Podcast: Coaching, Leading, and Learning From Gen-Z Teachers

Dr. Meagan Booth, the Supervisor of Employee Relations at Knox County Schools in Tennessee, explores our need to learn about and from our Gen-Z teachers. She suggests the need to move from "just trust me" leadership to "here's what you can expect" leadership providing consistency and transparency that build trust and respect for Gen Z. How do we make mental health "a way of being" to create systems that promote a switched focus from surviving to thriving?

Read Meagan's article, "Gen Z Isn't Lazy: Let's Rethink What We Expect Of New Teachers" here.

Email Meagan – mbooth@nextgencoach.net

Visit Meagan's LinkedIn.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.000] – Steve
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:30.000] – Steve
Coaching, Leading, and Learning from Gen Z Teachers. Joining the podcast today is Dr. Meagan Booth, a previous high school principal and the current supervisor of Employee Relations at Knox County Schools in Tennessee. Meagan recently had an article in Education Week titled, "Gen Z Isn't Lazy: Let's Rethink What We Expect of New Teachers." She suggests that we ask what the presence of Gen Z teachers can reveal about our school systems' practices. Welcome, Meagan – I'm looking forward to learning more from your insights.

[00:01:09.060] – Meagan
Hi! Excited to be here.

[00:01:11.800] – Steve
You started your article with an example of a Gen Z teacher requesting a mental health day when you were the principal. That story hooked me into your article, and so I was hoping you'd share that as a starter for our listeners.

[00:01:29.620] – Meagan
Absolutely. I hired this young, energetic young lady – she wasn't fresh out of college, she had done two years somewhere, but this was going to be a new position for her. I was Principal at the time at a non traditional high school. She brought lots of fresh ideas. She was really excited to be a

part of the team. We get six weeks into the school, which here there's a six-week grading period. At that six-week mark, she comes my office and just ask if we can chat. And of course, "Come on in. How's your first six weeks going?" She articulated herself so well about her need for a – she called it a mental health day. She wanted to know what our sick leave policy was. Was that included in it? She wanted to make sure she did things the right way, which I really appreciated. But she was very clear that she was not "cough, cough sick." She was needing a mental recharge day. She called it a recalibration day. She needed a day where she could turn herself off from the emotional toll of the job to set herself up for success, she felt like, for the remainder of the semester, which for us is that window from October to Christmas time.

[00:02:57.760] – Steve
Yeah, a hard time.

[00:02:58.500] – Meagan
A really hard time. You get the holidays and for her, she knew what she needed, and she was okay to articulate it. At first, it was like, does not compute. [laughter] I didn't know. What do you mean a mental health day? We got things to do. We have standards to learn and progress to make. But just the way she was able to articulate herself told me that this wasn't somebody who was lazy or didn't want to work or was spiraling out of control, like we hear a lot of language around. This was somebody who was strategic about ensuring that she could bring her best to the classroom every day. This was a strategy she needed to be able to do that.

[00:03:46.180] – Steve
A powerful learning time for you, huh?

[00:03:48.780] – Meagan
Oh, absolutely. Because I come from this world where we just go. I mean, even now, it's still my default. I've got two

young kids. I've got a husband. I've got a career. I'm building a business. I'm researching. I don't stop. And I need a mental health day sometimes, but my default is not that. So I really can appreciate that Gen Z is so… They're easy in their conversations around mental health and what their needs are, and they are so bold in asking for what they need in a way that we were never taught to be or taught that it was okay to be. I think if we can look in the mirror a little bit and stop having those knee-jerk reactions, we could learn a lot.

[00:04:51.580] – Steve
What are the time frames for what's identified as Gen Z?

[00:04:56.300] – Meagan
Gen Zer's are born between 1997 and 2012. So essentially right now, they're around 13 to 28, which is a big time span. But those older Gen Z's, they're right in the beginning of their career. Some of them have been teaching right at that five-year benchmark where we know we lose them if we haven't supported them correctly. So they're set to be an emerging group for many years to come, if you think about the 13-year-olds who still will have a lot to learn and grow before they enter the workforce. But I think it prompts us as leaders to prepare ourselves. Okay, if we act fast, we can keep these five-year benchmark people, but prime ourselves to support for the next 10 years.

[00:05:50.020] – Steve
When I read your article, you shared several statements that I thought were extremely insightful. So I'd like to read them one at a time and ask you to respond to them. Here's the first one: "When a Gen Z teacher ask for clarity on expectations or documentations, it's not insubordination. It's a trauma-informed need for transparency, shaped by a world where institutions often failed them."

[00:06:25.700] – Meagan
I don't think we account often enough that Gen Zer's are our

first post-Columbine group of professionals. Columbine happened in 1999. So even our oldest Gen Xers were only two years old, which means they entered the education setting post-Columbine. We were already doing lockdown drills. We were already a little bit of fight or flight at any little thing that happened. And then they experienced trauma in a school setting. In elementary school, they had Red Lake, and they had 911. Then in middle school, they have Virginia Tech. Then in high school, they have Sandy Hook. Then they start their careers, and we have a COVID pandemic shutdown. They've lived in these just constant routines of fight or flight, which has not given them the baseline of trust in institutions like we had. We grew up believing that school was a place that we came to learn and people loved us and we were safe there. And even when that got disrupted for some of us in the millennial generation, we still had the foundation that we built our early formative years on that Gen Zers didn't get. And so they distrust – you can't just say, well, this is a safe place.

[00:07:52.140] – Meagan
They want to know how and why and can you prove it to me? That's that transparency piece. It's just a mistrust in the institutions that we have, by default, believed and trusted in, that they don't have that foundation to just blindly trust and believe in. And so they don't. It's the fact of the matter. It's more about realizing and understanding what their formative years looked like to understand what professional and grown up they are now, in my opinion.

[00:08:30.000] – Steve
Leaders have to focus on building that trust that we may have assumed in other generations people had – wasn't our responsibility to build it?

[00:08:43.020] – Meagan
Right. I think for so long, it was just we trust in our leaders. There was some positional respect. You got to that position for some reason, and so I trust in your decision-

making process. Whereas Gen Zers, they don't necessarily have that foundation. So if we can shift into, instead of just trust me, into, here's what you can expect from me, or, here is what I will expect from you. Those very clear, articulated boundaries are great for them because that is how you build trust with them. It's not your position or your rank. It is, here is how I am willing to put in the work to equally build trust with you.

[00:09:26.240] – Steve
Another statement that I pulled from your article, what looks like this engagement is often deep distrust.

[00:09:34.120] – Meagan
I think that goes back to that transparency back and forth piece. It's a reading of the room. They're going to sit back and decide, is this worth my energy to engage in? Can I really trust you? Is this just another fight or flight thing? They've lived in a 24-hour news cycle their entire life. They have learned to process out some of the noise and wait for urgency. Is this actually urgent? Do I really need to engage with this work? Is it really going to be meaningful or next week we're going to have something new? They will sit and listen, and sometimes it looks like disengagement, but really it's a reading of the room. Is this worth investing my time and energy into? Or are you just going to give me something new later?

[00:10:30.220] – Steve
Am I hearing there, it's going to take a while for the trust to build, so that initial response isn't challenging me. It's just waiting.

[00:10:40.500] – Meagan
Right. It is. That's a great way to put it. It's not a challenge, and sometimes we see it that way. It is disengagement and their problem children or something, some challenge to what initiative I'm trying to do or what type of

feedback I'm trying to give. But that's not it. It's that the trust level isn't there yet for them to engage. That relationship piece and that building of a trust is so important because if you can lay that groundwork of trust, then they're very open to feedback, but not until then.

[00:11:18.900] – Steve
That's important for the coaches and my audience to be listening to. The other statement you made that I pulled is one I've heard a lot, which is why I wanted to catch it. You said, what's dismissed as entitlement is sometimes self-preservation.

[00:11:40.660] – Meagan
Yeah, I think they watched their parents and mentors burn out. We entered a mental health crisis in our country, especially really, I think globally, around the pandemic is when it became obvious. The pandemic, I think, initiated the national conversation about it. It was already existent, but Gen Zers watched it, and they just decided, no, thank you. Not for me. I'm not going to do that. I am going to earn my paycheck. I'm going to give my all, but I'm also going to preserve what makes me me, and I'm going to preserve my mental mental health. I think a beautiful example of this is the Simone Biles Olympics, where she pulled out for mental health reasons. She's 28, so she's that oldest Gen Z, and she lived through an Olympic culture, especially an Olympic gymnastics culture, where it was you give your all, you're breaking your ankle to win the gold medal. And she just decided, no, thank you. That is not for me. And she drew the proverbial line for every Gen Zer when she made the decision that I am not mentally in a place to give my all, so I will withdraw.

[00:13:14.380] – Meagan
And what it allowed her to do is to build back better. She came back at this most recent Olympics, better than ever, bigger than ever, and more winning than ever. And that is what I'm talking about with those Gen Zers because they watched it

firsthand of the burnout, of the mental health crisis. Just quite frankly, they have decided, not me.

[00:13:43.740] – Steve
What should we be learning from the Gen Z staff in our schools? How might that impact coaching and leading schools where we all can thrive, not just the Gen Zers?

[00:14:00.440] – Meagan
I think it's this shift of academic excellence isn't just tied to pedagogy and curriculum. We have done a lot of instructional coaching, which is wonderful. We've moved generations of students through things like cognitive coaching and all of the learning forward initiative. We have got great things in place that have done a great job of instructional coaching. But there is a piece that we have missed, which is that we can't do all that's required mentally and emotionally and physically of providing high-quality instruction if we don't tie it to the sustainability piece of mental health as well. That is what we can learn from Gen Z is how do they balance providing high-quality instruction while balancing it with sustainability. And I think they do that through boundaries. Here is where I'm willing to give it, and here is where I need to shut it off to preserve my work-life balance, to preserve my mental health. They're going to push transparency, which I think is good for everybody. I've always been a big believer, and people will rise to whatever bar you set. And if we set the bar at burnout, eventually, we will only keep the people in our building who are willing to burn out to be there.

[00:15:38.400] – Meagan
But if we set the bar at sustainability without lowering our expectations for academic excellence, then we will keep people who are willing to give their all within those boundaries when you are transparent about what you expect from them. I expect that you will use your plan time for planning I will not pull you from it for other meetings, for-

[00:16:06.820] – Steve
Coverage of the class.

[00:16:07.450] – Meagan
Coverage, whatever it is. I want you to expect that that is your planning time, and I will allow it to be your planning time. I will expect that you do not check your emails at 8:00 PM at night. So I'm going to schedule send my emails that as the leader I am, I'm working at 11: 00 PM and I promise I'll hit schedule send so that you don't get it in your inbox and it doesn't push to your smartphone until 8:00 AM. Just respecting those boundaries and learning to create them within ourselves as those who lead and coach across generations, I think, can give us a sustainability piece of instructional coaching that we've been missing.

[00:16:53.720] – Steve
You've given me some reinforcement for a current piece that I'm working on in and my coaching training, and that is getting people more focused on the human connection, not taking away from any of the other instructional coaching elements, but that this conversation we're having is a human connection conversation. And so all those things become critical within that conversation.

[00:17:23.220] – Meagan
And this generation is teaching us that it's not assumed anymore. You can't just assume that because we work together, there's some human connection or some loyalty or preservation there. It's really a – through consistency and knowing my voice is safe here and transparency of expectations, I begin to buy in. Again, it goes back to the, is this worth investing in? Once that trust is built, then they're willing to invest and they're willing to receive the feedback, and they're willing willing to take the criticism and make changes. But that human connection, you're right. Without that human connection, they just don't get there, I don't think.

[00:18:13.820] – Steve
In your article, you describe the need for mental health to become a way of being in our schools. Tell us a little bit about what that looks like and sounds like when it's a way of being.

[00:18:25.780] – Meagan
I think for so long, we have treated mental health as some crisis or "they're having a mental health crisis, or I'm just not really sure what's going on with them. They've got some personal stuff going on." But instead of it being treated as some crisis that we have to manage because they're in a mental health crisis. Instead, we start designing our culture that values their mental health before we get to crisis. Little things, I think there's so much power in small shifts. Little things like what I talked about with schedule send. I'm going to model for you that I respect the boundaries in which we have collectively agreed to set. I don't expect you to respond to emails at night or to check your emails at night, so I'm not going to send you anything until you are back on contract. That doesn't mean that I'm not working then. It just means I'm respecting the boundaries. I think little shifts like that. When we see staff members who struggling, be open about conversations. We have employee assistance programs in most school districts and most job sites, most insurance companies. There is some version of an employee assistance program that allows for employees to seek counseling services or to talk to a coach before they get into crisis.

[00:19:55.180] – Meagan
So if you are a coach or a leader and you are willing to just offer it, "Hey, I see that you seem to be struggling recently. Are you aware of our Employee Assistance program?" Having those conversations and normalizing that it's okay to struggle, it's not a sign that you're a bad teacher. It's not a sign that you are not good at your job or this job is not cut out for you. But instead, that's just a way of being.

That’s a way of life. We all have our ups and downs and struggles. Sometimes the workload maybe just needs a little extra hand of an employee assistance program, somebody to talk to a counselor to chat with. And then it’s how do you give feedback? Again, feedback is collaborative. It’s a back and forth. It’s a, well, here’s why I did this. Well, here’s why we think this is better. Instead of just a, you’re doing this, this, this, this, and this wrong, and I’ll be back next month for my next walk through. It’s human connection, right? It’s culture. It It becomes a way of being and how we interact rather than everybody freaks out because somebody’s having a hard time, they must be in a mental health crisis.

[00:21:10.220] – Meagan
Instead of we normalize the conversation through little small interactions, little small actions that we model, I do think that’s the best way for us to make it a part of what feels good to be at work, which is when we know that the conversation around mental health is not a crisis anymore, it’s a way of being.

[00:21:32.700] – Steve
You triggered a recall for me. Quite a ways back, I was doing some work in classroom management, and an author that I was reading described that the acting out kid in your class was – you should consider that student the canary in the coal mine. You getting an early on signal that things were off, not zeroing it in on that student. As I was just listening to you, I was almost flashing to the same thing. That teacher who walked in your office and laid that out to you was a canary, letting you know there were probably plenty other people around the school in the same spot. I really see that as an awareness, a learning for all of in those leadership roles.

[00:22:32.760] – Meagan
Oh, absolutely. I think when we have cross-generational mentorship within a building, that’s another just small… We always think our veteran teachers and our new teachers. But

being strategic in that and valuing what they can teach each other, I think, is an important piece of the mentoring and coaching. Instead of the top-down I'm coaching, you're right. What is the Gen Zer – what are they articulating that is signaling some underlying things that maybe millennials, Gen Zers, aren't articulating? They may not feel safe to – they may not even realize. I didn't even realize I had anxiety until I started having employees. And then suddenly I was like, is this anxiety? I don't know. Is it? It turns out, yes. We weren't given the language, and we weren't given the space to feel it either, quite frankly. Mentoring and coaching can be a two-way street. I think schools that will encourage it and value it as that, a two-way street, what can both learn from each other. They really set themselves up for monumental growth in student achievement because you have educators who are in a mindset to provide high-quality instruction and to lift the emotional weight and the secondary trauma that comes with teaching.

[00:24:16.420] – Meagan
It's such a heavy job, emotionally and mentally, that if we can raise everybody up to this level of your mental health is sacred, we're all on a better place.

[00:24:27.380] – Steve
We can't make it happen for kids if we can't make it happen for the staff.

[00:24:31.240] – Meagan
Oh, exactly. How can you model social emotional learning if you're not doing it yourself? Yeah. That's absolutely true.

[00:24:39.020] – Steve
Well, Megan, I came into this podcast expecting it to be delightful, and you've exceeded the expectations I had coming in.

[00:24:48.280] – Meagan

Well, thank you. I have really enjoyed it.

[00:24:50.560] – Steve
Thank you so much. I will post the link to the article that I read in the podcast notes so folks can find it. What's the best way for folks who'd like to connect with you and follow your ongoing work?

[00:25:07.980] – Meagan
Linkedin is probably my best outlet as far as social media goes. That's Dr. Meagan Booth, which is the actual LinkedIn tag is Next Gen Coaching. Then if you want to email me, you're welcome to do that as well, mbooth@nextgencoach.net.

[00:25:29.260] – Steve
We'll I'll also put both of those links in the podcast lead-in.

[00:25:32.680] – Meagan
Thank you. I appreciate it. I appreciate you inviting me on. This was absolutely wonderful. I enjoyed every bit of it.

[00:25:41.800] – Steve
Thank you. I will be following up and likely look for a return visit as you share your ongoing insights.

[00:25:47.290] – Meagan
Oh, I would love to.

[00:25:48.670] – Steve
Thanks so much.

[00:25:51.410] – Meagan
I would love to. Thank you very much.

[00:25:55.850] – Steve
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.