

LEADERSHIP IN AN INTERGENERATIONAL GAP – A STUDY OF MANAGERS’ VIEWS OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP OF GENERATION Z EMPLOYEES

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Abstract: *The entry of Generation Z into the work cycle sets many new questions for managers especially in light of various generational characteristics, post-COVID-19 effect adds the challenge of labor turnover and difficulties retaining staff. In the past management and leadership were a key factor affecting employees, and this will continue, but what are Generation Z employees looking for? This article presents qualitative research conducted in Israel with high-tech company managers dealing with a generation of employees who are less committed to organizations and more to themselves leading to new values in the world of work. The research aims to map management and leadership skills and styles expected to influence employees and connect them to a manager and organization. The research revealed that managers identified six core skills required to create leadership for Generation Z: authenticity, training ability, flexibility and change, emotional intelligence, interpersonal communication, and ability to provide ongoing feedback. These research findings provide a thinking infrastructure about the world of leadership in generational change and an understanding that the intergenerational gap leads to changing management and leadership style.*

Keywords: *Generation Z, leadership, management, High-tech managers in Israel, world of work*

Introduction

The post COVID-19 era in the world of work has set new challenges for managers and organizations especially in light of employees’ behavioral changes with an emphasis on younger employees from Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Labor turnover alongside the scarcity of workers in many fields have become a core challenge (Reiser, 2022). A Microsoft report on working trends in 2022 revealed that 58% of Generation Z employees are considering changing work in the coming year, compared to 43% of employees from previous generations (Moot, 2022). One of the ways in which organizations today operated to cope with work turnover is the development of managers in organizations with an understanding that managers’ leadership and behavior in the past which may continue to be an important factor in the world of work in the future, affecting employees and leading to organizational outcomes (Yukl, Mahsud, Prussia & Hassan, 2019). In the contemporary world of work, managers deal with four generations of employees (baby boomers, generations X, Y, Z) under one roof with each having different expectations of their managers, each with different needs and motivating factors. Intergenerational diversity indeed contributes to organizations in a range of areas such as creativity, but also leads to conflicts requiring managers to adapt their management style to generational and employee characteristics. The entry of Generation Z increases this challenge and has recently been explored from various angles and in different countries

(Kirchmayer & Fratricová, 2020; McCrindle & Fell, 2020; Racolța-Paina & Irini, 2021). This article is based on qualitative research conducted in the Israeli high-tech industry, which constitutes 10% of the labor market in Israel and recruits thousands of young employees from Generation Z every year (Israel Innovation Authority, 2021). This generation's characteristics alongside rapid employee turnover poses many questions for high-tech industry managers with regard to management skills, management and leadership style which will allow to strengthen commitment and retain employees. The purpose of this article is to present findings from a qualitative research of managers' perceptions of management style and leadership in front of generation Z, the research is based on interviews with managers and presents a number of management skills required to create engagement and commitment, the article includes a brief literature review on the characteristics of generation Z and a review on intergenerational leadership, the qualitative research methods, key findings collected from the analysis of the interviews as well as discussion and conclusions from the research.

Literature Review

Generation Z Employee Characteristics

Although Generation Z has entered the work cycle only in recent years, many studies have categorized the work qualities of this generation compared to previous generations, since this generation grew up in the technological world and is very confident with technology and its integration into the world of work, and their choices are different from those of previous working generations and challenge managers and human resource managers (Lanier, 2017; Singh, 2014; Singh & Dangmei, 2016). This generation matures late and behaves so in their personal and working lives (Twenge, 2017), seeks flexibility, creativity and a desire to experience a range of jobs (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Work life balance led by Generation Y continues to be as important for Generation Z employees (Lanier, 2017; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010) alongside the importance of work environment, relationships and motivation Generation Z employees seek (Kirchmayer & Fratricová, 2020). Generation Z seeks personal growth in their workplace and require ongoing feedback (Lev, 2022), in fact they have led to changes in the psychological contract between managers and employees in everything related to employees' place and development in organizations (Schroth, 2019). Their motivational factors at work and different from previous generations, and are more intrinsic than previous generations (Mahmoud, Fuxman, Mohr, Reisel, & Grigoriou, 2020). Racolța-Paina and Irini's (2021) study in Romania showed a generation of employees looking for transparency and innovation in the world of work. Generation Z employees are much more honest in their approach and despite their lack of employment experience, they expect good salaries and very good to unrealistic conditions (Racolța-Paina & Irini, 2021).

In his research Chillakuri (2020) clarified the intergenerational gap in the world of work and identified six essential variables enabling faster entry of Generation Z into organizations and affecting their success: non-repetitive meaningful work, performance management accompanied by immediate feedback, work home balance, personal connection alongside being able to work digitally with managers, organizational and big picture understanding as well as personal learning and development (Chillakuri, 2020).

The COVID-19 period sharpened the intergenerational gap in the world of work, studies conducted during this period indicated that in this time of uncertainty the need for stability and security in Generation X was highlighted in contrast to Generation Z that sees little importance in this value, but for whom pleasure from work is extremely important ((Mahmoud, Reisel, Fuxman, & Mohr, 2021). Working from home for a protracted period of time is difficult for Generation Z who feel less productive when only distance working, hybrid working is a perfect solution for this generation, which needs social interaction at work (McCrinkle & Fell, 2020). A Linked-in survey published in May 2022 in the U.S.A. showed that 70% of Generation Z employees experienced career awakening symptoms following COVID-19, were bored or wanted to change jobs, 33% had already decided to seek other work or a new field, 30% were looking to develop or change their role within their organizations (Moot, 2022). In summary, Generation Z in the world of work constitutes a new challenge for managers, but also brings opportunities for organizations.

Intergenerational leadership – the concept of leadership had been thoroughly examined and has many definitions. Kotter (1990) defined leadership as the ability to create change, he saw management and leadership as two separate complementary components (Kotter, 1990). Yukl (2012) argued that fundamentally leadership in organizations is in fact the effect of personal and collective efforts to achieve a common aim (Yukl, 2012). Leadership has the ability to improve team performance in an organization. Several studies have presented the intergenerational differences in perceptions of the employees' assessment of leadership in the world of work (Bako, 2018; Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007), which is greatly influenced by generational qualities, their leading values and qualities and behaviors for which employees look in managers. The literature and research have tended to examine the topic of leadership extensively, but is there also an intergenerational gap in employees' need for management and leadership style? Professional literature is divided about this and points to a number of approaches. Differences between generational characteristics and existing organizational conflicts, employees' experiences and values lead to the need for different intergenerational leadership (Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007; Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). In Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown's (2007) study, they found an intergenerational difference in assessing leadership qualities, the baby boomer generation (1945-1965) sought wise, persuasive and diplomatic leaders with political abilities, experience and long-term views, credibility was the supreme quality looked for in leaders. Generation X (1965-1980) sought optimistic, persuasive and experienced leadership capable of seeing the broader picture. This generation looked for leaders focused on listening, encouragement and feedback. Generation Y (1980-1995) sought loyal, creative leaders who showed caring and paid attention to employees personally. Bako (2018) identified an intergenerational gap in views of intergenerational leadership, according to which Generation Z was different from previous generations in its expectation of risk taking leadership, willing to sacrifice, awakening conflicts and encouraging diversity. Laudert (2018) maintained that Generation Z, in light of its characteristics, expected authentic and adaptive leadership capable of inclusivity. Petrucci and Rivera (2018) presented the need for digital leadership in light of intergenerational changes and employees becoming more technological, they viewed the influence of Generation Z on developing leadership and the need for managers to motivate employees to connect with them, provide feedback digitally as part of new leadership expected of managers (Petrucci & Rivera, 2018).

Another approach argued not to classify leadership according to intergenerational gap and generational thinking but according to life expectancy, developmental perspective because it better comprehends dynamics related to age, relevance to leadership, followers and leadership development (Rudolph, Rauvola & Zacher, 2018). Research about Generation Z's own management ability and leadership in the VUCA era conducted in India taught much about the intergenerational gap in management and leadership. Hameed and Sharma's (2020) research found that Generation Z had a gap in management abilities in the VUCA reality, particularly in global leadership despite characteristics of impulsivity and assertiveness. This generation with problems in a range of qualities will find it difficult to function in complexity and will prefer to be led than lead (Hameed & Sharma, 2020).

Methods

This study was conducted using qualitative methodology, a research approach that is not considered science seeking to expose legitimization, but science looking for meaning and allowing researchers to observe, understand and interpret human behavior to produce new knowledge (Tzabar-Ben Yehoshua, 2016). It is an approach based on people's stories, which researchers help them tell, reveal and to which they present meanings. Spoken and written words are a key means of qualitative research (Shkedi, 2003). The qualitative research stages were based on Creswell's stage approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative methodology was chosen out of a desire to understand managers' views of management and leadership of the younger generation through open conversations and without adhering to prescribed criteria or measures.

Research Aim and Methodology

To identify management and leadership skills needed in working with Generation Z employees. This study employed a purposeful sample focusing on choosing participants best representing the population from which it was chosen that can teach us about the examined phenomenon (Mason, 1996). Interviewees were chosen after criteria were defined for participants: high-tech management, managerial seniority, managing employees from a range of generations including Generation Z. In addition, Shkedi (2014) argued that interviewees require other characteristics that make them suitable for research needs: ability to express themselves, sensitive to others, comfortable with being questioned, capable of separating their thoughts and experiences and ability to devote the time needed for research (Shkedi, 2014). The research population chosen were managers from Israeli high-tech companies understanding that they have coped with the broad entry of young employees into this industry and have experienced labor turnover and low employee commitment to their organizations. 15 participants from the field of high-tech representing small and medium-sized companies as well as middle managers from large and even international companies, human resource managers from high-tech companies. All participants came from a management background and managed employees from different generations, which enabled them to compare intergenerational gaps.

Two tools were used to collect data in this study: (1) a research diary documenting the researcher's thoughts, ideas and feelings throughout the process from the stage of planning the research and choosing research tools, through data collection and analysis stages (Bloor & Wood), 2011. (2) semi-structured interviews adhering to a list of fixed

order questions to ensure that requirements were identical for all interviewees. In contrast to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide more opportunities for participants to elaborate and encourage them to include clarifications and address additional issues (Bryman, 2016; Fontana & Frey, 2005).

For research purposes, a 22 items questionnaire was chosen, validated by four experts and tested with a small pilot. Interviews were conducted between September 2021 and January 2022. Because of COVID-19, all interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom, all participants gave informed consent, which was also recorded. Data was analyzed in a number of stages including collecting recorded interviews and the researcher's diary, transcription of interviews from recordings and validation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), reading data and identifying key characteristics (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), mapping and analyzing words that became categories (Rallis & Rossman, 2012) by focusing on key words emphasizing intergeneration management and leadership in the world of work. Categories were also partially based on theoretical views (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and finally themes addressing management and leadership were analyzed (Flick 1998). Findings were arranged in tables and the frequency of chosen issues analyzed.

Research Findings

Six core components emerged from category analysis in the field of management and leadership, which managers from generations X and Y identified as most important in their work with Generation Z employees:

Authentic leadership – managers identified a strong need among Generation Z employees for authentic leadership based on managers' ability to engender trust with employees, leadership based on values of personal example, transparency, reliability honesty and integrity. *"I feel that young employees in my company look in leadership for transparency, honesty and integrity, you cannot sell them stories"*, stated interviewee 11, a development manager in a large high-tech company. This behavior is also seen in managers' ability to connect employees to organizational aims through authenticity. *"A manager who creates authenticity leads and stirs his employees to identify with organizational aims"*, stated interviewee 3, a human resource manager in a high-tech company. Managers presented Generation Z employees as those whose personal interests are paramount and there is a real difficulty connecting them to organizational aims. Authentic leadership is a key tool in attaching employees to organizational goals and commitment, *"Defining aims and including employees who integrate personal with organizational values, leads to them achieving targets on their own"* stated interview 13.

Manager as coach – managers raised this component in light of the need they identified among Generation Z employees for rapid personal and professional development within a company. Managers understood that Generation Z employees will not remain over time in an organization, but as long as they feel as they are developing personally and professionally they will remain. The high-tech world is highly noticeable for its dynamism and work turnovers and this study highlighted managers' understanding of the importance of the ability to be personal and professional development coaches in the management and leadership of the younger generation, *"An employee, in my opinion, expects to learn from the manager, he seeks professional, educating and developing authority, a professional figure"* was a statement made by interviewee 4, a human resource manager in a large high-

tech company. Another statement from a group manager in a high-tech company (interviewee 1) emphasized the understanding of what Generation Z employees seek, “*A manager is a means of development for an employee*” and therefore, managers understand the need for a coaching approach combining professional coaching alongside developing employee capabilities, encouraging doing and providing a sense of constant development in a company.

Flexibility and change – the VUCA era reflecting a world of many rapid changes and uncertainty closely connects to the behavior of Generation Z employees, therefore an adaptive management method works well with employees from this generation, in contrast to traditional management. Managers identified the need for a new type of management leading to the ability to change rapidly, managers’ ability to be flexible, accept frequent changes and react quickly. Technological tools in high-tech also create change, work has moved from management in mails to faster and more immediate task management systems such as: Jira and Slack. Managers maintained that Generation Z employees’ technological conduct was also influential and encouraged the need to be flexible and fast. “*They work very fast, which also affects the manager*”, said interviewee 11, a development manager. In the COVID-19 era, with the transition to home working, managers had to change their management patterns, flexibility added another dimension to management style, distance management, activating young employees, coaching and controlling tasks, “*When we worked in offices it was easy to micromanage, it is much more difficult in home working and therefore how we manage changed*”, stated interviewee 8, a development manager in a start-up company.

Interpersonal communication – managers viewed interpersonal communication as a key to connecting young employees, the digital era in which most communication passed through digital channels such as emails and WhatsApp messages, creating a distance between managers and employees and therefore interpersonal communication became more important. “*High-tech managers are less professional in communication and do not know how to bridge the gap*”, stated interviewee 7, a manager in a large high-tech company. His statement clarified the gap existing today in the field of management in high-tech industry where managers are very professional but experience difficulties establishing good communication with employees. In managers opinion, COVID-19 increased the gap because of an absence of social encounters, Zoom did not fully bridge the need to establish good communication and as evidence of this is the statement of a development manager that employees recruited during COVID-19 did not connect well to managers and teams for a long time mainly because of an absence of interpersonal encounters. Managers saw this skill as a key tool to attach Generation Z mainly the ability to pay attention to needs, “*They expect me to pay attention and be available to them*”, said interviewee 12, head of a development team in a start-up company.

Emotional intelligence – the need to see employees, relate to them, show empathy and connect to them is more powerful when referring to Generation Z. Generational characteristics such as assertiveness, looking at themselves and need to be at the center of things led managers in this study to float emotional intelligence skills as critical to successfully working with Generation Z. “*Successful managers are people’s people*”, interviewee 1, a group manager in a large high-tech company said, and the ability to connect with employees is important to every employee from every generation but so much more so with Generation Z. This generation’s uniqueness stood out in what interviewee 10,

managing director of a small cyber company said, *“No one wants a tough manager, but Generation Z looks for a manager who is a friend who knows how to laugh and connect”*. The need for a connection and to see managers as friends has increased in comparison to previous generations. Generation Z seeks attention and caring from managers. *“It is very important for me to be attentive and caring”*, said Interviewee 12. These are employees who seek a personal relationships. *“I show the importance and need to be patient especially with young employees”*, stated interviewee 9, a development manager at a high-tech company, who highlighted the need to integrate patience with employees precisely in a highly dynamic, fast and impatient reality where the resource of time is so dear in management work.

Give ongoing feedback – managers viewed the issue of feedback as an important management and leadership skills, which must be developed in working with the younger generation. *“Managers who know how to give feedback are better, good feedback helps grow people”* stated interviewee 13, a human resource manager. Employees' need for feedback has changed both because of Generation Z characteristics and the rate at which activities occur and therefore, Generation Z employees expect different feedback both in its format and frequency. *“Feedback is super important for them but reading from a sheet of paper won't work”*, said interviewee 2, a group manager in a high-tech company who raised the importance of integrating feedback into daily activities and using a range of tools starting with a short phone message or email to a personal conversation about performance. Managers saw a generation of employees seeking immediate, here and now reactions. *“Always expecting warm feedback”*, said interviewee 11, a development manager. This approach requires managers to adapt as they were used to only providing arranged and periodic feedback. Feedback was seen as part of managers' coaching and accompanying process with employees, *“Part of holding an employee's hand is pointed feedback”* stated interviewee 12, head of a development team.

Managers feared feedback because it immediately produces an expectation among employees for salary rewards. *“Feedback automatically produces for an employees, especially a young one a link to a salary request”*, said interviewee 4, a human resource manager, and therefore it is important to know how carry it out constructively and not in a manner creating salary expectations.

The qualitative research in fact mapped six essential management and leadership components needed to work with Generation Z: authenticity, manager as coach, flexibility and change, interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence, and change to feedback approach to employees.

Discussion

The research findings presented an approach combining a range of management and leadership skills managers need in their work with Generation Z. In a world of rapid change and slightly different generational characteristics, there is no one management model for working with the new generation. Managers have to develop a basket of skills and apply them according to individual employees. Authentic leadership (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, & May, 2004; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008) will probably suit many of the characteristics working with Generation Z. Like other studies concerned with authentic leadership for Generation Z (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014;

Laudert, 2018), this research raised Generation Z's need for morality, integrity, justice and transparency. These needs are added to flexibility and change reflecting management in the VUCA era and coping with uncertainty (Yehezkel, 2020) where managers must react quickly, have technological abilities in face of a highly technological savvy and fast generation and in fact, develop alongside flexibility, digital management as well (Petrucci & Rivera, 2018) combining technology with management and ongoing contact with employees both to manage tasks and adapt them to employees and their use in other actions such as passing on shared information, rapid employee feedback and more. The coaching approach also has an important place as presented by Schroth (2019) where Generation Z was more emotional and needed managers who know how to coach supportively and reinforce them through ongoing feedback and attention to their needs. In the Israeli high-tech, managers understood that employee coaching skills are a complementary layer and important to coaching and employee development skills, which until now focused more on the professional and less the emotional. COVID-19 and the transition to hybrid working have clarified the view that communication with employees, and particularly young employees, requires a different approach than with Generation X and Y employees (McCrinkle & Fell, 2020).

Emotional intelligence as a leadership component (Goleman, 2017) acquired a significant weight in this study. This finding synchronized with Machová, Zsigmond, Lazányi, & Krepszová's (2020) study showing a Generation Z's greater need for emotional intelligence than previous generations. Managers must show greater empathy and develop their social skills with employees, Generation Z seek managers who are friends and not bosses, true leadership and not a work organizer.

The conclusion derived from the research findings is that managers must consolidate a basket of skills to develop management and leadership, show intergenerational intelligence in their work, know how to suitable skills adapted to employees' personal needs. Improving managers' awareness and strengthening their skills are likely to enable a better connection with Generation Z employees, also affect labor turnover and establish organizational commitment. These skills are also important to previous generations, but the characteristics of Generation Z entering the workplace emphasize the need to combine and integrate management skills and adapt their power personally according to both managers' and employees' characteristics.

This study contributes to the understanding of the intergenerational gap and to the creation of a bridge between managers and employees, a practical contribution of the study is the correct training of the managers in organizations to deal with the change that is developing in the world of work.

Research Limitations

This qualitative research explored the views of managers in the field of Israeli high-tech, where managers testify that they blossomed in organizations mainly because of their professional skills and less owing to their management skills. Many viewed management skills as a personal gap needing improvement. The study did not examine employees' views, but only a management perspective and therefore, there is room to add research with employees that will provide a broader picture of management and leadership for Generation Z.

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