



EMPOWERMENT & ENVISIONING

Creating Meaningful Generation Z Leadership Experiences

By

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Hard to define? The word leadership.

A unified definition of leadership eludes even the most ardent scholars.

Authors Brent Ruben, Richard De Lisi and Ralph Gigliotti explored overarching perspectives pertaining to leadership in *A Guide for Leaders in Higher Education: Core Concepts, Competencies, and Tools*:

- Does it refer to the act of leading, or more so to the individual?
- Are some people “natural leaders” while others are not?
- Does a leader need to be enigmatic, outgoing and outspoken?
- Are individuals with advanced degrees better leaders than those with less education?
- Does a title or a formal position make someone a leader?
- Can “one single constellation of leadership knowledge and skills” create a leader who can then lead in any given “setting, situation, and culture”?

These perspectives show how leadership definitions vary and how complex discussions can become.

However, in Ruben’s *What Leaders Need to Know and Do: A Leadership Competencies Scorecard*, he proffers salient points regarding a relatively stable definition of leadership, where leaders attract people, build community, create and sustain culture, manage, influence, pursue purpose, problem-solve and create vision through action and strategy. Through this lens, we can better understand leadership as the “process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal,” as defined by Peter Northouse in *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

Harder to Define: Generation Z

Current students in higher education who are the world’s future workforce, known informally as Generation Z, were born approximately between 1999 and 2015. Arriving on campus beginning in 2016, they comprise 21 percent of the US population, third behind Millennials (25 percent) and Baby Boomers (23 percent), according to the demographics website Knoema. Gen Z characteristics include:

- They are more obese than any other generation and experience higher ADHD diagnoses than preceding generations, with average attention spans falling from 12 to six seconds, report Mark McCrindle and Emily Wolfinger in “The ABC of XYZ: Understanding the Global Generations.”
- Forty-one percent of Gen Z spend three or more hours in front of screens between the end of the school day and bedtime, with 27 percent of their overall time spent on some screen, according to Maggie Jones’ infographic, *Meet Generation Z: Marketing’s Next Big Audience*.
- McCrindle and Wolfinger also point out Gen Z are digital integrators, perceiving life and technology as inseparable. However, they observe technology’s ability to cause distress or harm to self and others.

McCrindle and Wolfinger further explored seven defining Generation Z factors:

- 1. Demographically changed.** They live among an increasingly older population, with parents who gave birth much later in life. Household types are no longer nuclear and include family members and non-family members. They also appear to reach puberty at younger ages compared to Gen X and Millennial populations.
- 2. Generationally cohesive.** They are bound by similarities, including a distaste for materialism, oversaturation and overreliance on technology, as well as a globalized view of society. They will be the most highly educated generation in human history, while having experienced the economic downturn of the late 2000s.
- 3. Digitally integrated.** They are born with technology in hand, which is now seamlessly integrated in their everyday lives. Instead of hailing cabs, they use Uber or Lyft. Instead of leaving home for great take-out, they use smart devices to have food delivered by third parties.
- 4. Globally focused.** They live in an increasingly small world. With incredibly fast, responsive technological advancements, they access the globe

with a few finger taps. Also, proliferation of mass media and social media encourages them to share experiences and popular culture across borders, oceans and societies.

- 5. Visually engaged.** They prefer knowledge acquisition via a screen, be it through an online video or social media update. They’re less likely to read a newspaper, magazine or book, but are much, much more likely to flourish using non-verbal communication, including short video clips, GIFs, emojis and memes.
- 6. Educationally reformed.** They embrace the idea that learning is no longer life-stage dependent but a lifelong endeavor. Returning to school late in life induces little anxiety for them, as job markets evolve with technology. They will actively shy away from the rote memorization exercises of past generations.
- 7. Socially defined.** They are enormously influenced by peer groups and social media platforms. This influence exposes dichotomous beliefs: More fiscally conservative, politically moderate and socially liberal. While Millennials practiced community service, Gen Z champions social justice.

Generational Leadership Preferences

Gen Z understands leadership and leadership development in divergent ways compared to Baby Boomer, Gen X and Millennial cohorts. Broadly speaking, leadership preferences by generation can be described as:

LEADERSHIP PREFERENCES BY GENERATION			
Baby Boomer	Gen X	Millennial	Gen Z
Command & Control	Pragmatism & Practicality	Consensus & Collaboration	Empowerment & Envisioning

For example, Baby Boomer employers flourished in a rigidly hierarchical, 20th century leadership structure that relied on authority and where age, position and organizational charts dictated leadership. The “do as I say” and “without question” mentalities were common, and in the societal and global context of the mid-1900s, military-like authoritarianism was comforting. A leader “points the way from afar” while directing tasks and managing workflow, rather than envisioning goals and managing people.

Gen Z’s leadership approach, on the other hand, focuses on teamwork, mentoring, vision and trust, producing a 21st century leadership model. **Consulting** (asking questions and including the team), **involving** (engaging with the individual and the team, identifying as an equal participant) and **coaching** (fostering a meaningful and influential relationship with team members) work well for Gen Z, many of whom are well educated and have strong, passionate voices, report McCrindle and Wolfinger. These leaders bring out a chorus of opinions, introducing innovation, inspiration and creative problem solving, while avoiding hands-off delegation and imparting unwanted advice.

Gen Z is quick to differentiate between managers and leaders. They report greater success working alongside leaders who “innovate, focus on people and teams, stress people skills and emotional intelligence, and are driven

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by vision, values, and trust,” as opposed to managers, who “administer, focus on policies and procedures, stress technical skills and knowledge acquisition, and are driven by structures, rules, and control” (McCrindle and Wolfinger). This doesn’t mean Gen Z won’t respect managers and will throw off all aspects of the traditional, corporate hierarchy. Gen Z respects authority and is keenly aware of workplace expectations. However, they do expect leaders to listen to ideas and opinions, provide opportunities for growth and innovation, solve problems with originality and creativity, and invite employees into help with decision-making (Seemiller and Grace).

Gen Z Leader Role Models

Who inspires, listens to and understands Gen Z? Seemiller and Grace worked with hundreds of Gen Z members to identify these leadership development trends:

WHO ARE AND AREN'T LEADER ROLE MODELS FOR GEN Z?	
Are	Aren't
Parents	Bosses
Teachers	Religious Leaders
Coaches	Professional Athletes
Peers	Celebrities
Fictional Characters	Political Leaders

Source: “Generation Z Goes to College,” by Corey Seemiller & Meghan Grace

It may shock business leaders to discover Gen Z views Albus Dumbledore as a better leader than their boss. However, it’s crucial to understand that characteristics most admired in fictional characters, such as Harry Potter, Tris Prior and Katniss Everdeen, are realistically attainable: Strength of conviction, inspiration, perseverance, problem-solving through innovation and creativity and selflessness. Gen Z knows these characters aren’t real, but fervently hopes what they represent isn’t fiction.

“Based on their experiences and perceptions,” write Seemiller and Grace, “Generation Z will likely view effective leadership as leveraging the capacities of others, engaging in complex thinking and innovative problem-solving, utilizing a collaborative and interdependent approach, communicating effectively, being adaptable, guiding others to greatness, being optimistic, persevering through adversity, and employing honesty and altruism.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Zachary N. Clark is director of Student Activities and Assessment at **Indiana University of Pennsylvania**, where he earned a master’s degree in student affairs in higher education. He previously earned a bachelor’s degree in history education from Saint Vincent College (PA). In addition to working in student affairs, he has also served as a mental health professional and has been honored for community service. He is a member of the National Association for Campus Activities’ Research and Scholarship Group.

OBSERVATIONS FROM PRE-PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

While observing and interacting with Gen Z on campus, student affairs staff and faculty have opportunities to more fully understand this generation’s capacity for leadership development and more fully prepare them for the workforce. While outlining their potential strengths in the workplace, faculty and staff must also prepare for potential weaknesses, including (most prominently) a soft skills development gap. Research from the National Association of Colleges and Employers echoes this, noting Gen Z continues to struggle with communication and listening, teamwork or team-think skills, decision-making strategies, problem-solving and conflict management and resolution.

Anecdotally, through conversations with students, it seems Gen Z considers pre-professional experiences such as club/organization involvement, internships/practicums and field experiences as vital leadership development components. They value these experiences as opportunities to build upon strengths while working on growth areas, including soft skills. Gen Z learns in a very hands-on way how to lead. —Zachary N. Clark