

Leading with Meaning the Young Employees in Today's Organizations – A Narrative Literature Review on Leadership Theory and Generation Z in the Workplace

Cristina POPESCU (RÂMBU)

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
30A Expozitiei Blvd., 012104 Bucharest, Romania
cpopescu.ro@gmail.com

DOI: 10.25019/STR/2025.025

Abstract

The research aims to explore how leadership theory evolved from classical and behavioral approaches to transformational, servant, and spiritual leadership paradigms and how Generation Z is described in the current workplace context. The research is based on the organizational leadership literature and generational studies, with a focus on Generation Z. The articles were identified through searches in Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Reports from Deloitte, McKinsey, and the Romanian National Institute of Statistics were included to contextualize workforce and generational trends. Using a narrative review methodology, articles were screened for theoretical relevance to leadership and Generation Z in the organizational environment. From this perspective, the study's limitation is that it does not provide the depth of a systematic literature review or an analysis based on statistical aggregation. The main findings showed that, on one hand, Generation Z is inclined towards values and spiritual orientation, having the tendency to analyse and legitimize a leader's actions through a spiritual lens, connected to meaning, and on the other hand, there is a theoretical gap in connecting the leader's values and their role to the professional development of younger employees – inspite the considerable theoretical contributions in the field of leadership, there is limited scholarship connecting contemporary leadership paradigms with Generation Z workforce expectations. The paper's contribution is to lay the foundations for future research exploring the direct link between a leader's values, including spiritual ones, and their contribution to the professional development of the new employee generation.

Keywords

Generation Z; Leadership Styles; Intergenerational Work Relations; Management; Personal Values; Spirituality In Leadership; Team.

Introduction

Multigenerational team leaders have existed throughout history since the emergence of the first forms of human organization; personal values and spiritual orientation have always played an essential role in the outcomes of actions, whether we look at leaders of armies, countries, or companies. Studies in management and leadership are numerous and increasingly research the role of personal values, meaning, and intrinsic motivation as elements of transformational leadership (Fry, 2003), connected to the field of generational analysis from an organizational perspective (Gamaliel, 2023).

The current state of the field, although rich in research, allows a special attention to how the organization continues to support generations X and Y in developing a leadership style adapted to representatives of Z, efficient and relevant, based on meaning and authenticity. The author's approach is based on two generally observable realities: on one hand, with the entry of generation Z into the workforce, organizations are practically confronted with four generations simultaneously, each with its own perception of the work-value relationship, with different learning styles, beliefs and communication styles (Barhate & Dirani, 2021), and on the other hand unlike previous generations of young people entering the labor market and organizational rigor, Generation Z is faced with a much faster and more profound pace of change accentuated by social, economic or political developments, all under the huge influence of the digital universe, a space of everyone and no one, in which the distinction between real and virtual is deeply blurred, and everyday experiences take place in a

completely different reality than the one that humanity has known over thousands of years (Levin & Mamlok, 2021).

Generation Z, also known as the snowflake generation, is the youngest and most subject to technological advances (Berkup, 2014), strongly influenced by events occurring at an accelerated pace and by the almost constant, immediate connection to the digital world. Snowflakes are the children of ultra-projective parents, less resistant to trials, much more sensitive and impatient (Zavodna, 2022). In this context, the author believes that Generation Z needs the presence of leadership models with strong values and spiritual orientation, who will guide them towards an analysis of reality on foundations firmly anchored in principles and values. In the same sense, it is necessary that the transfer of values and meaning from leader to employee be understood and received constructively, and that the intergenerational gap no longer act as a barrier or a conflicting differentiator, but as a lever for healthy, solid growth of people and, therefore, of organizations.

In regards to the application of the future findings, the research aims to describe the current established literature in leadership and Generation Z characteristics in the workplace, opening the possibility of future research on how the personal values of a leader (such as humbleness, consistency, generosity, honesty) influence the perception and behavior of young employees Z, favoring their intrinsic motivation and the way they relate to professional development and fulfillment.

Literature review

Overview of leadership

Humanity, in its various organizational systems, has known forms of leadership and leaders who stood out, positively or negatively, through qualities or, on the contrary, through reprehensible deeds, opening the way for the study of what would later become a field of social sciences as relevant to society as a whole, as much debated and researched. Leadership is a field that has not yet received a unanimously accepted definition or, moreover, which does not provide a universal approach, in this case, for what constitutes an effective leader (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). In general, we can say that most definitions describe leadership as a process, so it is based on a clear intention, in this case, to exert influence on people to lead a group or organization (Yukl & Gardner, 2020, p. 41).

The first writings that open the way to research have their roots in the 19th century (Figure 1) – Thomas Carlyle studies the lives and behaviors of historical figures such as Martin Luther, Napoleon, Alexander the Great or even Shakespeare and Dante, as relevant figures in capturing the realities of their times inspiring and creating connections within generations, qualities seen as valuable for a leader (Halaychik, 2016).

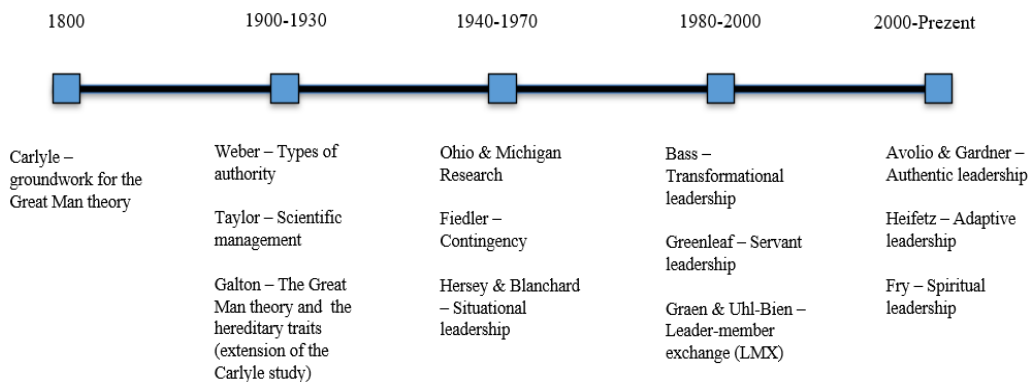


Figure 1. Influential thinkers in the study of leadership

Source: the author based on the literature review

Carlyle's work sets the tone for the beginning of the in-depth study of the field, more precisely at the beginning of the 20th century, when Galton, among other researchers, laid the foundations of the "Great Man Theory" from which, later, the "Trait Theory" developed, according to which successful leaders possess certain innate qualities, the idea being generally accepted, at that time, that they could be attributed more to men, especially from a military perspective (Madanchian et al., 2016). Max Weber and Frederick W. Taylor laid the foundations of scientific management, respectively (Zufelde & Farzullayev, 2025). Later, researchers noted that context also plays an essential role in leadership (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). Thus, contingency and situational theories emerged (Hunt et al., 2019), highlighting that leadership effectiveness depends on context, with the theorists being Fred Fiedler (1967) and Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (1969), respectively. The transactional leadership founded by James MacGregor Burns (1978) evolved, with the help of Bernard Bass's research, into transformational leadership, in which the responsibility for leadership lies equally on the shoulders of the leader and the employee, with change and adaptability as essential characteristics (Hunt et al., 2019).

Developed from transformational leadership, a new research direction appeared as an answer to the need of organizations, through leaders and employees, to be anchored in values, spirituality, meaning, ethics or sustainability: servant leadership, theorized by Robert Greenleaf, in the early 1990s and later taken up by Larry Spears, in the 2000s, authentic leadership described by Avolio and Gardner in the early 2000s, adaptive leadership by Robert Heifetz or spiritual leadership advanced by Louis Fry, based on values and spirituality. We can therefore note the connection between these fresh approaches to leadership, inclined towards values and spiritual orientation, and the tendency of Generation Z to analyze and legitimize a leader's actions through a spiritual lens, connected to meaning. Leadership based on values and meaning can constitute an answer in the dialogue with Generation Z, with work meaning being, for 89% of Z respondents in the Deloitte study (2025), an essential element for satisfaction and well-being.

Leadership, personal values, and spiritual orientation for Generation Z

The concept of generation was first studied systematically in the early 1990s, when William Strauss and Neil Howe defined it as "the totality of people born at the same time, within an interval of approximately 20 years" (Raiu, 2021). Another definition highlighted by Berkup (2014) refers to individuals who belong to the same age group and have lived, or will live, similar experiences that will influence their lives. For the temporal delimitation of generations, this paper proposes the model accepted and advanced by Raiu (2021), presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Generational model

<i>Generation</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Age</i>
Silent Generation	1928-1945	80-97 y.o.
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	61-79 y.o.
X	1965-1980	45-60 y.o.
Y	1981-1996	29-44 y.o.
Z	1997-2012	13-28 y.o.
Alpha	2013-present	12 y.o.

Source: Raiu, 2021, updated for 2025

In today's organizations, characterized by rapid change, globalization, and generational diversity, leadership combines the process of command with that of co-creation with Generation Z, thus becoming necessary for leaders to demonstrate not only cognitive (analysis, strategy), but also emotional (emotional intelligence, empathy) and value-based (authenticity, ethics, spiritual orientation) competencies. Values represent what is important to each person throughout life, being "a central component of self and personality" that underlies behaviors and attitudes (Schwarz, 2012). The new generational wave, paying attention to the personal values of their leaders, requires adaptation and reinvention on a spiritual foundation. Authors Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton emphasize that, since

the end of the 20th century (1999), spirituality has become, from a management and organizational leadership perspective, the ultimate competitive advantage (Fry, 2003). In the same way, Eisler and Montuori (2003, pp. 46-56) note that we are going through an era in which it is obvious that the current business model is dysfunctional (economically, socially, or from an environmental perspective) and that spirituality in the workplace can offer an opportunity for change, but also remains a challenge.

Dehaghi et al. (2012) and Fajar et al. (2024) concluded that employees who encounter spiritual values at work feel more attached to the company and are more loyal, thus suggesting a direct link between spirituality and commitment. A similar conclusion is reached by Robert W. Kolodinsky et al. (2008), who state that organizational spirituality and job involvement are positively related. Moreover, in its 2023 report, McKinsey shows that 25% of young Gen Z respondents reported relying on faith and spirituality in difficult mental health situations, which builds on the generation's openness to a spiritual approach in the professional environment. In parallel, the same report highlights that several Generation Z representatives are dissatisfied with their chosen careers, suggesting that a capable leader, endowed with professional, intellectual, and spiritual qualities, may have a greater success rate in guiding young Generation Z both professionally and spiritually. As for leadership style, Fuchs et al. (2024) suggest that young employees seek mentors rather than authoritarian figures; however, sometimes they appreciate authority in a constantly VUCA world.

At the same time, Bateh (2019) concludes that it may be impossible to define a style suitable for Generation Z and that the leader should rather be able to juggle between Z representatives with various traits, values, and skills. In fact, only a few leaders use a single style; rather, they choose according to the circumstances, even if they naturally prefer a certain style (Biloa, 2023). In support of the need for adaptation and change, Raiu (2021) emphasizes that, despite generational homogeneity, there are still differences that, if recognized, can help managers build relationships and motivations aligned with the needs of each generation. The multigenerational reality in today's companies (including at the level of team management mix - experienced leaders lead heterogeneous teams in terms of age and young graduates lead seniors) requires, more than ever, a deep understanding of different values and perspectives, with today's workplace emphasizing mentality, not age (McCrindle, 2018, pp. 149-150).

In terms of human resources efforts, organizations increasingly face challenges in attracting, motivating, and retaining employees from Generations X, Y, and Z. According to McKinsey's Human Resources Monitoring Report for Europe (2025), key issues include high turnover during the work trial period (18%), limited integration of learning and performance processes, and an underdeveloped focus on employee experience (20% unsatisfied with the current job while only 7% having a certain plan to change the job) – factors that may contribute to the quiet quitting phenomenon. These findings highlight a shift in workplace expectations, particularly among Generation Z, characterized by openness to change, a need for immediate feedback, and a preference for digital learning, but also by a lower tolerance for criticism, unjustified high self-esteem, and high expectations for a career development plan (Maioli, 2016). Generation Z tends to lose interest quickly, shows a limited attention span, prefers learning through the Internet rather than from books, and often displays an elevated, sometimes unjustified, level of self-confidence.

Their expectations from the employers are clear: not only stability and salary, but also a well-defined career development plan (Maioli, 2016). It is worth noting the Generation Z preference for working for companies with strong moral values and ethics; thus, company culture may serve as an attraction for the younger generation (Leslie et al., 2021). In Romania, 2024 data from the National Institute of Statistics show that employment is highest among university graduates (90%), yet over 60% of unemployed young adults aged 25–34 have never worked. Prior studies (Raiu, 2021; Dolot, 2018) further indicate that while Generation Z values work, a lack of fulfillment can quickly lead to disengagement. Also, Generation Z expects rapid career advancement without commitment or effort, and struggles to accept a step-by-step approach. At the same time, Iorgulescu (2016) concluded in her study on Generation Z and the perception of work that young people need constant development and a good relationship with their superiors, who should serve as their mentors.

Methodology

This research proposes a narrative literature review methodology with the main objective of exploring leadership theory, personal values, spirituality, and generational characteristics – particularly Generation Z. The study also requires interconnecting studies on various subjects, as described before. From this angle, the narrative approach is considered viable (Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

The central research questions of the study are:

- RQ1: How has leadership theory evolved from classical and behavioral approaches to transformational, servant, and spiritual leadership paradigms?
- RQ2: How is Generation Z described in the literature in terms of workplace expectations and motivational drivers?

The literature selection process followed a search strategy to identify seminal works and recent empirical contributions relevant to the study's objective. The articles were identified through searches of major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Additionally, reports issued by institutions and consultancy agencies were included to contextualize workforce and generational trends, such as those from Deloitte, McKinsey, and the National Institute of Statistics in Romania.

The search process combined leadership, generational, and spirituality constructs, for example:

- “Leadership theory evolution”
- “Spiritual leadership”
- “Workplace spirituality and performance”
- “Generation Z workforce characteristics”
- “Intergenerational leadership”
- “Values-based leadership”
- “Gen Z career aspirations”

Regarding the inclusion criteria, the resulting corpus was based on open-source articles published in major journals in English starting in 2003. Particular attention was given to intersections of leadership style, spiritual and value orientations, and Generation Z expectations. Non-academic articles, studies without relevance to leadership, values, spirituality, or Generation Z, and paid sources were excluded.

Results and discussion

Every attempt to research and theorize the field of leadership, from the 19th century to today, has encountered the difficulty of exhaustively encompassing all the aspects necessary for effective, constructive leadership within the organization and among its people. Starting with the “Great Man Theory”, with its tendency to highlight historical figures as the only sources of leadership, and reaching the beginning of the 21st century to the theory of the servant leader, for example, what can be observed is that the field is in continuous development and that each theory has its own contribution to the field, even if it is the product of the era in which it was born (Hunt et al., 2019). The study shows that above historical contexts, personal traits or behaviors, the basis of any current or future leader is, first and foremost, his human quality, in other words that set of immutable values, which through their strength and verticality, pass the test of time, context, situation, conditions, and which, being intrinsically linked to man, can only be closely linked to spirituality.

Beyond the research universe of the field or the lexical definitions of the words "leader" and "leadership", we can admit that today the field of leadership abounds in theories such as those mentioned above - the leader as a servant, authentic, transformational or ethical leadership (Hunt et al., 2019) and that it is almost impossible to define, from a theoretical point of view or on an empirical basis, those unique traits that could help create a successful leader profile for Generation Z. Moreover, the complexity of the issue increases as studies on the transformation of Generation Z in a digital context have entered the scene, with a focus on leadership, management, and organizational behavior (Lazăr et al., 2023). However, even if it may be difficult to define a leader profile for today's organization, it is worth noting that studies conclude that the younger generation tends towards spirituality, values, and meaning, and can judge superiors through a moral lens. Clarity regarding the concepts of leadership and spirituality in an organizational context is still required; otherwise, it will be rather difficult to operationalize these constructs (Avolio et al., 2009).

Future research indicates an opportunity from a theoretical perspective by extending existing theories to include value-based and spiritual dimensions in the analysis of intergenerational leadership and from a practical viewpoint by clarifying Generation Z expectations regarding organizational leadership, while also offering a guidance framework for leaders from Generations X and Y in adapting their leadership style to younger employees' values and motivations. Furthermore, it may propose developing an HR policy guide for recruitment, retention, motivation, and the development of the next generation of relevant members in contemporary organizations (Bencsik et al., 2016).

Conclusions

A growing need is emerging for current leaders to adopt a value-based leadership style, grounded in spirituality and consistently reflected in both discourse and action.

Current leadership theories relevant to Generation Z have their origins in the life stories of prominent figures, bringing back into discussion the importance of spirituality and values such as service to others, kindness, humility, sacrifice, or forgiveness, in the act of leadership. It can be concluded that a leadership style adapted to Generation Z cannot ignore the role of values and spirituality, as these represent the criteria by which the legitimacy and effectiveness of today's leaders are evaluated. This conclusion may support the position according to which leadership styles based on personal values and on spirituality have a common ground that can be further researched and connected to the current workplace and young employees, sometimes adversely influenced by the way contemporary society, particularly under the impact of the Internet, understands the role of values. In parallel, organizations are increasingly challenged to attract, motivate, and retain employees who today predominantly belong to Generations X, Y, and Z. It is therefore essential to understand how Generation Z relates to life and, consequently, to work.

In terms of limitations, this study does not provide the depth of a systematic review of the literature and the analysis based on statistical aggregation. The selection bias of the corpus may occur.

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Received: October 10, 2025

Revised: March 1, 2026

Accepted: March 4, 2026