, who grew up being told regularly that they were special, can end up distrusting compliments from their spouses. Judy Neary, a relationship therapist in Alexandria, Va., says it's common for her clients to say things like: "I tell her she's beautiful all the time, and she doesn't believe it." Ms. Neary suspects: "There's a lot of insecurity, with people wondering, 'Is it really true?'"

"Young married people who've been very praised in their childhoods, particularly, need praise to both their child side and their adult side," adds Dolores Walker, a psychotherapist and attorney specializing in divorce mediation in New York.

Employers are finding ways to adjust. Sure, there are still plenty of surly managers who offer little or no positive feedback, but many withholders are now joining America's praise parade to hold

Research/
Documents

Information at the
Gottman
Institute's
website:
www.gottman.com

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Judy Neary

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Dolores Walker

Research/
Documents

The website of
Consultant Board,
Inc.:
www.thepeoplekeeper.com

on to young workers. They're being taught by employee-retention consultants such as Mark Holmes, who encourages employers to give away baseball bats with engravings ("Thanks for a home-run job") or to write notes to employees' kids ("Thanks for letting dad work here. He's terrific!")

Bob Nelson, billed as "the Guru of Thank You," counsels 80 to 100 companies a year on praise issues. He has done presentations for managers of companies such as Walt Disney Co. and Hallmark Cards Inc., explaining how different generations have different expectations. As he sees it, those over age 60 tend to like formal awards, presented publicly. But they're more laid back about needing praise, and more apt to say: "Yes, I get recognition every week. It's called a paycheck." Baby boomers, Mr. Nelson finds, often prefer being praised with more self-indulgent treats such as free massages for women and high-tech gadgets for men.

Workers under 40, he says, require far more stroking. They often like "trendy, name-brand merchandise" as rewards, but they also want near-constant feedback. "It's not enough to give praise only when they're exceptional, because for years they've been getting praise just for showing up," he says.

Mr. Nelson advises bosses: If a young worker has been chronically late for work and then starts arriving on time, commend him. "You need to recognize improvement. That might seem silly to older generations, but today, you have to do these things to get the performances you want," he says. Casey Priest, marketing vice president for Container Store, agrees. "When you set an expectation and an employee starts to meet it, absolutely praise them for it," she

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Bob Nelson

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Bob Nelson

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Bob Nelson

says.

Sixty-year-old David Foster, a partner at Washington, D.C., law firm Miller & Chevalier, is making greater efforts to compliment young associates -- to tell them they're talented, hard-working and valued. It's not a natural impulse for him. When he was a young lawyer, he says, "If you weren't getting yelled at, you felt like that was praise."

Interview

Telephone interview with David Foster

But at a retreat a couple of years ago, the firm's 120 lawyers reached an understanding. Younger associates complained that they were frustrated; after working hard on a brief and handing it in, they'd receive no praise. The partners promised to improve "intergenerational communication." Mr. Foster says he feels for younger associates, given their upbringings. "When they're not getting feedback, it makes them very nervous."

Interview

Telephone interview with David Foster

Modern Pressures

Some younger lawyers are able to articulate the dynamics behind this. "When we were young, we were motivated by being told we could do anything if we believed in ourselves. So we respond well to positive feedback," explains 34-year-old Karin Crump, president of the 25,000-member Texas Young Lawyers Association.

Interview

Telephone interview with Karin Crump

Scott Atwood, president-elect of the Young Lawyers Division of the Florida Bar, argues that the yearning for positive input from superiors is more likely due to heightened pressure to perform in today's demanding firms. "It has created a culture where you have to have instant feedback or you'll fail," he says.

Interview

Telephone interview with Scott Atwood

In fact, throughout history, younger generations have wanted praise from their elders. As Napoleon said: "A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored

Interview

Telephone interview with Chip Toth

ribbon.” But when it comes to praise today, “Gen Xers and Gen Yers don’t just say they want it. They are also saying they require it,” says Chip Toth, an executive coach based in Denver. How do young workers say they’re not getting enough? “They leave,” says Mr. Toth.

Many companies are proud of their creative praise programs. Since 2004, the 4,100-employee Bronson Healthcare Group in Kalamazoo, Mich., has required all of its managers to write at least 48 thank-you or praise notes to underlings every year.

Universal Studios Orlando, with 13,000 employees, has a program in which managers give out “Applause Notes,” praising employees for work well done. Universal workers can also give each other peer-to-peer “S.A.Y. It!” cards, which stand for “Someone Appreciates You!” The notes are redeemed for free movie tickets or other gifts.

Bank of America has several formal rewards programs for its 200,000 employees, allowing those who receive praise to select from 2,000 gifts. “We also encourage managers to start every meeting with informal recognition,” says Kevin Cronin, senior vice president of recognition and rewards. The company strives to be sensitive. When new employees are hired, managers are instructed to get a sense of how they like to be praised. “Some prefer it in public, some like it one-on-one in an office,” says Mr. Cronin.

No More Red Pens

Some young adults are consciously calibrating their dependence on praise. In New York, Web-developer Mia Eaton, 32, admits that she loves being complimented. But she feels like she’s

Research/
Documents

Various news
articles located
through the WSJ
Factiva Database
System

Research/
Documents

News articles
located through
the WSJ Factiva
Database System

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Kevin Cronin

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Mia Eaton

living on the border between a twentysomething generation that requires overpraise and a thirtysomething generation that is less addicted to it. She recalls the pre-Paris Hilton, pre-reality-TV era, when people were famous -- and applauded -- for their achievements, she says. When she tries to explain this to younger colleagues, “they don’t get it. I feel like I’m hurting their feelings because they don’t understand the difference.”

Young adults aren’t always eager for clear-eyed feedback after getting mostly “atta-boys” and “atta-girls” all their lives, says John Sloop, a professor of rhetorical and cultural studies at Vanderbilt University. Another issue: To win tenure, professors often need to receive positive evaluations from students. So if professors want students to like them, “to a large extent, critical comments [of students] have to be couched in praise,” Prof. Sloop says. He has attended seminars designed to help professors learn techniques of supportive criticism. “We were told to throw away our red pens so we don’t intimidate students.”

At the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, marketing consultant Steve Smolinsky teaches students in their late 20s who’ve left the corporate world to get M.B.A. degrees. He and his colleagues feel handcuffed by the language of self-esteem, he says. “You have to tell students, ‘It’s not as good as you can do. You’re really smart, and can do better.’”

Mr. Smolinsky enjoys giving praise when it’s warranted, he says, “but there needs to be a flip side. When people are lousy, they need to be told that.” He notices that his students often disregard his harsher comments. “They’ll say, ‘Yeah, well...’ I don’t believe they really

Interview

Telephone
interview with
John Sloop

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Steve Smolinsky

Interview

Telephone
interview with
Steve Smolinsky

hear it.”

In the end, ego-stroking may feel good, but it doesn't lead to happiness, says Prof. Twenge, the narcissism researcher, who has written a book titled “Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled -- and More Miserable than Ever Before.” She would like to declare a moratorium on “meaningless, baseless praise,” which often starts in nursery school. She is unimpressed with self-esteem preschool ditties, such as the one set to the tune of “Frère Jacques”: “I am special/ I am special/ Look at me...”

Interview

Telephone interview with Jean M. Twenge

For now, companies like the Scooter Store continue handing out the helium balloons. Katie Lynch, 22, is the firm's “celebrations assistant,” charged with throwing confetti, filling balloons and showing up at employees' desks to offer high-fives. “They all love it,” she says, especially younger workers who “seem to need that pat on the back. They don't want to go unnoticed.”

Interview

Telephone interview with Katie Lynch

Ms. Lynch also has an urge to be praised. At the end of a long, hard day of celebrating others, she says she appreciates when her manager, Burton De La Garza, gives her a high-five or compliments her with a cellphone text message.

Interview

Telephone interview with Katie Lynch

“I'll just text her a quick note -- ‘you were phenomenal today,’” says Mr. De La Garza, “She thrives on that. We wanted to find what works for her, because she's completely averse to confetti.”

Interview

Telephone interview with Burton De La Garza

Write to Jeffrey Zaslow at jeffrey.zaslow@wsj.com

Conclusion – Reaction to the Project

When I first heard about the project, I knew that I would be able to complete it to the fullest, in part because my grade depended on it, but also because I read through hundreds of news stories on social bookmarking sites each day. I am kind of a news junkie. The only thing that worried me was getting in touch with the author, but as soon as I found out that this interview could be conducted over email, I was at peace again.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I originally contacted two journalists but only Zaslow followed through by answering the questions. I knew nothing about him when I was interviewing him and was rather surprised to find out, upon doing the author analysis, that he is an award winning author with an impressive writing career. If I had known this before interviewing him, I would have been a little more nervous about contacting him, but keeping myself in the dark leveled the playing field.

Zaslow is a Blackberry user, so every time that I sent him a message, he received the message immediately, even if he was away from his desk and usually responded as soon as he could. This was nice, as I didn't have to worry about sending a message to him and then having to wait forever just to find out if he had received it. Zaslow was always polite and showed a genuine interest in helping me and this further supported my decision that this was the right story to pick.

Conclusion – Learning Experience

The first thing that I learned during this project was that some people do not want to be contacted. The articles that I originally chose contained no contact information for their authors at all and as a result, I took to the Internet. I am a *very* advanced computer user and usually have absolutely no trouble finding anything that I want through the

Internet, but the email addresses of the authors of these stories eluded me. I know that I could have called the publications, but it ended up working out better by merely choosing different articles.

Zaslow's responses to the questions were not the most detailed, but he is very busy and I understand that. The idea of using a Blackberry seems like an ideal one for a journalist, as it would ensure that they are nearly always available. The most interesting thing that I learned from his answers was that his newspaper uses a customized article search engine, and that leads me to believe that a journalist working at a major publication would have no trouble finding anything they want.

The article itself was rather interesting and I hope that the whole of my generation does not fall into this system of needing praise to continue working. I was somewhat aware of this phenomenon before reading the article, but I will always be conscious about it now and will skeptically look at any praise I receive.

This project was a refreshing cool-down from the enormous workload that I had this semester and was actually somewhat fun to do, as now I can see that during this semester, I have essentially equipped myself with the tools necessary to research a story with the same amount of fidelity as a professional journalist would.

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May 2, 2007

Mr. Zaslow,

I wish to express my sincerest gratitude for the time you spent helping me with my journalism project. Thank you for responding to my messages in a timely manner and for your willingness to help. You are obviously a very busy writer and journalist, and you are doing an excellent job at setting an example for other professionals in the field. I would like to say again that I very much enjoyed your article and I plan to make reading your work a common occurrence.

Thank you again,

Riley Paulsen