



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.*

The Most-Praised Generation



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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 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.

pist 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 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!”)

At one company, managers must write at least 48 thank-you or praise

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 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,

manding firms. “It has created a culture where you have to have instant feedback or you’ll fail,” he says.

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 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 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 personality TV era, when