

Navigating Leadership in the Gen Z Era: Strategies for Inspiring and Engaging a Digital Generation

Putri Rizki Syafrayani¹, Fauziah Khairani Lubis², Masitowarni Siregar³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The increasing presence of Generation Z (Gen Z) in the workforce has necessitated a shift in leadership strategies to effectively engage and inspire this digital-native generation. Gen Z employees prioritize autonomy, technological integration, and purpose-driven work, which challenges traditional leadership models. This study explores the most effective leadership approaches for managing Gen Z, focusing on transformational, laissez-faire, and participative leadership styles. The research employs a literature review methodology, synthesizing existing studies on leadership theories, workplace behaviors, and generational expectations. Findings indicate that Gen Z employees thrive in flexible, digitally connected, and ethically conscious work environments. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes mentorship and motivation, proves particularly effective, while laissez-faire leadership supports their need for independence. However, a balanced approach is necessary, as Gen Z also requires structured feedback and career development opportunities. The study concludes that organizations must adopt adaptive, technology-driven, and value-oriented leadership models to attract and retain Gen Z employees. Leaders who embrace digital tools, corporate social responsibility, and continuous learning will create a dynamic and motivated workforce that fosters innovation and long-term success.

Keywords: First keyword, Second keyword, Third keyword (9 pt, Bold)



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Corresponding Author:

Putri Rizki Syafrayani,
Department of English Applied Linguistics,
Universitas Negeri Medan,
Jl Willem Iskandar Psr V, Medan Estate, Percut Sei Tuan, Kab. Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara 20371.
Email: prizkisyafrayani@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Generation Z (Gen Z) as a dominant workforce segment has created a pressing need for organizations to rethink traditional leadership strategies. Gen Z, born between 1995 and 2012, is the first generation to have been raised in a fully digital environment, which has shaped their expectations for work, communication, and leadership (Dwidienawati & Gandasari, 2018). This generation is characterized by high technological proficiency, a preference for work-life balance, and a demand for inclusivity and purpose-driven employment. Unlike their predecessors, Gen Z employees tend to resist hierarchical structures and instead favor participative, transparent, and flexible leadership approaches (Baldonado, 2018).

A critical challenge for organizations is the difficulty of engaging and retaining Gen Z employees. Research has shown that Gen Z workers tend to be less committed to long-term employment in a single organization and more inclined toward job-hopping in pursuit of personal and professional growth (Chillakuri, 2020). Additionally, they seek constant feedback, rapid career advancement, and work environments that integrate digital tools seamlessly (Deloitte, 2024). This trend has prompted scholars and practitioners to explore leadership models that align with these expectations, as failing to meet them can lead to high turnover rates and reduced organizational productivity.

Despite extensive research on leadership styles, a gap remains in understanding the most effective leadership approaches for engaging Gen Z employees. While previous studies have examined transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles, limited research has focused on how these leadership styles should be adapted to align specifically with Gen Z's needs (Ogunsola et al., 2024). Traditional leadership models emphasize authority and structured processes, which may not be as effective for a generation that values autonomy, collaboration, and ethical leadership (Sudha, 2023). Thus, an investigation into how leadership strategies can be tailored to Gen Z's expectations is essential for organizations aiming to optimize workforce engagement and productivity.

One of the most critical gaps in existing research is the limited exploration of technology's role in leadership for Gen Z. As digital natives, Gen Z employees expect digital tools to be seamlessly integrated into workplace operations, from communication platforms to AI-driven performance assessments (Wilson, 2021). However, many leadership studies do not sufficiently address how digital leadership can enhance Gen Z engagement and retention. Understanding how leadership styles can incorporate digital tools to create more dynamic and responsive work environments is crucial for modern organizations.

Additionally, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical leadership are becoming increasingly influential in Gen Z's workplace engagement. Studies indicate that Gen Z employees are highly concerned with social justice, sustainability, and ethical business practices (Vieira et al., 2024). They prefer working for organizations that align with their personal values and contribute to meaningful causes. However, existing leadership models often do not prioritize ethical considerations in a way that resonates with Gen Z employees. This research aims to bridge that gap by identifying leadership strategies that not only foster productivity but also align with Gen Z's ethical and social expectations.

Given these challenges and research gaps, this study explores leadership strategies that effectively engage and inspire Gen Z employees. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- a. How can leadership styles be adapted to align with Gen Z employees' expectations and workplace behaviors?
- b. What role does digital leadership play in engaging and retaining Gen Z employees in modern organizations?

By addressing these questions, this research provides insights into the evolving landscape of leadership in the digital era, offering practical recommendations for organizational leaders to successfully manage and inspire Gen Z employees. The findings will contribute to the growing body of literature on leadership adaptation, employee engagement, and the future of work in an increasingly technology-driven and socially conscious environment.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a literature review methodology to explore leadership strategies for engaging and inspiring Generation Z employees. The literature review method is chosen to synthesize existing research, theories, and empirical findings on leadership styles, Gen Z workforce dynamics, and organizational management approaches. The methodology follows a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and synthesizing relevant academic articles, books, and reports from credible sources such as peer-reviewed journals, industry publications, and organizational studies.

The research relies on secondary data gathered from scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and Scopus. The selection criteria for sources include relevance to leadership strategies, Gen Z workforce behavior, and contemporary workplace challenges. Only studies published within the last ten years are considered to ensure up-to-date insights.

A thematic analysis is employed to categorize leadership strategies into transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles. The effectiveness of these leadership styles in managing Gen Z employees is assessed by examining empirical findings from previous research. The study also identifies emerging trends in leadership adaptation for digital natives, including the role of technology, workplace flexibility, and corporate social responsibility.

The study focuses on leadership strategies applicable to Gen Z employees in professional settings, particularly within corporate and organizational environments. While the findings provide valuable insights, they are limited by the reliance on secondary data and the absence of primary data collection through surveys or interviews. Future research could enhance the findings by incorporating quantitative and qualitative data from real-world organizational settings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the literature review highlight that Gen Z employees exhibit a strong preference for autonomy, digital integration, and continuous feedback. According to Bălan and Vreja (2018), Gen Z's work values differ significantly from those of previous generations, creating challenges for leadership. Their preference for flexibility and innovation suggests that traditional hierarchical

leadership models may be ineffective in engaging them. Additionally, Bateh (2019) found that no single leadership style is universally effective for Gen Z employees. Instead, successful leaders must adopt a hybrid approach that combines transformational, laissez-faire, and participative leadership elements.

One of the key takeaways from the research is that Gen Z employees thrive in environments where leadership is adaptable and responsive to their needs. Transformational leadership is particularly effective because it fosters engagement through vision-driven motivation, mentorship, and continuous feedback (Bateh, 2019). Leaders who adopt this approach are better equipped to guide Gen Z employees toward professional growth while ensuring that their work aligns with the organization's broader goals. However, transformational leadership alone may not be sufficient, as Gen Z employees also value independence and self-direction. This makes laissez-faire leadership an attractive complement, as it allows employees the freedom to take ownership of their tasks while leveraging digital tools for collaboration (Bălan & Vreja, 2018).

However, laissez-faire leadership carries potential risks, particularly when employees require guidance or structured support. A purely hands-off approach can lead to a lack of direction and accountability, which may hinder performance. Therefore, leaders must strike a balance by maintaining open communication channels and providing periodic check-ins to ensure alignment with organizational objectives. Effective leadership for Gen Z is not about choosing one style over another but about integrating multiple approaches based on situational demands and employee needs (Bateh, 2019).

Another significant finding is the emphasis that Gen Z places on technology in leadership. As digital natives, they expect seamless technological integration in workplace communication, performance monitoring, and collaboration. Research by Bălan and Vreja (2018) highlights that organizations that fail to integrate digital tools effectively may struggle to retain and engage Gen Z employees. Leaders must therefore leverage artificial intelligence, cloud-based collaboration platforms, and data-driven decision-making to create an efficient and interactive work environment. Virtual workspaces and remote collaboration tools play a crucial role in meeting Gen Z's expectations for flexibility and real-time feedback, enhancing both productivity and job satisfaction.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical leadership also play a vital role in engaging Gen Z employees. According to Bateh (2019), Gen Z workers are more likely to feel committed to organizations that align with their values, particularly in areas such as sustainability, diversity, and social impact. This generation expects leaders to demonstrate ethical decision-making and prioritize inclusive workplace policies. Organizations that actively support social causes and provide employees with opportunities to contribute to meaningful projects tend to experience higher levels of engagement and retention among Gen Z employees.

Furthermore, leadership strategies must account for Gen Z's unique approach to career development. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z employees prioritize skill acquisition and career progression over job stability. They seek opportunities for professional growth and expect continuous learning and mentorship from their leaders (Bălan & Vreja, 2018). This requires leaders to create mentorship programs, offer skill-based training, and facilitate cross-functional experiences that enable employees to explore diverse career pathways. The implementation of personalized development plans and regular feedback loops helps address Gen Z's need for professional advancement while ensuring that their contributions align with organizational objectives.

Despite the advantages of adaptive leadership strategies, challenges remain in effectively managing Gen Z employees. One challenge is their preference for rapid career progression, which can lead to frequent job-hopping if their expectations are not met. Leaders must proactively address this by setting clear career pathways and demonstrating how employees can achieve growth within the organization. Additionally, while Gen Z values independence, they also require frequent feedback and recognition to stay motivated. Leaders should leverage digital performance tracking tools and real-time feedback mechanisms to keep employees engaged and informed about their progress (Bateh, 2019).

The research findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all leadership approach is ineffective for managing Gen Z employees. Instead, leaders must be flexible, incorporating elements of transformational leadership to inspire and mentor, laissez-faire leadership to grant autonomy, and transactional leadership to provide structure where necessary. By integrating these approaches, organizations can create a leadership model that fosters engagement, innovation, and long-term commitment among Gen Z employees. Furthermore, leveraging technology, promoting ethical

leadership, and prioritizing continuous learning are essential components of an effective leadership strategy tailored to this generation.

In conclusion, managing and inspiring Gen Z employees requires a multifaceted leadership approach that is adaptable, technology-driven, and value-oriented. Leaders must embrace digital tools, provide continuous feedback, support career development, and align organizational values with Gen Z's expectations. By doing so, they can create a workplace culture that not only attracts but also retains and motivates Gen Z employees, ensuring long-term organizational success.

4. CONCLUSION

The integration of Generation Z into the workforce requires a fundamental shift in leadership strategies to align with their expectations, work habits, and values. This research has demonstrated that Gen Z employees value autonomy, digital integration, ethical leadership, and continuous learning. Traditional leadership models based on strict hierarchies and rigid structures may not be effective in engaging this generation. Instead, a hybrid leadership approach that combines transformational, laissez-faire, and participative leadership styles is essential for fostering motivation, innovation, and long-term commitment.

A key takeaway from this study is the importance of adaptability in leadership. Gen Z employees thrive in environments that offer flexibility, technological integration, and purpose-driven work. Leaders who embrace digital tools and data-driven decision-making can create a work culture that resonates with Gen Z's expectations. Additionally, corporate social responsibility plays a crucial role in engaging and retaining Gen Z employees. Organizations that demonstrate a commitment to social causes, inclusivity, and ethical leadership are more likely to attract and retain this new generation of workers.

However, despite their preference for autonomy, Gen Z employees still require structured career development and regular feedback. Organizations must strike a balance by providing opportunities for professional growth while maintaining clear communication channels. Leadership strategies should include mentorship programs, continuous learning opportunities, and real-time feedback mechanisms to keep Gen Z employees engaged and motivated.

Ultimately, the future of leadership lies in adaptability, technology-driven solutions, and a deep understanding of Gen Z's values and motivations. Organizations that invest in leadership models that cater to this generation's unique needs will be better positioned for long-term success. By embracing flexible leadership approaches, leveraging digital tools, and fostering a culture of continuous learning and ethical engagement, organizations can create a thriving workforce that drives innovation and sustained growth.

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