



Generation *We*

WHY *Me* DOESN'T WORK FOR ONE AND EVERYONE, AND WHAT *We*
CAN DO TO CHANGE IT ~ STEVEN SMITH & DAVID MARCUM

Because of its unequaled power to lift one and everyone, *we* is an inspiring, fashionable word.

In times of tragedy or triumph, wedding vows or funerals, the word *we* moves minds and hearts into unity and commitment. But the lasting power of *we*-charged language lies in *we*-centered habits, which are often separated by miles.

Couples pledge *we* in wedding vows but draw fierce battle lines of *me* that divide property and children in divorce. At moments like 9/11 when fear and grief push people to their emotional limits, it isn't hard to line streets with American flags and declare the power of We. Not much later, however, Rush Limbaugh Americans turn up the volume to drown out Bill Maher Patriots, and Rachel Maddow gets back to work attacking Tea Party activists, who are busy rebelling against every *we* that isn't them. The power of *we* fades fast.

It also starts too late.

The Momentum of Me

There is a prevalent belief in a rising societal trend of *me*. The belief isn't completely without merit. To measure specific levels of *me*, one tool researchers use is the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), comprised of forty paired statements from which participants choose a response. For example, "I insist upon getting the respect that is due me" or "I usually get the respect I deserve." Scores are based on points attached to specific answers, so in the above example choosing the first statement over the second would add a point. An NPI score of 21 reflects high narcissism and overconfidence. Fifty-eight percent more college students scored higher on a narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982.

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Jean Twenge of San Diego State University and author of *Generation Me* and *The Narcissism Epidemic*, examined the prevalence of me-centeredness from the NPI. “I think these analyses end the debate completely,” said Twenge. “Narcissism is rising.” If you now feel justified sentencing the current twenty-somethings to a decadent *me* generation, or feel indicted as a *me*-first twenty-something, hold on.

Psychologists Brent Donnellan and Kali Trzesniewski looked at NPI scores from 1979 to 2007, breaking NPI questions into subsets. Their study concluded that some signs of narcissism have increased while others have decreased, with no major changes overall. Now you’re either confused or relieved, probably driven by how close to “twenty-something” you are.

From our point of view, not all NPI questions reflect true narcissism: “I am assertive” and “I like to take responsibility for making decisions” are indicators used on the NPI, but in reality are much different than “Everybody likes to hear my stories” and “I can make anyone believe anything I want them to.” Many statements on the NPI are simply strengths, with benefits or counterfeits depending on how pure confidence is. An increase in some scores may even be beneficial, contingent on where you stand on the confidence continuum. So the gradual rise in the NPI index may reveal good and bad news.

When you carefully consider the NPI and other generational self-confidence research from multiple angles and psychological points of view, what is clear is that while *me-first* isn't dramatically rising in any specific generation, our twenties are *always* accompanied by ineffectively high doses of *me*. As early as 1907, nearly each decade has produced front-page articles written by journalists beyond their twenties condemning the current twenty-somethings of *me-first* behavior. While the specific accusations aren't entirely untrue, the most revealing cross-generational truth is that we've all been twenty-something, and we're not too far beyond those behaviors ourselves.

Me is a habit that takes too long to wear off for any generation's own good, and corners each of us into a mentality that carries on for years. The lengthy detox time creates a long span of disruptive and dysfunctional *me-first* tendencies that leaves generations of talented, undaunted young people miscalculating the right ratio of *me-to-we*. Why are the twenties so *me-centered*? Nature and nurture.

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Cornered by Me in Our Twenties

It isn't until our mid-twenties that a vital part of the brain—the frontal lobes—are completely connected. This explains why teenagers are often so infuriatingly me-centered. “You think of them as these surly, rude, selfish people,” said University of Pennsylvania Professor of Neurology Frances Jensen. “Well, actually, that’s the developmental stage they’re at. They aren’t yet at that place where they’re capable of thinking about the effects of their behavior on other people. That requires insight.”

As the frontal lobe connects and awareness of *we* increases, social conditions that lend themselves to think *me* intensify. It's like coming out of a diet detox and someone takes us to McDonalds for our first meal. In our early twenties we're independent for the first time, and so we establish who I am: *my* style, *my* decisions, *my* major, *my* grades, *my* social life, and *my* persona. Our social circles are mostly people our age. Dating is more recreational than serious and so there isn't a vested interest in the other because he or she isn't a *significant* other. Jobs don't typically involve complex relationships with a variety of people, so we're not pushed beyond our demographic comfort zone. Because we've been absorbed in and surrounded by *me*, there is a tide of neural *me* wiring and social *me* conditioning to overcome entering our mid-twenties and exiting our late twenties. Those habits are hard to break, even with fully functioning frontal lobes.

Fortunately, over time, life presents more openings to break those habits and think *we*. Our thirties are a decade of committing seriously to one partner, starting new families, greater political and social awareness, and launching careers that require interaction with a variety of people and purposes. The forties and fifties bring financial sacrifice for children's college tuition, blended families, civic involvement, and a personal history of lessons to rely on that give us reason to trust *we* over *me*.

And though the opportunities for *we* increase past our twenties, it's easy to revert to *me*, *myself* and *I* as a thirty-forty-fifty something at work. Life after thirty is designed with experiences to extract us from *me*, but pressures of mortgages to pay, job competition, promotions to campaign for, retirement to think about, performance to maintain and recognition of our own level of success keep *me* in play. Certain social expectations also come with age. Driving a rusty Honda Civic is perceived okay as a twenty-something college student, but as a forty-something manager the social pressure changes. If not managed wisely, appearances and material accumulation give *me* excessive power. Because the social reinforcements of *me* are always there to distract us from *we*, the long learning curve sets standards for the way people behave organizationally and economically.

Tribal Leadership coauthor Dave Logan discovered that 76 percent of company cultures are *me*-centered. The more *me*-centered the culture, the worse the company's financial performance. Self-centered capitalism undermines the very system that *me*-centric proponents claim indivi-

duality, unbridled consumption, and competition bolster. A broader view of *we* could help check the economic instability that rugged capitalists claim to protect.

On June 12, 2009, Bill Moyers interviewed former Clinton administration Secretary of Labor Robert Reich about healthcare reform and the state of the economy.

BILL MOYERS: What has happened to capitalism that has led it to the abyss?

ROBERT REICH: Essentially, capitalism has swamped democracy. You see, there's no such thing really as pure capitalism without rules and regulations that set limits on profit-making, because otherwise it's everybody out for themselves. Otherwise, nobody can trust anybody. Otherwise, it's the law of the jungle.

Unless you have a democratic system that allows the rules to be created not by the companies but by the people and the people's representatives reflecting what the public needs, not what the corporations need, you're going to have a system that is not a democracy, and it's not democratic capitalism. It's super capitalism without the democracy.

So why does society tend to work in opposition to *we* if *we* is clearly a superior strategy?

Why don't human beings make stronger moves to get past *me* sooner once the frontal lobes are ready to go? Because psychologically and historically, *me* is a durable way to survive and succeed.

Politics and business are competitive and capitalistic. Head-to-head, *me* appears to be the most viable strategy. But perception isn't reality.

Social science and history expose *me* as a less steady way to survive, and a fragile way to thrive. And when *me* leaves work and goes home, stakes can get even higher. Emotions are closer to the surface. Love is deeper. Commitments are stronger. *Me* collapses entirely as a carryover strategy from boardrooms to living rooms.

The Straightest Line to Success

To stand up or stand out, it's natural to think me-first: *self*-awareness, *self*-development, *self*-esteem, *self*-respect, and *self*-fulfillment. But what's natural about me-first isn't optimal. Across relationships, professions and politics, the weight of evidence in favor of we overpowers *me*.

A landmark study of 3,000 married couples by psychologist John Gottman showed a link between certain everyday behaviors and the likelihood of a couple's divorcing. After observing a couple talk for only five minutes, Gottman and his team could predict with 91% accuracy whether the couple would stay together.

Gottman's conclusions are essentially based on one pivotal question: Are the small, everyday behaviors of each partner focused on *we* or *me*? For example, when one partner won't share

power, there is an 81% chance that the marriage will self-destruct. Only after divorce do couples usually realize the deep, individual cost of playing *me* first. Though no application of *we* may be more important than marriage, the power of *we* extends beyond home.

Despite a deep inventory of stories on lone geniuses, anyone paying attention knows that the best ideas are almost always born of *we*. Nineteen individuals won the first fifteen Nobel Prizes in physics, yet the last fifteen prizes have gone to forty-two people. Only three times in the last fifteen years has a *single* person won. Scott Page, Professor of Complex Systems, Political Science, and Economics at the University of Michigan, was curious to know why.

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Page created an experiment in which groups of people were challenged to solve the same complex problem. When participants were isolated to solve the problem, some ranked great, average, and below average. Welcome to the bell curve. Page then divided people into teams with similar problem-solving abilities, ranging from super teams of only the best and brightest to groups composed of the worst. As expected, the brighter the collective talent, the better their performance. The bell curve worked again.

Next, Page mixed it up. Randomly allocating the best, average, and worst problem-solvers to teams, he assigned another set of complex problems and analyzed performance. The randomly chosen and diverse teams outperformed the superstar teams. Thinking the outcome was an anomaly, he tried the experiment again. And again. Each time diversity defeated single-minded, intellectual horsepower. Of his findings Page wrote:

Our collective ability depends as much on our collective differences as it does on our individual IQ scores. Does this logic imply that we should abandon the meritocracy? That we should remove those “my child is an honor student at Neil Armstrong Junior High” bumper stickers from our mini vans and randomly allocate spots in our top colleges? Of course not. Obviously, ability matters. But here’s the catch: so does diversity. We’re limited in our abilities. Our heads contain only so many neurons and axons. Collectively, we face no such constraint.

Despite the case for *we*, and people aren't always convinced, most still have deep-seated anxiety about how *we* actually works. Because *me* feels instinctive and in *my* control, natural fear of conceding control, missing out, or being vulnerable makes us uneasy about *we*. The fear arises because *me*-first appears to be the straightest line to success, especially in a competitive, *me*-centered world.

For example, whether we like it or not, most everything sets up for bell curves: IQ, income, GPA, marital happiness, employee performance, etc. Legendary General Electric CEO Jack Welch graded employee performance by a 20-70-10 rule: "A" players were the top 20 percent; "B" players were the vital middle because they worked hard and performed but weren't quite "A" players; and the bottom 10 percent were fired every year. It became known as "rank and yank." While not all organizations are as intense and strict as GE, many practice similar methods of ranking and evaluating employees.

Reacting to competition and bell curves, *me*-first is a typical strategy to get the limited resources for individual livelihood and achievement. Deeply held beliefs about *me* drive the strategy:

- If I don't focus on my needs, I lose control of what matters to me.
- If I take care of myself, and everyone else does the same, everyone gets what he deserves and the weakest links lose out. What's wrong with that?

- I paid a price to excel. I'm not going to let strangers who don't care about what's important to me or who aren't as invested in my career as I am, draft off my hard work or put my ambitions at risk.

A *me*-first strategy on competitive bell curves leads to hyperventilation about rankings and using tainted personal tactics to jump to the top of the curve. It's easy to predict the off-center behavior: people are distracted by what others are doing, how they're doing it, who's noticing, and attempt to re-adjust who they uniquely are to fit the criteria of a generic curve. Anxiety then replaces confidence, office politics confine competence, and relevance drops. *Me* is a convoluted way up the curve and a defective method for staying there.

So in a survival-of-the-fittest, forced-rank, bell-curve world where ambitions, dreams, and careers are at stake, how does *we* help *my* livelihood and achievement? The answer is counterintuitive: lose yourself. Forget *me*.

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Lose Yourself

Imagine you're in sales. You could be selling anything: a car, home, idea, or product. In this case, let's say you work for a company like IBM. It's approaching the end of Q4 and you're working on a make-or-break sale. The final client presentation is tomorrow morning. Closing the quota-breaking deal means livelihood and achievement: commission, promotion, reputation, kids' college tuition, house payments, retirement, cars, clothes and vacations. But if you walk into the presentation focused on *your* ambitions, the deal is far less likely to close.

When you've made the sale about *me*, you're at risk of the worst habits: overselling features, talking too much, rushing through explanations, closing too early, mistaking attention for agreement, and avoiding objections. The me-first approach downgrades the client's ambitions to second place, and seems to try and take what isn't yours: the client's choice. As the client picks up on your intent, they grow suspicious of what you say, guard what they say, and don't give you access to information or decision-makers. You lose the sale. Your company loses revenue. Even the client loses if your product was in fact better than competitors'. No one wins.

Losing yourself doesn't mean losing. Whether you're pitching a new idea, convincing investors for more funding, or making your case for a new job during an interview, losing *yourself* guarantees the best chance of winning.

One Level Out

In any venture or relationship, before thinking of *me*, maximize your relevance by thinking one level out from where you are. As you think, talk, and decide on a daily basis, ask: What is this about outside of *me* (me equals the level where you are, not just you personally)? What's the bigger picture? Who's the customer? Who has something at stake? Why does that matter, and how do I make sure I understand? If I *were* them, what would matter most to me?

The Power of We

Individually and societally, we hesitate to think *we*-first and one level out because it feels less powerful, and people need power. The control, motivation and autonomy that power provides boosts everything from resources, influence and social support to health and longevity. People who feel powerful are 16 percent happier with life and 26 percent more satisfied at work. But getting the full benefit of power requires respect.

As respect goes, the opportunity to use the power we have typically follows. No matter how powerful we are, the level of respect we get plays a major role in what we can do with that power. That may explain why *respect* on a job-seeker's priority list ranks second only to company stability and compensation, and ahead of healthcare benefits and work-life balance.

As interested as we are in power for what it allows us to do, not everyone, however, is equally interested in the same *type* of power:

1. **Power over:** institutional authority, title, responsibilities, control.
2. **Power to do:** talent and expertise.
3. **Power of who:** integrity and authenticity.

Someone who wields power *over* without respect gets minimal, short-lived compliance. Anyone with a power-hungry, autocratic boss knows this firsthand. Power *to do* is limited until people notice and respect your strengths. Anyone new to a job or project where their talent wasn't valued has been emotionally deflated by being artificially respected and realistically underused. Respect fails the power of *who* when morals decline and what we say isn't what we do.

Respect liberates power, and begins with equality.

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Equality

From the moment we meet anyone we may have no idea the level of respect they deserve or what power type(s) they have, given a very individual and unequal history of advantages and disadvantages. We are not equally free, smart, safe, healthy, connected, or recognized. Nature and nurture designed us differently enough that two people rarely see or do things precisely the same way every time. Even people of similar backgrounds who gather for similar reasons with similar passions are never identical, except at a twin festival. (Yes, there is one. It's in August). We face different challenges, are presented with diverse opportunities, and are treated with different prejudices and preferences by different people.

On any given bell curve, we are either ahead of or behind each other. A single change in time, place, or circumstance can instantly shift individual value and performance. So considering that we are all different nearly all of the time in thousands of ways, what makes us equal and why does it matter to respect?

One thing we have in common, ironically, is individuality. Whether we come from poverty or privilege, high school or grad school, health or handicap, life designed us with unique origins, stations and destinations. As distinctive, unequal and even unfair as those designs may appear

to be, everyone is, however, equally capable of achieving the potential they do have in their own circle of opportunity and influence.

We can at least trust that their experiences are different than ours and respect the price they paid to become who they are, know what they know, and achieve what they have. Without equality, respect has no trustworthy foundation upon which to build. Any given change in circumstance or simple misperception would constantly alter levels of respect, leaving guessing and judgment as the most common strategies for investing respect. Diversity is the constant truth of equality and the foundation for respect.

By definition then, stereotypes homogenize individuality. Applied to us or by us, stereotypes give a false sense of superiority or inferiority that marginalize respect, limit power and deplete human achievement. Because stereotypes can reemerge at any time for anyone, crushing stereotypes in favor of truth requires analyzing the beliefs behind them. Studying the history of the group about which you have predetermined ideas, or getting to know the person you may have boxed and labeled, is a start.

Challenging stereotypes may include questions such as: What do you think of twenty-somethings? Middle-aged white men? Young African Americans? Immigrated Hispanics? Gay married couples? Harvard graduates? Cal-Berkeley students? High-school dropouts? Liberal democrats? Conservative

republicans? Atheists? Mormons? New employees? Executives? Politicians? Greenpeace? The NRA? Add your own.

Liberating power through respect hinges on how loyally we live by the self-evident truth of equality. There is no stereotype so severe that it can't be crushed by a single act of equality. And if after stripping away stereotypes we find honest disagreement or even come face to face with humanity's ugly side, then at least truth is facing truth, not stereotype facing stereotype. As equality liberates us from stereotypes, our ability to invest respect increases.

More broadly, solving society's most pressing problems calls for unprecedented power of every type. And while power can always be strengthened and perfected, there is no stronger way to unleash the power we have now than elevating respect.

When Me Doesn't Matter

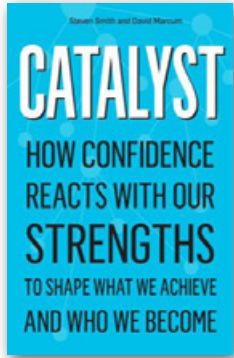
Even though *we* benefits *me*, it's important to note that certain causes and times deserve nothing but *we* with no thought of *me*. *We* isn't always about optimizing both. *We* can be sacrifice. Doing good for good's sake matters. Your world, community, neighborhood, family, and relationships need devotion with no thought of a return.

Economically speaking, a stronger version of capitalism may require, ironically, less indulgence and more sacrifice. For example, it is harder to forego income to pay down an oppressive national debt when there's no realistic reason to believe that *my* generation will get a maximum return on the investment. This isn't a political ad. It's a plea for more community concern and less individual complacency. More service, less line-drawing. More collaboration, less contention.

The current trends of me over we are helping no one achieve potential. *Me* is an inferior, less relevant way to live and work, and with less of an upside personally, politically, or professionally.

It's time to shift, and the science and strategies are there to make we work. 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS | Surveying 8,000 people in over 1,200 organizations, Steven Smith and David Marcum conducted an eight-year study of the interplay between human strengths and confidence. The result is their latest book, *Catalyst: How Confidence Reacts with Our Strengths to Shape What We Achieve and Who We Become*. Their work has previously been published by Simon & Schuster and Wiley, in 24 languages and 50 countries, and taught in top organizations across the world. ChangeThis readers can download the book free at www.g5learning.com/catalyst. Smith and Marcum are also co-founders of [G5 Learning](#), a company dedicated to help young professionals build career capital and realize their potential. ChangeThis readers can sign up for [a free G5 Membership](#).

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