The Influence of Leadership Style on Generation Z's Work Motivation in the Workplace

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ABSTRAK

Masuknya Generasi Z secara besar-besaran ke dalam angkatan kerja global menghadirkan tantangan signifikan bagi praktik kepemimpinan kontemporer. Generasi ini, yang dicirikan sebagai penduduk asli digital yang menghargai tujuan, kolaborasi, dan umpan balik berkelanjutan, memiliki pendorong motivasi yang berbeda yang mungkin tidak selaras dengan model kepemimpinan tradisional. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki pengaruh spesifik gaya kepemimpinan terhadap motivasi kerja karyawan Generasi Z. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan desain korelasional, data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner daring dari 250 profesional Gen Z. Analisis regresi berganda mengungkapkan bahwa gaya kepemimpinan menyumbang 49% dari varians dalam motivasi kerja. Gaya kepemimpinan transformasional dan demokratis muncul sebagai prediktor positif terkuat, secara signifikan meningkatkan motivasi dengan memenuhi kebutuhan Gen Z akan tujuan, stimulasi intelektual, dan kolaborasi inklusif. Sebaliknya, kepemimpinan laissez-faire menunjukkan dampak negatif yang signifikan, secara aktif menurunkan motivasi karyawan dengan menciptakan lingkungan yang ambigu dan diabaikan. Temuan menyimpulkan bahwa untuk secara efektif melibatkan dan mempertahankan Generasi Z, organisasi harus secara sengaja membina para pemimpin yang visioner, partisipatif, dan aktif terlibat sebagai pelatih dan mentor, sambil secara tegas menjauh dari pendekatan kepemimpinan yang terlepas dan tidak terlibat langsung.

Kata kunci: Generasi Z; Gaya Kepemimpinan; Motivasi Kerja; Kepemimpinan Transformasional; Manajemen Tenaga Kerja

ABSTRACT

The massive entry of Generation Z into the global workforce presents a significant challenge for contemporary leadership practices. This generation, characterized as digital natives who value purpose, collaboration, and continuous feedback, possesses distinct motivational drivers that may not align with traditional leadership models. This study aims to investigate the specific influence of leadership styles on the work motivation of Generation Z employees. Utilizing a quantitative approach with a correlational design, data was collected via an online questionnaire from 250 Gen Z professionals. Multiple regression analysis revealed that leadership style accounts for 49% of the variance in work motivation. Transformational and democratic leadership styles emerged as the strongest positive predictors, significantly enhancing motivation by fulfilling Gen Z's need for purpose, intellectual stimulation, and inclusive collaboration. Conversely, laissez-faire leadership demonstrated a significant negative impact, actively demotivating employees by creating an environment of ambiguity and neglect. The findings conclude that to effectively engage and retain Generation Z, organizations must deliberately cultivate leaders who are visionary, participative, and actively engaged as coaches and mentors, while decisively moving away from detached, hands-off leadership approaches.

Keywords: Generation Z, Leadership Style, Work Motivation, Transformational Leadership, Workforce Management

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary workplace is undergoing a significant demographic shift with the massive entry of Generation Z (individuals born between 1997 and 2012) into the global workforce. This transition is not merely a chronological change but a transformative event that is fundamentally reshaping organizational dynamics, culture, and expectations. As the first true cohort of digital natives, Generation Z has been immersed in technology, instant communication, and global interconnectedness since childhood, shaping a worldview and a set of professional preferences that are distinct from their Millennial predecessors (Borde et al., 2022). Their entry compels a critical re-evaluation of long-standing HR policies, management techniques, and physical workspaces. Unlike previous generations who may have adapted to technological change, Gen Z embodies it, bringing an innate fluency with digital tools, a preference for visual and video-based communication, and an expectation for seamless, efficient processes. This influx coincides with other major workplace revolutions, including the normalization of remote and hybrid work models, a greater emphasis on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and a shifting psychological contract that prioritizes flexibility and personal well-being over lifelong job security. Consequently, organizations that fail to understand and adapt to the unique characteristics of this new generation risk not only a cultural disconnect but also significant challenges in attracting top talent, fostering innovation, and maintaining a competitive edge in an increasingly dynamic economic landscape (Bono & Judge, 2004).

As digital natives who grew up in an era of rapid technological advancement, instant communication, and social change, Gen Z brings a unique set of values, expectations, and motivations to their professional lives. Unlike previous generations, they often prioritize purpose, flexibility, continuous feedback, and a collaborative work culture over traditional incentives. This represents a fundamental recalibration of the employee-employer value proposition. For Generation Z, a compelling purpose is not a peripheral benefit but a core requirement; they seek to understand how their individual role contributes to a larger social or organizational mission, and they are increasingly skeptical of roles that offer financial reward without a clear sense of ethical or social contribution (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). This quest for meaning is intrinsically linked to their demand for flexibility, which they view as essential for managing their well-being and integrating their personal and professional lives seamlessly. The rigid 9-to-5 structure is often perceived as an antiquated constraint, with a strong preference for models that judge output over hours spent at a desk. Furthermore, having been raised in an era of instant information and social media interactions, their expectation for continuous, real-time feedback replaces the traditional annual review cycle. They crave regular affirmation and constructive coaching from their managers, which they see as vital for their professional growth and sense of security. Finally, the hierarchical and competitive structures that motivated previous generations hold little appeal for Gen Z, who instead thrive in a collaborative and inclusive work culture that values teamwork, open communication, and shared success. In essence, while traditional incentives like salary and job security remain important, they now function as a baseline—what truly engages and retains this generation is a work environment that aligns with their values of meaning, autonomy, development, and community (Blanchard & Miller, 2007).

Concurrently, the role of leadership has never been more critical. In an increasingly dynamic and competitive business environment, effective leadership is a cornerstone of organizational success, serving as the primary mechanism for navigating unprecedented rates of technological change, globalized markets, and evolving workforce expectations. The traditional model of a leader as a distant figure who simply

delegates tasks and monitors output is becoming obsolete, unable to foster the agility, innovation, and deep engagement required for a company to thrive today. In this complex landscape, leaders are now expected to be multifaceted catalysts: they must be visionaries who can articulate a clear and inspiring direction, architects who can build a culture of psychological safety and trust, and coaches who are dedicated to unlocking the potential of each individual. Their ability to adapt their style, communicate with transparency, and empower their teams directly influences an organization's capacity to retain top talent, maintain morale through periods of uncertainty, and ultimately translate strategi c objectives into tangible results. Therefore, the quality of leadership is no longer just a component of success but is increasingly the defining factor that separates high-performing, resilient organizations from those that struggle to keep pace. Leadership style—the approach and manner in which a leader provides direction, implements plans, and motivates people—is a powerful determinant of employee morale, engagement, and productivity. Traditional, autocratic leadership models are increasingly being challenged for their effectiveness in managing a modern, diverse workforce (Bălan & Ovidia, 2018).

This creates a crucial point of inquiry: are conventional leadership styles effective in motivating Generation Z employees? The potential for a mismatch between established leadership practices and the intrinsic motivators of this new generation poses a substantial challenge for organizations, threatening to undermine both operational efficiency and long-term strategic goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Traditional, often hierarchical and authority-based models of leadership, which may have been effective for previous generations who valued clear chains of command and job stability, risk creating a significant disconnect with a workforce that prioritizes autonomy, collaboration, and dialogue. If organizations persist with these outdated approaches, they face the very real consequences of rising disengagement, increased absenteeism, and ultimately, high turnover rates among their Gen Z talent. This is not merely a theoretical human resources concern but a pressing business issue, as the high cost of recruiting and training new employees, coupled with the loss of fresh perspectives and digital fluency that Gen Z brings, can directly impair innovation and competitive advantage. Therefore, answering this question is not an academic exercise but a strategic imperative, compelling a thorough re-examination of leadership development programs and managerial practices to bridge the growing generational gap and secure a thriving, future-ready workforce. Understanding how different leadership styles such as transformational, democratic, servant, or laissez-faire—resonate with Gen Z is essential for fostering a work environment where they can thrive (Ali & Shariat, 2023). Therefore, investigating the interplay between leadership style and the work motivation of Generation Z is not just an academic exercise but a strategic imperative for businesses seeking to attract, retain, and maximize the potential of this emerging talent pool.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research approach with a correlational design to systematically investigate the relationship between leadership styles and the work motivation of Generation Z employees. The primary aim was to quantify the extent to which different leadership approaches predict variance in motivation levels within this specific generational cohort. The population for this research was defined as Generation Z individuals, specifically those born between 1997 and 2012, who are currently employed in full-time or part-time positions within various industries. A non-probability sampling technique, namely purposive sampling, was utilized to recruit

participants who met these specific criteria. Data was collected through an online self-administered questionnaire, which was distributed via professional networking sites and targeted online communities for young professionals. A total of 250 valid responses were gathered and constituted the sample for this study.

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire divided into three sections. The first section collected demographic information such as age, gender, education level, and years of work experience. The second section measured leadership style using a standardized scale that assessed employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisor's leadership across multiple dimensions, including transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles. Participants indicated their agreement with various behavioral statements on a five-point Likert scale. The third section measured work motivation using a validated scale that captured key motivators for Gen Z, such as intrinsic motivation, desire for feedback, need for work-life balance, and career development aspirations, also using a five-point Likert scale. The validity of the instrument was confirmed through expert review, and its reliability was established by calculating Cronbach's Alpha, with all constructs exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.7.

The collected data was then prepared and analyzed using statistical software to ensure a rigorous and objective examination of the research hypotheses. This crucial phase began with a comprehensive data cleaning process to screen for missing values, outliers, and any inconsistencies that could compromise the validity of the results. Once the dataset was refined, the analysis proceeded systematically, starting with descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic profile of the respondents and establish the central tendencies and distributions of the key variables, namely the perceived leadership styles and work motivation levels. Following this foundational overview, inferential statistical methods were employed, with multiple regression analysis serving as the primary technique to probe the nature and strength of the relationships between these variables. This sophisticated approach allowed for the quantification of how much variance in work motivation could be uniquely explained by each leadership style while statistically controlling for the influence of the others. The software generated critical outputs, including beta coefficients, p-values, and confidence intervals, which were meticulously interpreted to determine not only which leadership approaches were significant predictors of motivation but also the direction and relative strength of their impact, thereby transforming raw survey responses into robust, empirical evidence that either supported or refuted the study's central thesis.

This process began with a critical data cleaning phase, where the raw data was screened for missing values, outliers, and any inconsistencies in responses to maintain the integrity of the dataset. Following this preparation, the analysis proceeded in two main stages, commencing with descriptive statistics to summarize the basic features of the data, which provided a clear profile of the respondent pool and the central tendencies for each variable measured, such as the predominant leadership styles perceived and the average levels of work motivation. Subsequently, inferential statistical techniques were employed, with multiple regression analysis serving as the primary tool to delve deeper into the relationships between variables. This sophisticated method allowed for the quantification of the unique influence of each leadership style on work motivation while controlling for the effects of the others, thereby isolating the specific impact of transformational, democratic, transactional, and laissez-faire approaches. The software generated key outputs including beta coefficients, p-values, and R-squared figures, which were meticulously interpreted to determine the strength, direction, and statistical significance of each relationship,

ultimately providing the empirical evidence needed to confirm or refute the study's core propositions about what truly drives Generation Z in the workplace.

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the demographic profile of the respondents and the central tendencies of the main variables. Following this, inferential statistical analysis was performed using multiple regression analysis. This technique was chosen to determine the collective and individual influence of the different leadership style dimensions on the work motivation of Generation Z employees, allowing the researchers to identify which specific leadership behaviors were the most significant predictors of motivation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
RESULT

The analysis of the data collected from 250 Generation Z respondents revealed significant insights into the relationship between perceived leadership styles and their work motivation. Descriptive statistics indicated that the dominant leadership style perceived by respondents was transformational leadership, with a mean score of 4.2 (on a 5-point scale), followed by democratic leadership (mean = 3.9). Transactional leadership was less frequently reported (mean = 3.1), while laissez-faire leadership was the least observed style (mean = 2.4). In terms of motivation, the highest mean scores were found in items related to "receiving regular and constructive feedback" (mean = 4.5) and "working in a collaborative and inclusive team environment" (mean = 4.3).

The multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict work motivation based on the four leadership styles, providing a sophisticated statistical model that could isolate the unique contribution of each leadership approach while accounting for the presence of the others. This method was crucial for moving beyond simple correlations to understand the complex interplay between these variables in a real-world context where leaders often exhibit a blend of styles. The analysis yielded a regression model that was statistically significant, confirming that the collective influence of these leadership styles was not due to random chance. The R-squared value revealed that a substantial proportion of the variance in work motivation scores could be explained by the model, offering a quantifiable measure of its predictive power. Delving into the individual predictors, the standardized beta coefficients illuminated the specific weight and direction of each leadership style's impact.

The analysis clearly identified transformational and democratic leadership as having strong, positive coefficients, establishing them as powerful drivers of motivation. In stark contrast, laissez-faire leadership displayed a significant negative coefficient, quantifying its detrimental effect. This granular level of insight, afforded by the multiple regression technique, allows for a nuanced understanding that is essential for developing targeted leadership development programs, moving from general advice to specific, evidence-based recommendations on which behaviors to cultivate and which to consciously avoid when managing Generation Z employees. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 245) = 28.74$, $p < .001$, indicating that leadership styles collectively explain a substantial portion of the variance in work motivation. The R-squared value was 0.49, meaning that approximately 49% of the variance in Generation Z's work motivation can be accounted for by the leadership styles included in the model. Examining the individual predictors, transformational leadership ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$) and democratic leadership ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .01$) emerged as the strongest positive and significant predictors of work motivation. Transactional leadership showed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < .05$). In contrast, laissez-faire leadership demonstrated a significant negative relationship with work motivation ($\beta = -$

0.22, p < .01), suggesting that a lack of guidance and involvement from leaders actively demotivates Generation Z employees.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly support the central hypothesis that leadership style exerts a powerful influence on the work motivation of Generation Z, with the statistical evidence revealing that nearly half of the variance in their motivation levels can be directly attributed to the approach their leaders take. This powerful correlation moves beyond theoretical assumption and provides empirical validation for what has been largely anecdotal, firmly establishing leadership as a dominant factor in the engagement equation for this cohort. The data compellingly demonstrates that leadership is not a peripheral concern but a central lever that managers and organizations can actively pull to unlock higher performance, greater commitment, and enhanced well-being among their youngest employees. This profound connection underscores that the challenges of managing Gen Z are not inherent to the generation itself, but are often a reflection of leadership inadequacy (Aldhaheri, 2023). Consequently, the onus is now on organizations to intentionally cultivate leadership capabilities that are specifically tailored to this new reality, moving beyond generic management training to programs that address the nuanced psychological and motivational needs of a generation that is redefining the employer-employee contract. The study ultimately confirms that investing in the development of modern, adaptable leaders is not merely a supportive HR initiative but a direct and critical investment in organizational productivity, innovation, and long-term stability. The fact that nearly half of the variance in motivation (49%) is explained by leadership perceptions underscores the critical role that managers play in engaging this new generation of workers (Bilginoglu & Yozgat, 2018).

The most salient finding of this study is the potent positive impact of transformational leadership on the work motivation of Generation Z. This can be fundamentally attributed to a strong alignment between the core tenets of this leadership style and the intrinsic values that define this generation. Transformational leaders operate by inspiring and motivating their teams through a compelling and shared vision of the future. They act as role models, stimulate intellectual curiosity, and provide personalized consideration, all of which directly cater to the key motivational drivers of Gen Z. For a generation that has come of age in a world saturated with information and social causes, the desire for their work to possess a deeper meaning and purpose is paramount. A transformational leader effectively fulfills this need by connecting daily tasks to a larger, inspirational mission, thereby transforming a mere job into a platform for meaningful contribution.

Furthermore, this leadership style naturally fosters an environment of continuous learning and growth. The intellectual stimulation provided by such leaders who challenge assumptions, encourage creativity, and solicit new ideas—resonates powerfully with Gen Z's characteristics as agile learners and problem-solvers. They thrive in environments where their cognitive abilities are engaged and where they feel they are developing valuable skills. Moreover, the individualized attention and coaching inherent in transformational leadership meet Gen Z's often-cited need for regular, constructive feedback. Unlike the annual review model preferred by previous generations, Gen Z expects frequent and affirming guidance to help them navigate their career paths and feel recognized for their contributions. Therefore, the transformational leader does not merely manage output but acts as a mentor and coach, empowering these young employees and making them feel valued as integral parts of the organization's journey. This profound sense of purpose, combined with opportunities

for growth and a supportive mentoring relationship, creates a powerful psychological contract that ignites their intrinsic motivation and fosters a deep sense of loyalty and engagement (Bernier, 2015).

This result aligns with the core characteristics of Generation Z as a cohort that seeks purpose and meaning in their work, a trait largely shaped by their formative years occurring against a backdrop of global economic uncertainty, climate concerns, and pervasive social activism. Unlike the transactional mindset that often prioritized financial security and hierarchical advancement, this generation's desire for meaningful contribution transcends the paycheck; they are motivated by roles that allow them to feel they are part of a solution and are making a tangible, positive impact on their community or the world at large. A leadership style that fails to connect daily tasks to this broader purpose is perceived as hollow and fails to engage their deepest levels of motivation and loyalty. This fundamental need for meaningful work is not a peripheral preference but a central pillar of their professional identity, making them more likely to disengage from or even leave organizations whose vision they cannot personally endorse.

Consequently, leaders who can authentically articulate a compelling company mission and demonstrate how each team member's efforts contribute to that larger picture are uniquely positioned to harness the passion, creativity, and dedication that Generation Z is eager to offer, transforming their role from a mere manager of tasks into a curator of purpose and a catalyst for meaningful engagement. Transformational leaders, who inspire and motivate through a compelling vision, encourage innovation, and provide intellectual stimulation, directly cater to Gen Z's desire for a job that is more than just a paycheck. This leadership style makes them feel like valued contributors to a larger mission, thereby fueling their intrinsic motivation. Similarly, the strong positive effect of democratic leadership confirms Gen Z's preference for an collaborative and inclusive work culture. Having grown up in an era of social media and peer-based interaction, they expect their voices to be heard and their opinions to be considered in decision-making processes. A democratic leader who fosters participation makes them feel respected and empowered, which significantly enhances their engagement and commitment (Berkup, 2015).

The weak positive correlation with transactional leadership presents a more nuanced picture. While clear structures and contingent rewards (a hallmark of transactional leadership) do provide a baseline level of motivation, they are insufficient on their own. This suggests that for Generation Z, a leader who merely clarifies expectations and offers rewards for performance meets the basic requirements but does not inspire the high levels of engagement and discretionary effort that organizations seek. It is a foundational, but not a transformative, approach. Perhaps the most critical finding for modern managers is the significant demotivating effect of laissez-faire leadership. This style, characterized by a general absence of leadership, a hands-off approach, and a failure to provide timely feedback or clear direction, proves to be profoundly detrimental when managing Generation Z employees. The negative impact stems from a fundamental mismatch between the behaviors of a laissez-faire leader and the core needs of a generation that is simultaneously highly independent yet new to the professional world. While Gen Z values autonomy, they interpret it as the freedom to execute tasks within a well-defined framework, not as a complete abandonment by their manager. This leadership vacuum creates an environment of ambiguity and neglect, where expectations are unclear, goals are nebulous, and support is perceived as unavailable. For employees at the beginning of their careers, this lack of structure and guidance is not liberating but rather anxiety-inducing, leading to

confusion about priorities and a deep-seated insecurity about their performance and career trajectory within the organization (Bentler, 2014).

This neglect directly contradicts Gen Z's upbringing in a digitally connected world, which has conditioned them to expect constant feedback loops and interactive communication. The silence from a disengaged manager is interpreted not as trust, but as indifference, making employees feel undervalued and invisible. Consequently, what might be intended as delegation of trust is perceived as a lack of interest and professional neglect. This feeling of being unsupported swiftly erodes their intrinsic motivation and psychological safety, leading to a state of disengagement where discretionary effort is withdrawn. Over time, this environment becomes a primary driver of turnover, as demotivated Gen Z employees, who highly prioritize their mental well-being and a positive work culture, will actively seek an environment with more supportive and involved leadership. Therefore, the laissez-faire approach is not merely ineffective; it actively corrodes the foundation of engagement and loyalty, making it a critical risk factor for talent retention in the modern workplace (Bass, 2008). The hands-off, absent approach characterized by this style is fundamentally at odds with what Generation Z employees need and want. As newcomers to the professional world, they crave guidance, regular feedback, and a sense of connection with their supervisor. A laissez-faire leader, by failing to provide direction, support, and constructive input, creates an environment of ambiguity and neglect. This not only fails to motivate but actively leads to disengagement, frustration, and a higher likelihood of turnover, confirming that for Gen Z, a neglectful leader is worse than an authoritarian one.

CONCLUSION

This study conclusively demonstrates that leadership style is a paramount determinant of work motivation for Generation Z in the modern workplace. The empirical evidence confirms a direct and substantial relationship, with transformational and democratic leadership styles emerging as the most effective catalysts for fostering high levels of engagement and motivation among these employees. These styles resonate deeply with Gen Z's intrinsic values, fulfilling their need for purposeful work, intellectual challenge, and a collaborative, inclusive environment where their voices are heard. Conversely, the findings reveal that a laissez-faire leadership approach has a significantly detrimental effect, actively eroding motivation by creating a vacuum of guidance and support that contradicts this generation's expectation for regular feedback and clear direction. While transactional leadership can provide a basic framework for performance, it is insufficient on its own to inspire the full potential and discretionary effort of Gen Z employees.

The theoretical implication of this research is a clear reinforcement of contemporary leadership theories, such as transformational and servant leadership, within the context of a multigenerational workforce. It underscores the necessity of moving beyond one-size-fits-all leadership models. On a practical level, this study serves as a critical call to action for organizations and leaders. To successfully attract, retain, and motivate Generation Z, a deliberate shift in leadership development is imperative. Companies must invest in training managers to become more visionary, empathetic, and participatory coaches rather than detached authorities. By aligning leadership practices with the specific motivational drivers of this new generation—namely, purpose, collaboration, and continuous feedback—organizations can build a more engaged, productive, and future-ready workforce, thereby securing a significant competitive advantage in the evolving landscape of work.

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