

Interview

Young men (in crisis) and the search for a healthy masculine identity: How might managers respond?

The majority of gender studies and discussions these days focus on women and also on issues of intersectionality. In this free-wheeling interview - against the grain - Payal Kumar asks Daniel Harris about the challenges that young men face when transitioning to adulthood. Harris provides deep insights into how to enhance a positive sense of masculinity for young men — and why this matters. Daniel has worn many hats: American diplomat, scholar, author and director of Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace.

Payal: Tell me a little bit about yourself

Daniel: I've spent 40 years working at the interface of two or more cultures, first in international business and then for 29 years as an American diplomat. I learned early what a difference it makes to engage with people in their own languages, and I became fluent in French, German and Spanish. I've published several articles also a book: *Spiritually and Developmentally Mature Leadership* (Springer, 2019).

I would say that from my high school years onward, I have been passionate about leadership and experiencing other peoples and cultures. By 1973, I had lived in South Africa and France and I suddenly had an epiphany: I wanted to pursue an international career. I see the years from 1973 to 1984 as my “quest,” in the sense of Joseph Campbell’s ‘hero’s journey’. The hero’s journey for me was moving the adolescent into the young adult through a series of hardships, humiliations and perils that became all the more serious with marriage (1980) and fatherhood. In June 1984, I became an American diplomat in the US Commercial Service. In all, I lived in nine countries on four continents, and returned to South Africa, Germany and France a second time as a diplomat.

After retirement in 2013, I had the opportunity to think expansively about the issues facing young people during my time as the Director of the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace, and as an adjunct in the Management Department of the Walton College of Business, University of Arkansas. I met such interesting people – like you! – through the Management, Spirituality and Religion interest group in the Academy of Management.

Payal: Why are you focused on enhancing positive masculinity for young men and not enhancing the self-esteem of young adults in general?

Daniel: Great question! First, there is abundant data in a series of books and reports that men are in crisis at multiple levels, including education, relationships, employment and deaths of despair. *Of Boys and Men* by Richard Reeves, Senior Fellow Brookings Institute, lays out the data and the alarming repercussions. His most telling point is that we can have policies that help men while maintaining a momentum on women's issues. Women are tuning in to this. A series of analyses and op-eds written by women have appeared recently with titles like "What's the Matter with Men?"¹ and "Men Are Lost."² There was even a Saturday Night Live skit on women taking their male partners to "a man park" to socialize them.

The reality is that many men are in pain and, as Fr. Richard Rohr says, "Pain that is not transformed will be transmitted." If we are not willing to help men transform their pain, our whole society will suffer – not because men are bad but because they don't know what to do with their pain. Too many boys and young men are imploding, taking their own lives or lashing out in violence. Others are ripe for exploitation by extremists of Right and Left.

Payal: What got you interested specifically in the topic of the positive image of masculinity?

Daniel: My interest crystallized in mid-2016 when our twin grandsons were born, followed by two granddaughters. I believe that grandchildren are God's trick to make you care about the world 100 years after you have left it! This amplified my growing unease at the negativity around boys, men and masculinity. I myself could ignore it but my grandsons would be shaped by it – as would the other boys/young men who might one day be partners for my granddaughters.

In 2017, I experienced Illuman's Men's Rites of Passage. Illuman was founded by Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr who wrote two seminal books for the men's movement: *From Wild Man to Wise Man*, and *Adam's Return* (2003). Rohr summarized the "Five Hard Lessons" he found every pre-technical culture sought to teach boys through rites of initiation. Further, he created a modern rites of passage for men entering (or already in) the "second half of life" (40 years plus). These rites

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/30/whats-the-matter-with-men>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/>

had such profound impact that in 2013 Illuman was created as an umbrella organization to make them widely available.

My personal experience of the Men's Rites of Passage (at the age of 69) was far more powerful than I had expected, and I saw how life-changing this experience could be for other men. In my continuing involvement in Illuman I find myself astonished at how much pain men carry, how alone they feel, yet how deeply men will share when they feel safe and accepted. When men experience this deep, positive transformation through Men's Rites of Passage, it ripples out to families, communities and businesses. Illuman is now creating rites of passage for other male transitions. My personal focus is on creating rites of passage for teen boys moving into adolescence.

Payal: What are your views on young men and spirituality?

Daniel: I wrote an extensive independent study on spirituality in young adult men while pursuing a Masters in Divinity (2018-2021). I found that secular literature completely ignored the spirituality of young men; yet most mainstream denominations treat young men as problems to be fixed rather than as beloved sons of God. My interviews with 15 people working with young men provided rich insights. For example, there is excellent research on spirituality in young people, but almost none recognize that young men had specific needs. "One-size-fits-all" approaches in youth groups and campus ministries were skewed 70%-80% towards females. We really need a positive theology of masculinity that points men towards spiritual wholeness!

Payal: What resources would you recommend for business leaders and mentors?

Daniel: The single wisest and most useful insights I have found come from a recent podcast by Michael Meade – anthropologist and a founder of the men's movement in the 1970s – entitled "When Men Are Lost."³ His core message is that so many men lack connection to their own souls, their innermost selves, and thus lack a coherent sense of identity. Previous notions of what it means to be a man or definitions of masculinity no longer seem satisfactory, yet we are living in a time of radical change, such that any new definitions will be strongly contested. We can support

³ <https://www.mosaicvoices.org/episode-340-when-men-are-lost>

men in finding an inner sense of meaning, purpose – an identity, which incorporates one’s gender and connects to one’s soul. Richard Rohr’s writings have also touched the lives of many men.

From a psycho-social and policy perspective, *Of Boys and Men* by Richard Reeves offers a well-balanced analysis of the “crisis” in men. He conveys that this is not a zero-sum game: if men suffer and fall behind, it affects all of us. Recognizing the needs of men does not have to diminish women.

Reeves book suffers from the same two weaknesses affecting most secular analyses:

- 1) He ignores the spirituality of men, and he ignores faith communities as places where men can find the connection they desperately need.
- 2) He offers policy solutions to some socio-economic and psycho-social problems, but he does not address the fundamental questions on the minds of young men: “What does it mean to be a man at this moment in history? What does masculinity look like for me and for my peers?” These questions affect gay, straight and trans guys, and men of all ethnicities, though the situations and answers may vary widely.

Though Reeves dodges these questions, he courageously calls to account both the Right and the Left on the ideological spectrum for using young men as pawns in culture wars rather than helping to find a new social consensus around a positive model of masculinity. Reeves notes that anyone who offers a model or models for healthy masculinity will inevitably be attacked, from Right or Left or both! Sadly, mainline Protestant churches have also failed to offer a positive theology of masculinity – perhaps this is one reason young men have streamed out of organized Christianity even faster than young women.

Payal: What message would you like to give to young men and women?

Daniel: Over a decade ago a handsome, cosmopolitan young man in his late twenties told me: “Dan, the kind of men women *say* they want are not the men they go out with on Saturday night!” In a recent article in the *Washington Post*, Christine Emba⁴ quoted Scott Galloway as saying that

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/?wpisrc=nl_opinions

the conversation around masculinity has come off the tracks when “being a man is essentially trying to ignore all masculinity and act more like a woman. And even some women who say that — they don’t want to have sex with those guys. They may believe they’re right, and think it’s a good narrative, but they don’t want to partner with them.” Ms. Emba “cringed in recognition.”

Women have a big stake in creating an environment in which men can work out this new way of being in the world; yet, in this harshly judgmental environment, it can seem dangerous even to have an honest conversation about what it means to be a man. Research (and experience) shows that a man’s sense of manhood is developed in relation to other men. *Women can bring out the best in men, but they cannot define masculinity for them.* Today’s young men must discover it and define it themselves. Young women can help by being honest about what they personally are seeking in a man, whether for a party or as a partner – especially when what they truly want differs from the narrative in university classrooms and social media.

The fact that men continue to occupy a disproportionate percentage of the top 5% of leadership positions (C-suite, tenured academics, politicians) should not mask the fact that young men are falling badly behind in a range of measures, especially university education. Shaming and blaming men for being men may well induce an angry backlash or passive aggression.

Young men need to do the hard work of forming a male identity in connection with healthy men. Rites of passage programs can provide a safe but challenging place to explore more deeply who you are and who you want to become. Illuman <https://illumian.org/mrop/> Mankind Project <https://mankindproject.org/new-warrior-training-adventure/> Animus Valley <https://www.animas.org/great-place-to-start/the-animas-quest/> and others will take you out of your comfort zone and into new possibilities. A sense of identity, a sense of purpose and connection to trusted men can transform your life.

Payal: What would you recommend to corporate leaders mentoring young men who have joined the workplace?

Daniel: We are in a period of radical change in which almost everything is contested. “Liminal space” is where we’ve left one place but not arrived in the next. Consensus breaks down and

people struggle to understand a way of being in the world. This is especially true for boys and young men, trying to find an identity that includes their authentic masculinity.

Many young men are seeking connection and belonging. They are disconnected from other men, from community and from their own inner beings, including connection to any transcendent Being. This lack of connection translates into isolation, lack of purpose and an incomplete identity. They change jobs frequently and may find little meaning in their work.

Here are some ideas you could adapt to your corporate culture:-

1. Young men need healthy male role models. Not perfect men – just healthy! Up to 40% of young men did not live with their dads or had emotionally detached dads. *Beautiful Beings*, an Icelandic film, shows the anguish and the violence of boys who lack a healthy man in their lives. There's a deep hunger for male mentors. *Who are the authentic men in your organization who would care enough to spend time with young men? Which men embody your corporate values?* The mentors do not have to solve anyone's problems or deliver oracular wisdom. They do not have to be "cool." Young men need an older man who is "real" to listen to them, to ask thoughtful questions and perhaps to reframe situations, or share authentic stories from his own experience.

Listening to men is part of my calling these days. Some I've never met, but they'll pour out their stories for an hour or more. Being heard by another man, without judgement or fixing is remarkably healing and empowering. Finding men willing to listen is the hard part, especially as psycho-therapy now skews so heavily towards the female. Some young men may never have been heard by a mature man who cares!

2. Men need to be in circles with other men *where it feels safe* to open up. Both from my own experience and asking professionals, I find men will open up with other men in a way they will not if women are present. Two men I know have created a "dads' group" drawn from acquaintances who have children of similar ages. They may go to a bar or have a poker night, but they share real experiences, instead of trashing each other's sports teams. As trust builds, the sharing deepens and expands beyond parenting. This "dads' group" becomes a lifeline in troubled times.

In Illuman we have a “Way of Council” which sets intentions – including confidentiality – and provides a structure that a mentor could use to begin building trust <https://illumian.org/way-of-council/>. Because these are men only groups, they may have to meet outside of work, but they can be encouraged by mentors.

3. Young men are searching for a coherent identity that includes their masculinity. Yet, men are disparaged and denigrated in ways that would (rightly) evoke outrage if directed at women or minorities. Do not tolerate disparagement or ridicule of men any more that you would of women or trans folk! Memes like “Men are trash” should be swiftly rebuked in the workplace. Richard Reeves advocates banning terms like “toxic masculinity” which have become meaningless, all-purpose insults that do nothing to make any situation better. We see young men holding back ideas or not expressing different opinions out of fear of being accused of “male privilege” or worse – even when the issue at hand has nothing to do with gender. Call out toxic *behavior*. Toxic behaviors can be defined and corrected without blaming anyone’s gender.
4. Young men often find themselves adrift, even more than young people generally. They may have little sense of direction, purpose or meaning. In teaching a leadership class, I assigned Stephen Covey’s personal mission statement to students as a project that went through four drafts. As an essential foundation, we did two exercises to help students determine their 3-4 (not 5 or 6) most important values. Students were uncomfortable having to think through what they *really* cared about. The litmus test: “Would you pay a price to defend this value? If not, take it off the list; it may be aspirational, but it’s not that important to you.”

Students were expected to list their top values in the first draft and to become more specific, more concise and more focused with each successive draft. Some students hated the discipline of connecting values to ambitions, and to setting priorities. For example, what’s more important to you *really*: to become a Fortune 500 CEO, to be a loving and present parent; to make a difference in the world; to have a scratch golf handicap, etc.? You can put them all in your one sentence mission statement but you must list them *in order of priority*. When life

gets complicated, you will have to make choices; knowing what you truly value and what your real priorities are will help you make wise choices. This exercise caused discomfort and students needed a lot of encouragement and guidance – but they gained important self-discovery. Students emerged with a framework of values and a set of goals that informed what a fulfilling life might look like. Values as the foundation of a sense of purpose create at least the beginnings of an ethical structure.

Payal: Would you like to add anything else?

Daniel: Offer training in meditation and a quiet space at work. I would say that young men are inherently spiritual beings at a time when organized religion has fallen out of favor. Most young people lack coherent spiritual frameworks or any idea of spiritual disciplines. Too often, they have no deep connection to their inner selves. Meditation, taught well and practiced consistently, has significant benefits that appeal to many young people – IF they practice regularly! I recommend teaching (and encouraging) meditation. The *Mindfulness Institute for Emerging Adults* (formerly Koru) developed a curriculum specifically for young adults. I have taught this course and find it sound and effective. Regular meditation can lead to deeper self-discovery and connection with our own souls. It would be especially effective in conjunction with the Stephen Covey exercise described above.

Also, ask young men open-ended questions about their “calling.” What is it you were put on this earth to do? You may see serious discomfort or deer-in-the-headlights looks. The notion of calling may not be familiar to many young men today. Still, introduce the concept to young men who are searching for a sense of identity and purpose. It’s about connecting to their inner reality, and perhaps a transcendent Reality. Many won’t have a clue how to do that. Suggest they ask that calling question when they enter deep meditation, and just let it hang there – simply observe what comes up. In the absence of a calling, they gravitate to immediate gratification or just getting rich “whatever it takes.” Some recognize early that material success is not enough – they ache for an over-arching narrative that helps them make sense of their lives. Others may only get it when they fall into real crisis at mid-life, when life seems purposeless, despite material success. Other just end their lives – either literally or numbing themselves until they die. A sense of purpose

embedded in a coherent sense of Being motivates and sustains us, especially in tough times. It may also help your employees know what matters, and how to manifest that in their best work.