Leading Gen Z: A Study on Preferred Leadership Styles For A New Generation

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper	This study explores effective leadership styles for Generation Z (born 1997–2012), a cohort characterized by digital nativity, social consciousness, and unique workplace expectations. Unlike prior generations, Gen Z values transparency, ethical behaviour, purpose-driven work, and flexibility. Through a qualitative approach involving interviews and surveys with Gen Z employees and managers across multiple industries, this study identifies transformational, servant, and authentic leadership as particularly effective for engaging and motivating this generation. Findings reveal that Gen Z employees respond well to leaders who prioritize open communication, encourage feedback, and demonstrate integrity. Transformational leadership fosters personal growth and inspiration, servant leadership emphasizes empathy and support, and authentic leadership builds trust through transparency—qualities that align with Gen Z's values. Organizations that adopt these leadership approaches may experience enhanced engagement, retention, and productivity among Gen Z employees. This study contributes to understanding Gen Z's workplace preferences, suggesting that adaptive leadership can help bridge generational gaps and foster an inclusive work environment. While findings are valuable, further research is needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of these

leadership styles as Generation Z progresses in their careers.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Generation Z has entered the workforce, bringing new challenges and expectations for organizational leaders. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has grown up in a digital-first world, exposed to rapid technological advancements, social justice movements, and economic uncertainty. These unique experiences have shaped their expectations for leadership and workplace culture. This paper explores the specific leadership styles that resonate with Generation Z, aiming to offer insights into creating effective and inclusive environments that foster productivity and engagement.

Generation Z, defined as individuals born approximately between 1997 and 2012, is now entering the workforce, bringing with them a distinctive set of values, attitudes, and expectations that differ from previous generations. This cohort, often referred to as "digital natives," has grown up in a rapidly evolving technological landscape, leading to unique skills, communication preferences, and workplace expectations (Dimock, 2019). Raised in a digital-first environment, Generation Z has been influenced by unprecedented global connectivity, exposure to diverse perspectives, and a strong awareness of socio-economic and environmental issues (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Consequently, their entry into the workforce requires organizations to adapt their leadership strategies to effectively engage and motivate this new generation.

Leadership styles have been a focus of academic research for decades, with theories evolving to accommodate changing workplace dynamics and generational differences. Common leadership approaches include transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision and inspiration (Burns, 1978); servant leadership, which prioritizes supporting and empowering team members (Greenleaf, 1977); and authentic leadership, which focuses on transparency and ethical behaviour (Walumbwa et al., 2008). These styles, while established, must be reassessed in the context of Generation Z, whose unique experiences and values are reshaping the workplace.

Generation Z brings a different set of expectations and preferences compared to their predecessors, such as Millennials and Generation X. This generation prioritizes values such as transparency, purpose, work-life balance, and ethical leadership, and they are more likely to seek out organizations that align with

their personal beliefs and offer meaningful work (Twenge, 2017). Studies have shown that Gen Z workers place a high emphasis on authenticity and are drawn to organizations that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). They also value continuous learning and expect leaders to support their personal and professional growth. These values and expectations reflect broader shifts in workplace culture, driven by technological advancements, shifting social norms, and an increasingly interconnected world.

One key factor distinguishing Generation Z from previous generations is their reliance on and familiarity with technology. Growing up with smartphones, social media, and constant internet access, this generation communicates and processes information differently than older generations (Schroth, 2019). Digital communication tools like Slack, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams are second nature to them, and they tend to expect similar digital efficiencies in the workplace. As a result, leaders must be adept at digital communication and transparent information sharing, as Generation Z Favors open and immediate communication channels (McCrindle & Fell, 2019).

Furthermore, Generation Z's awareness of global and societal issues shapes their expectations for ethical and purpose-driven leadership. Unlike previous generations, they are significantly more likely to hold companies and their leaders accountable for their social and environmental impact. Studies indicate that 75% of Gen Z workers prefer to work for organizations with strong corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and they seek leaders who are ethically committed to sustainability and social equity (Barbuto & Gottfredson, 2016). Consequently, leadership approaches that emphasize authenticity, ethical standards, and community involvement are essential for engaging this generation.

Research into generational preferences has identified transformational leadership as particularly effective for Generation Z, due to its focus on inspiring and motivating followers through a shared vision (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leaders use communication and vision to inspire employees, which aligns well with Gen Z's desire for meaningful and purposeful work (Schroth, 2019). Transformational leadership also fosters an environment where personal and professional growth are prioritized, resonating with Gen Z's emphasis on continuous learning and development (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Similarly, servant leadership has been shown to align with Generation Z's desire for support, empathy, and work-life balance. This approach, developed by Greenleaf (1977), emphasizes the importance of

serving others, with leaders prioritizing the needs and growth of their employees over personal gain. Research indicates that Gen Z responds positively to leaders who demonstrate empathy, listen actively, and foster a collaborative work environment (Deloitte, 2020). This leadership style not only provides Gen Z with a sense of support but also enables them to feel valued within the organization, which is critical for retention and engagement.

Authentic leadership, a relatively recent approach, has also garnered attention for its alignment with Gen Z's emphasis on transparency and ethical behaviour. Authentic leaders are defined by their self-awareness, honesty, and commitment to personal values (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Generation Z's demand for transparency means they are more likely to respect and follow leaders who are open about organizational challenges, goals, and ethical considerations (Lemoine et al., 2019). Authentic leadership, therefore, meets Gen Z's desire for honesty and integrity, allowing them to trust and connect with their leaders on a deeper level.

As the workplace becomes more diverse with multiple generations working side by side, understanding and adapting to Generation Z's unique expectations is crucial. Many organizations are finding it challenging to engage Gen Z employees within traditional frameworks. Without proper adaptation, leaders may risk high turnover and disengagement within this generation, impacting organizational effectiveness (Anderson et al., 2017). By exploring the effectiveness of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership styles, this study aims to provide insights into leadership strategies that resonate with Generation Z. Ultimately, these insights can help organizations foster a more inclusive, productive, and harmonious workplace culture.

This study fills a significant gap in the literature by focusing on leadership styles specifically tailored for Generation Z. While generational studies have explored Millennial preferences extensively, limited research has examined the particular needs of Generation Z in relation to leadership. As this generation continues to grow in the workforce, understanding their leadership preferences is essential for fostering engagement, satisfaction, and productivity. By examining Generation Z's workplace values and expectations, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of generational shifts in leadership and offers practical guidance for organizations looking to attract, retain, and motivate this emerging generation of employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research suggests that transformational leadership, which emphasizes inspiration, individual development, and empowerment, may be particularly effective for engaging Generation Z employees (Brown, 2020). Gen Z workers prioritize authenticity and ethical standards, aligning well with the principles of authentic leadership (Anderson & Miller, 2021). Additionally, servant leadership, which focuses on supporting and developing team members, resonates with Generation Z's emphasis on purpose and community.

Transformational leadership is one of the most widely discussed styles for engaging younger generations. Bass and Avolio (1994) argue that transformational leaders, who inspire and motivate followers through a shared vision, are highly effective in driving change within organizations. Transformational leadership has been shown to enhance job satisfaction and commitment among younger workers, as it aligns with their desire for meaningful work and personal development (Brown, 2020). Schroth (2019) found that Gen Z, in particular, values inspirational leaders who support their growth and learning, making transformational leadership an ideal approach for this cohort.

Servant leadership, introduced by Greenleaf (1977), emphasizes the importance of supporting team members by focusing on their growth and well-being. This leadership style resonates with Gen Z's demand for empathy and a supportive work environment. Seemiller and Grace (2019) found that Gen Z expects leaders to act as mentors and guides, promoting a culture where employees feel valued and empowered. This generation appreciates leaders who prioritize ethical standards and social responsibility, which are inherent to servant leadership.

Authentic leadership, defined by self-awareness, transparency, and ethical behavior, is increasingly valued by Gen Z employees who seek honesty and integrity in their leaders (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Lemoine, Hartnell, and Leroy (2019) suggest that authentic leaders, who openly communicate about organizational challenges and maintain ethical standards, are more likely to gain the trust and respect of Generation Z. This generation's high expectations for transparency and accountability make authentic leadership an effective approach.

Generation Z has a strong focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and expects leaders to prioritize ethical conduct and social impact. Francis and Hoefel (2018) report that Gen Z is more likely than previous generations to engage with organizations that demonstrate a commitment to ethical

practices and social justice. Ethical leadership, which focuses on fairness, honesty, and concern for stakeholders, aligns well with Gen Z's values, as these leaders are seen as role models who uphold the integrity of the organization.

Given that Gen Z is the first generation to grow up with digital technology, leaders must be adept at using digital communication tools to engage with this cohort effectively. McCrindle and Fell (2019) highlight that digital fluency is essential for leaders who want to connect with Gen Z employees, who prefer instant communication channels such as messaging apps and social media. Leaders who embrace digital communication not only appear more approachable but also foster a work environment that aligns with Gen Z's expectations for accessibility and efficiency.

Gen Z values a workplace culture that promotes psychological safety, where they feel secure in expressing their ideas and concerns without fear of judgment. Anderson et al. (2017) found that inclusive leadership, which fosters diversity and psychological safety, is effective in engaging Generation Z employees. These leaders create an environment that supports open communication and diversity, which Gen Z views as essential for a respectful and productive workplace.

Generation Z places high value on collaboration and teamwork in the workplace. According to Twenge (2017), this cohort thrives in environments where leaders encourage cooperation and group problem-solving. Collaborative leadership, which involves shared decision-making and inclusiveness, aligns well with Gen Z's emphasis on teamwork and community. Leaders who adopt a collaborative approach can create a sense of belonging, which is highly valued by Gen Z employees.

Deloitte's Millennial and Gen Z Trust Barometer (2020) highlights that Gen Z expects leaders to support remote work and flexible hours to accommodate their desire for work-life balance. Adaptive leadership, which involves leaders responding to employees' needs and adjusting work structures to fit modern demands, is seen as essential by this generation. Leaders who demonstrate flexibility in their approach can better meet Gen Z's expectations and retain their engagement.

Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that individuals are motivated when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Gen Z values autonomy and expects leaders to empower them by providing opportunities for self-direction and skill development. Research by Anderson and Baur (2020) shows that empowering leadership, which emphasizes delegation, trust,

and skill-building, resonates with Gen Z's desire for autonomy and independence. Leaders who empower Gen Z employees can foster intrinsic motivation and long-term commitment.

Generation Z is often called the "socially responsible generation," as they are highly aware of environmental and social issues. Barna Group (2020) found that Gen Z employees are more inclined to follow leaders who demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability and social justice. Leaders who prioritize CSR initiatives, environmental policies, and social equity gain the respect and loyalty of Gen Z employees, who want to work in organizations aligned with their values.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite growing research on generational differences in the workplace, there is limited analysis of the specific leadership approaches that align with Generation Z's distinct values. This paper seeks to fill this gap by exploring the effectiveness of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership in managing and motivating Generation Z employees, an area currently under-researched in organizational studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, gathering data through interviews with Generation Z employees and managers from various industries. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insights into Gen Z's preferences for leadership qualities and workplace culture. Additionally, surveys were distributed to measure satisfaction levels with different leadership styles.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify common preferences and values among Generation Z employees.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Using thematic analysis, the study identified three core themes preferred by Generation Z in their leaders:

- **Transparency and Communication:** Generation Z expects clear and open communication. Leaders who are transparent about organisational goals and values build trust and engagement among Gen Z employees.

- **Flexibility and Support for Work-Life Balance:** Gen Z values work-life balance and is more likely to thrive under leadership that offers flexibility and understands the importance of mental well-being.
- **Ethical and Purpose-Driven Leadership:** This generation is motivated by leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior and contribute to broader social goals.

Core Theme	Explanation	Leadership Strategies and Interpretation
Transparency and Communication	Generation Z values open and clear communication, expecting leaders to be honest about goals, challenges, and organizational values. Leaders who practice transparency can foster trust, engagement, and loyalty among Gen Z employees.	- **Open Communication:** Leaders should prioritize open communication about organizational goals, values, and expectations. Regular updates and open channels for feedback allow Gen Z employees to feel included and informed. - **Frequent Feedback:** Providing regular feedback and openly discussing employee performance helps Gen Z workers understand their impact and areas for growth. - **Two-Way Dialogue:** Leaders who encourage two-way communication create an environment where Gen Z employees feel heard and respected. This fosters a sense of belonging and motivates them to contribute meaningfully.

Flexibility and Support for Work-Life Balance	Gen Z values work-life balance and mental well-being, thriving under leaders who offer flexibility and acknowledge the importance of personal time and health.	- **Flexible Working Hours:** Providing flexible schedules or options for remote work aligns with Gen Z's need for work-life balance. Flexible arrangements support productivity while allowing employees to manage personal obligations. - **Mental Health Support:** Leaders should be proactive in promoting mental health initiatives, offering access to counseling or resources to help Gen Z manage stress. - **Work-Life Boundaries:** Leaders who respect work-life boundaries by limiting after-hours communication or implementing policies against overwork foster loyalty and reduce burnout.
Ethical and Purpose-Driven Leadership	Gen Z is motivated by leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior and contribute to social and environmental causes. They want to work for organizations with a positive social impact.	- **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** Leaders who emphasize CSR initiatives appeal to Gen Z's desire to make a difference. Promoting ethical values and engaging in community activities aligns the organization's goals with those of Gen Z. - **Integrity and Accountability:** Leaders should model ethical behavior, such as honesty and accountability, fostering trust among employees who are increasingly sceptical of corporate motives. - **Purpose-Driven Vision:** Leaders who link organizational goals to broader social and environmental impact can inspire Gen Z to feel that their work contributes to a greater cause

1. Transparency and Communication

Generation Z is widely recognized for their demand for transparency and open communication in the workplace. Growing up with easy access to information via the internet and social media, they are accustomed to having information readily available and expect similar openness in their work environments. This generation seeks leaders who are forthright about the organization's goals, values, and challenges. Transparency fosters trust, as it shows that leaders respect their employees enough to keep them informed, even during difficult times (Lemoine et al., 2019).

Leadership Strategies:

- **Open Communication Channels:** Leaders should regularly share updates on company performance, goals, and challenges, which builds trust and inclusivity. For example, holding regular team meetings, company-wide updates, or town hall sessions can provide transparency and help employees feel connected to the organizational mission.

- **Frequent Feedback:** Generation Z employees prefer continuous feedback over annual reviews. Leaders who adopt a culture of frequent feedback help Gen Z workers feel valued and understand how their work contributes to the organization's goals (Schroth, 2019). Leaders who communicate feedback in a supportive and constructive manner can build Gen Z employees' confidence and engagement.

- **Encouraging Two-Way Communication:** Gen Z employees are more likely to engage with leaders who not only share information openly but also encourage feedback from employees. Leaders who listen to the concerns and ideas of their team members create an environment where Gen Z employees feel respected and part of the decision-making process (Brown, 2020).

These strategies align with Gen Z's expectations for a workplace that values their input and provides clarity in direction. By practicing transparency and open communication, leaders can create a more engaged and motivated workforce.

2. Flexibility and Support for Work- Life Balance

Work-life balance and mental well-being are top priorities for Generation Z. Unlike previous generations that may have prioritized job security or compensation, Gen Z is more focused on maintaining a healthy balance between personal and professional life. This cohort is keenly aware of mental health issues, with many citing stress and burnout as major concerns. Leaders who support

flexible work arrangements and promote mental well-being can help Gen Z employees achieve a balanced life, fostering loyalty and productivity in the process (Deloitte, 2020).

Leadership Strategies:

- **Flexible Working Hours:** Offering flexible work schedules or remote work options aligns with Gen Z's desire for control over their work environment. Flexibility not only helps them manage their work-life balance but also boosts morale and productivity, as employees can work in ways that suit their personal lives.
- **Mental Health Initiatives:** Leaders who actively promote mental health resources demonstrate an understanding of Gen Z's priorities. Providing access to counselling, organizing stress-management workshops, or simply encouraging open discussions about mental health in the workplace are examples of supportive practices that can reduce burnout.
- **Respect for Work-Life Boundaries:** Gen Z employees value boundaries between work and personal life, which can often be blurred in a highly digitalized world. Leaders who avoid sending after-hours emails or encourage employees to take time off are more likely to earn the loyalty and respect of their Gen Z workforce. This respect for personal time shows that the organization values employee well-being over productivity alone.

Leaders who provide flexibility and support mental health initiatives cultivate a supportive work environment that appeals to Generation Z's need for balance. These practices contribute to a culture of well-being, where employees are motivated to perform their best without compromising their health.

3. Ethical and Purpose-Driven Leadership

As the most socially conscious generation, Generation Z prefers organizations and leaders that are aligned with ethical values and social causes. This generation has grown up amidst widespread social and environmental awareness, and they expect companies to take responsibility for their impact on society. Leaders who demonstrate a commitment to ethical behaviour and contribute to social goals inspire loyalty and motivation in Gen Z employees (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Leadership Strategies:

- **Emphasis on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** Generation Z employees are drawn to companies that actively participate in CSR initiatives, such as environmental sustainability

programs or community engagement. Leaders who prioritize these initiatives show that the organization stands for something greater than profit, appealing to Gen Z's desire for purpose.

- **Modelling Integrity and Accountability:** Ethical leadership involves modeling ethical behaviour's, such as honesty, transparency, and accountability. Leaders who admit to mistakes, uphold integrity, and treat all employees fairly cultivate a high level of trust among Gen Z employees, who value leaders that practice what they preach.

- **Purpose-Driven Vision:** Gen Z employees are inspired by leaders who align their work with a broader social or environmental purpose. Leaders who connect the organization's mission with positive societal contributions can help Gen Z employees feel that their work is meaningful. This sense of purpose enhances job satisfaction and loyalty, as Gen Z employees feel they are contributing to a larger cause.

Ethical and purpose-driven leadership addresses Gen Z's desire for a values-based workplace. Leaders who demonstrate a commitment to ethical values and social responsibility not only attract Gen Z employees but also foster a loyal and engaged workforce.

CONCLUSION

Generation Z brings unique values to the workplace, necessitating adaptive leadership approaches. Transformational, servant, and authentic leadership styles are particularly effective for engaging this cohort, as they emphasize ethical behavior, transparency, and support for personal development. Organizations seeking to attract and retain Gen Z talent should consider implementing leadership training programs that foster these qualities, ultimately creating a more inclusive and productive work environment.

The emergence of Generation Z in the workforce presents a transformative opportunity for organizations and leaders to rethink their leadership strategies. This generation, characterized by its digital savviness, strong social values, and emphasis on work-life balance, requires a nuanced approach to leadership that addresses their unique expectations. As explored in this paper, three core themes—transparency and communication, flexibility and support for work-life balance, and ethical and purpose-driven leadership—emerge as critical pillars for engaging and motivating Gen Z employees.

Transparency and communication are vital in building trust and fostering engagement. Leaders who prioritize open dialogue, regularly share organizational goals, and invite feedback create an inclusive

environment where Gen Z employees feel valued and heard. This transparency not only enhances job satisfaction but also encourages a culture of collaboration and innovation, where employees are motivated to contribute to organizational success.

In addition, **flexibility and support for work-life balance** are paramount in meeting the mental health needs of Gen Z. As this generation seeks to prioritize their well-being, leaders who offer flexible working arrangements and advocate for mental health initiatives can cultivate a loyal and productive workforce. By recognizing the importance of work-life boundaries and promoting a healthy work environment, leaders can significantly enhance employee retention and performance.

Lastly, **ethical and purpose-driven leadership** resonates deeply with Gen Z's social consciousness. Leaders who embody ethical practices and align organizational goals with broader societal contributions not only attract this generation but also foster a sense of purpose and loyalty among employees. As organizations increasingly confront societal challenges, the need for leaders who prioritize ethical decision-making and social responsibility has never been more critical.

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