

Generational Perceptions of Leadership Styles and Their Effects on Employee Performance: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

The growing occurrence of multigenerational workforces has heightened the levels of academic and practical concern in the ways leadership styles are seen between generations and how these perceptions affect the performance of the employees. The systematic review is a synthesis of the existing empirical evidence regarding the connection between leadership styles and generational differences in workplace outcomes. In line with the PRISMA directives, 62 peer-reviewed studies with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs were found by conducting a thorough search of 6 academic databases published between 2010 and 2025. This was achieved using narrative and thematic analysis where patterns of generational preference in the leadership were identified and presented with results on performance. Baby Boomers proved to be more transactional and directive-oriented and have high value of structure, stability, and formal recognition. The Generation X and Millennials were more responsive to the emerging leadership styles based on empowering and transformational leadership, which focuses on autonomy, feedback and collaboration. Generation Z showed an increasing interest in servant and shared leadership that is associated with authenticity, inclusiveness, and digital fluency. The best fit concerning the style of the leadership and generational expectations was all the way through the generations, linked to the increased engagement, innovation, retention, and job satisfaction. This review adds a multigenerational paradigm of integrative and cross-generational scope that explains how leadership agility and generational intelligence improve organizational performance in variable and changing work environments.

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the knowledge of how employees from multigenerational cohorts are impacted by leadership styles. By analyzing leadership preferences and workplace expectations of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, the outcomes provide practical insights for employers to promote employee engagement, cooperation, and successful multigenerational workforce management.

1. Introduction

Multigenerational workforces are becoming more typical of organisations across the globe as up to four separate generational groups (Baby Boomers, 1946-1964), Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z (1997 to the present day) represent the members of the same organisations (Bailey and Owens, 2020; Trinet Team, 2024). This workforce diversity of unprecedented magnitude brings a considerable level of complexity, as every generation has been preconditioned by unique socio-economic, historical, and technological experience, which affects their values, communication and workplace style, and expectations (Basu, 2025; Kaplan, 2025).

One of the key problems of this diversity is related to the effectiveness of the leadership based on the generational groups. Previously effective leadership styles are no longer universally effective in work environments that were relatively homogeneous. The behaviours of leaders are understood differently by employees of various generations, especially when it comes to authority, autonomy, feedback, and purpose in working. Due to this fact, the effectiveness of leadership becomes more and more dependent on how well the leadership styles comply with generational expectations. Nonetheless, the lack of a clear and integrative understanding of the variation in leadership effectiveness among the generational cohorts is a thorny unresolved issue in the literature.

It has been empirically proven that the inappropriateness of the leadership style and the generational preference led to such adverse organisational outcomes as disengagement, intergenerational conflict, low level of innovation and high turnover (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). On the other hand, adaptive and responsive leadership approaches based on generational differences are associated with the increase of engagement, innovation, and organisational performance. This underscores the increasing roles of generationally sensitive and flexible leadership in organisations today.

Although more and more scholarly interest is given to multigenerational leadership, the current body of knowledge is non-coherent and inconclusive. Previous studies have so far been mostly preoccupied with single generational groups or single leadership styles to an extent where they have not been able to come up with an overall and comparative analysis of cross-generational leadership performance. Moreover, the empirical evidence is still discrepant, especially on the cross-cohort generalizability of leadership theory like the transformational leadership (Alghamdi, 2018; Salomaa, 2024). Moreover, even Generation Z and non-Western settings are underrepresented in the literature, which limits the ability to generalise the results (Rathi and Kumar, 2023).

Considering these shortcomings, a synthesis of the available empirical evidence is obviously in order, which should be recognizable as integrative and systematically organized. This gap is filled by the research paper which involves a systematic review of 62 articles published in 2010-2025 (with PRISMA) (Harrison et al., 2021). The review

analyses the impact of the generational difference on leadership style preferences and how leadership–generation fit influences key employee performance outcomes, such as engagement, retention, innovation, and job satisfaction. By so doing, the study suggests a cross-generational model of leadership effectiveness at multigenerational workplaces.

1.1. Problem Statement

A central problem confronting contemporary organisations is the leadership–generation mismatch: the systematic incongruence between the leadership behaviours practised by the manager, and the expectations of employees belonging to the various generational cohorts. Mismatch in this context is a quantifiable instance of the lack of compatibility between a leader whose dominant style and the style that the followers of a particular generation prefer, leading to negative performance related outcomes. Empirical research records that these mismatches correlate with diminished organisational commitment and increased turnover intentions (Anderson et al., 2017), decreased creative performance and discretionary effort (Krishna and Agrawal, 2025) and increased intergenerational tension leading to decreased team cohesion (Burton et al., 2019). The term fragmentation here implies the lack of a single, cross-generational theoretical explanation of leadership effectiveness - an explanation that diagrammatically indicates the causal links between generational values to leadership preferences to performance outcomes that can be measured. Such theoretical fragmentation does not only limit academic knowledge but also the ability of practitioners to develop evidence-based, generation sensitive leadership development programmes. It is against this gap that the current review is inspired.

1.2. Research Objective

The main aim of this systematic review will be to consolidate the existing empirical findings with regard to the existence of generational differences in the perceptions of leadership styles in the organizational context. Particularly, the research will focus on synthesizing available empirical evidence in relation to the manner in which leadership styles have been perceived and deployed within generations, to investigate the connection between the same and major employee performance outcomes, as well as find gaps in the literature at the issue of cross-generational effectiveness of the leadership styles. More precisely, this review aims at achieving three goals: (1) to trace the generational differences in the perception and preference with unique leadership styles (transformational, transactional, empowering, servant, and shared); (2) to determine the correlations between leadership-generation fit and meaningful employee performance outcomes, such as engagement, retention, innovation, and job satisfaction; and (3) to isolate critical gaps in the current literature regarding cross-generational leadership performance, especially longitudinal, cross-cultural and Generation Z-based.

1.3. Research Questions

Under these objectives, the following research questions are covered in the review. To begin with, what are the differences between generational cohorts regarding their conception of the various leadership styles? Second, what are the relationships between these perceived leadership styles and employee performance outcomes (engagement, retention, innovation and job satisfaction)? Third, what do the current literature gaps and shortcomings in the current body of leadership support regarding cross-generational in terms of effectiveness?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Generational Cohorts and Their Work Values

Social, economic and technological conditions that are in existence during the formative years define the values, expectations and work orientations of the generational cohorts. An example here is the Baby Boomer generation (1946-1964) who grew up in a time of economic stability and organizational development leading to high standards of loyalty, commitment, as well as reverence towards the position of authority. As such, organization, formal recognition, tenure-based promotion, and obvious chain of command are likely to be appreciated by the Baby Boomers since they represent organizational stability and appreciation. Leadership styles that are more predictable, organized and procedurally explicit are thus better positioned to accommodate this cohort of workers with their values of work.

The economic problems, shifting family rules were also witnessed and these Gen Ys, Generation X (1965-1980) and this also led to the emergence of independence, pragmatism and self-reliance. In many ways, Generation X members are described as being outcome-oriented in that the focus on autonomy, efficiency, and work-life balance are observed to be more important than the centralized organizational structures. This generation of employees is more likely to be positive towards leaders who offer clear guidance but leave some space in terms of decision-making and task performance (Budhe et al., 2017). Accountability and flexibility are their coping mechanisms that were developed in times of economic and social instability.

The Millennials (born 1981 to 1996) started working in the world during the period of high globalization and technological development, which formed the values of working as a team, meaning, and constant feedback. Although financial security is a significant factor, Millennials place of high value to meaningful work, the chance of self-development, and inclusive organizational cultures (Ashraf & Javed, 2019). They are especially sensitive to the leadership approaches that focus on coaching, mentoring, and developmental feedback provided continuously. Flexibility and work-life integration are also certain features of the expectations of this cohort, which is part of more global changes in career paths after the Great Recession and the emergence of digital forms of communication.

The original fully digital-native generation (since 1997) is Generation Z, whose expectations in the work environment are formed under the influence of being in constant contact, worldwide crises, and increased social consciousness. The ways of this generation are focused on authenticity, inclusivity, and ethical organizational behaviour and transparency and technological fluency are also important in the role of leadership. Compared to previous generations, Generation Z does not pay much attention to the idea of hierarchical recognition or a mentoring relationship and learns to require leaders to be open, responsive, and considerate of the welfare of their employees (Rathi & Kumar, 2023; Manoj, 2025). Psychological safety, diversity, and honest communication are not considered to be the extra benefits of the workplace culture but the basic components of the culture.

This generational profiling as a block has shown that there is a significant distinction in work values and motivational drivers between the generations, which further translates into a different interpretation and evaluation of leadership behaviours. Empirical studies

consistently show that generational cohorts differ in workplace attitudes, communication preferences, and behavioural expectations, which directly influence how leadership behaviours are interpreted across age groups (Becton et al., 2014). This knowledge of these differences enables one to critically analyse the appropriateness and efficiency of leadership styles when working in multigenerational teams and environments (Burton et al., 2019).

2.2. Intra-Cohort Variability and Contextual differences

Although the above generational profiles offer a valuable heuristic to make sense of the macro-trends in workforce, one must also remember that there is a lot of intra-cohort variation within each of the above-mentioned generations. Such membership is not the deterministic one; it is the probabilistic one that is predictive of values and preferences. Diversity can be observed to the level of individual differences in personality, socioeconomic status, educational level, professional level, and organisational culture, even in cohort size (Becton et al., 2014). As an example, Supervisory junior Millennials, in their first supervisory positions, might act more like Generation X managers in their preference of structured accountability than their generational membership would indicate. On the same note, a working Baby Boomer who has been employed in a technology-oriented, flat-based organisation is likely to have leadership preferences closer to those of Generation X (Anderson et al., 2017). Career stage and organisational context thus mediate the association amidst generational membership and leadership preference and this review takes cognizance of the fact that the cohort-based descriptions below are central tendencies and not homogenous characteristics.

2.3. Critique of Generational Theory

There is no scholarly consensus with respect to the application of generational categories in organisational research and therefore this requires critical involvement. One of the major controversies is the separation of three analytically distinct effects: cohort effects (values developed as a result of common historical exposure), age effects (changes in preferences and that happen naturally as individuals grow older), and period effects (effects that influence all age groups at once because of macro-level events like recessions or pandemics) (Anderson et al., 2017). Most of the existing cross-sectional studies confound these effects and explain the measured differences in leadership preferences by generational membership when, in reality, it could be related to the career-stage maturation or reaction to a particular historical event that is common to all cohorts. Moreover, opponents claim that social construction of generational terms (e.g., the idea of a Millennial, a Gen Z) is partially made more pronounced by the media discourse, and there is less empirical data on the existence of drastic cohort-based differences in workplace values than one might presume (Becton et al., 2014). This is especially required in longitudinal research which follows the same individuals across time periods in order to distinguish between age maturation and cohort-specific values system. These methodological constraints are recognized in this review, and generational categories are approached as rough analytical concepts the boundaries of which are fluid by nature, and not discrete and scientifically validated categories.

2.4. Leadership Styles: Definitions and Relevance

Fashion of leadership refers to the actions, plans, and interpersonal styles that a leader adopts to manipulate people and groups of people towards a common goal. Although the

effectiveness of leadership in a broad context relies on the ability to direct the organizational objectives with the motivation of followers, generational diversity has increased the significance of adaptive and circumstantial leadership. Leadership is a growing requirement in modern organizations facing the different expectations influenced by the values of different generations; therefore, Agile Leadership is an even more important skill (Gardner et al., 2024).

Transformational leadership is a concept that is generally discussed as among the most effective in the contemporary organizational environment. Transformational leaders clearly convey a strong vision, awaken the intellect and give personalized attention in the form of mentoring and counselling. This management style fits especially well with Millennials and Generation Z who often have a purpose-driven work attitude, transparency, and sense of mission (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

In contrast, transactional or directive leadership focuses on careful implementation of tasks, clear expectations of tasks, and performance rewards or punishment. This can be used effectively in a workplace where uniformity and adherence to procedures are great values. The Baby Boomers, in this case especially will react well to transactional leadership because of its conformity to the values of tenure, loyalty and formal recognition. Nevertheless, it is possible that in younger generations, such style can be seen as limiting one's creativity and free work because of the lack of freedom to work in their own direction.

Empowering leadership is all about autonomy, participative decision-making and delegation of power. Empowering leaders also makes the employees feel that they are owners and gain intrinsic motivation and thus they own the results and contribute innovatively. This leadership style is particularly open to Generation X and Millennials, who are more independent and self-directed (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015). It is empirically indicated that empowering leadership contributes to job satisfaction, confidence, and innovation through developing trust and accountability in teams (Neck et al., 2024).

The leadership styles of servant and shared leadership also change the emphasis from hierarchical power and leadership to collaboration, empathy, and shared responsibility. Servant leadership focuses on followers' growth and concerns their well-being, whereas shared leadership shares the leadership throughout the teams (Anderson & Sun, 2017). These strategies are very appealing to Generation Z, whereby inclusivity, authenticity, and relationship trust are key qualities in leadership legitimacy. In this generation, leadership is more of a group process that appreciates equity and digital competencies (Bolden et al., 2009).

Lastly, ambidextrous leadership combines the principles of transactional as well as transformational styles, allowing the leader to find a balance between structure and flexibility. Ambidextrous leadership also enables leaders in multigenerational and complex organizational situations to meet the stability demands of older generations, and at the same time encourage innovativeness and inclusiveness in the younger generation of workers (Rosing et al., 2011).

When combined, these leadership styles create a spectrum, but not opposing categories. Their applicability does not depend on their universal applicability but has to conform with the values, motivations, and expectations of the various generational cohorts.

To summarise generational differences in work values and preferred leadership styles discussed above, Table 1 presents a consolidated generational insight map.

Table 1: Generational Insight Map

Generation	Core Values	Preferred Leadership Style	Behavioural Indicators
Baby Boomers	Loyalty, stability, recognition	Transactional, Directive	Value hierarchy, clear instructions
Generation X	Autonomy, pragmatism	Empowering, Transformational	Independent, mentorship-seeking
Millennials	Feedback, purpose, flexibility	Coaching, Participative, Transformational	Thrive on feedback, development-focused
Generation Z	Authenticity, diversity, flexibility	Servant, Shared, Digital leadership	Expect transparency, digital engagement

Sources: (Wolor et al., 2021; IMD, 2024; Forbes HR Council, 2023; LinkedIn Workplace Trends, 2024).

3. Research Methods

The PRISMA guidelines were followed in this review to make the process transparent and replicable. The methodology framework was designed in a manner that would offer an objective and holistic overview of the available empirical data on the topic of generational perceptions of leadership styles and their influence on employee performance.

This study was conducted as a secondary research design and, therefore, it did not require any collection of primary data or mixed-methods research. Rather, it was a synthesis of results of a wide range of empirical literature containing diverse qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies. This method guaranteed the analysis to be multifaceted and at the same time preserve the integrity and attention of a systematic review.

3.1. Search Strategy

An organized and methodical search model was used to find empirical research on leadership styles used across the generational groups of people in an organizational setting. The sampling was done in six large academic databases such as Google Scholar, ProQuest, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect in order to be thorough. The literature review was conducted on articles published since January 2010 to May 2025, which reflects modern trends in the research and diversity of the workforce in the field of leadership.

The search terms were a combination of both generational identifiers (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z) and leadership terms (transformational, transactional, empowering, servant, shared) and employee performance outcomes (engagement, retention, innovation, job satisfaction, productivity). The use of the Boolean operators was strategically incorporated to give them the relevance they had the greatest, and to be as restrictive as possible, excluding irrelevant studies. This methodology helped expand the scope and minimize publication bias, and it is appropriate to PRISMA criteria of systematic reviews (Harrison et al., 2021).

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the methodological coherence and relevance, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were put. The inclusion criteria were that the studies had to be empirical and studied defined generational cohorts, and that the effects of one or more types of leadership on objective employee performance outcomes had been measured. To provide balanced representations both qualitative and quantitative researches and mixed-methods design were taken into account. The operationalised inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in Table 2 below, and they have variables that are measurable and used as operationalised criteria during the screening process to guarantee consistency and replicability in the selection of the study (Harrison et al., 2021). Table 2 below explain that criteria's for selecting studies that are need to be reviewed that are included the study type which is empirical (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods), comprised employees in organizational settings with recognized generational cohorts and at least one measured leadership style as a construct, and report quantifiable performance outcomes like job satisfaction, engagement, retention, or innovation. Only full-text access, English-language articles released between 2010 and 2025 are qualify. Conceptual or opinion-based research, student or non-organizational samples, studies without operationalized leadership characteristics or quantifiable performance outcomes, publications published prior to 2010, and non-English or abstract-only sources are also excluded.

Table 2: Operationalised Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Study type	Empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods)	Purely conceptual, theoretical, or opinion pieces
Population	Employees in organisational settings with identified generational cohort membership	Student samples; non-organisational contexts
Leadership variable	One or more named leadership styles measured as a construct	Studies without operationalised leadership variable
Outcome variable	At least one performance outcome measured: engagement, retention, innovation, or job satisfaction	No measurable performance outcome reported
Publication period	2010–2025	Pre-2010 publications
Language	English-language publications with full-text access	Non-English publications; abstracts only

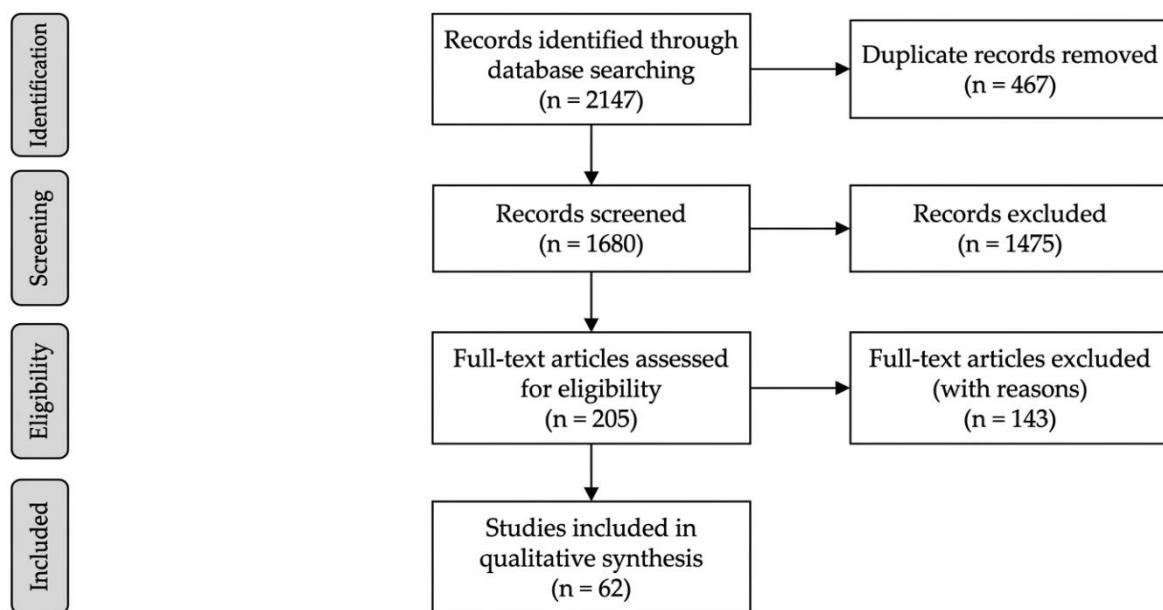
The studies were not included in case they were merely conceptual, had no categorization, or they were not conducted in organizations. Studies that relied on sample study with students were exclusionary because of minimum influence on workplace behaviours. Also, the included studies that did not have full-text access in their publications or versions not written in English were excluded to maintain consistency and transparency.

3.3. Screening Process

The screening process and the selection was in line with the PRISMA protocols so as to establish a high methodological rigor. The first search of the database produced 2,147 records. Having eliminated 467 duplicates, 1,680 titles and abstracts were filtered considering the inclusion criteria. Amongst them 205 full-text articles were evaluated as eligibility.

After conducting a thorough analysis of the methodological quality, relevance and correspondence to the review objectives, 62 articles were selected that satisfied all the requirements and were included in the final synthesis. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process.

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process



3.4. Quality Appraisal

Both Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) and Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklists were used to determine the level of methodological rigor and credibility. The reason why these tools were chosen was the variety of research designs covered in the review. Their use guaranteed methodological quality, reliability, and possible bias were consistently assessed in both qualitative and quantitative as well as mixed-method research. Quality rating (High / Moderate / Low) of each of the included studies was determined in accordance with the corresponding MMAT or JBI checklist items. Articles that were considered to be of Low quality were kept in the synthesis in order to be transparent but their results are mentioned accordingly with due caution. Table 4 (below) summarises the distribution of quality ratings of the 62 studies that were included in the study by the research design, and it offers transparency to the appraisal process (Hong et al., 2018).

It is also worth noting that even this review does not constitute mixed-methods research. MMAT was utilized as an appraisal tool only to measure methodological quality of the considered studies, but not methodological design of the review (Hong et al., 2018).

Table 3: Summary of Quality Appraisal Ratings by Study Design

Study Design	Appraisal Tool	No. of Studies	High Quality	Moderate Quality	Low Quality
Quantitative	MMAT	31	18	10	3
Qualitative	JBI	18	10	6	2
Mixed-Methods	MMAT	13	7	5	1
Total	—	62	35	21	6

3.5. Data Synthesis

Narrative and thematic synthesis were used as methods of data synthesis. All the studies were coded according to the generational cohort, the leadership style explored and employee performance outcomes recorded. This method made it possible to find out repeated themes, contrasts, and patterns of relationship across researchers. The coding framework was structured around three primary variables: (1) the generational cohort(s) studied (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z, or multi-generational), (2) the leadership style(s) measured (transformational, transactional, empowering, servant, shared, or ambidextrous), and (3) the performance outcome(s) reported (employee engagement, retention/turnover intention, innovation/creativity, or job satisfaction). Secondary coding variables included study design (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods), geographic context, organisational sector, sample size, and quality rating.

The analytical procedure comprised five sequential steps to ensure methodological rigour and reproducibility. Step 1 (Familiarisation): each included study was read in full and an initial summary was recorded. Step 2 (Descriptive coding): each study was independently coded using the framework above. Step 3 (Theme development): codes were grouped into preliminary themes representing recurring patterns in generational leadership preferences and performance associations. Step 4 (Analytical theme construction): preliminary themes were examined for internal consistency, cross-study contradictions, and strength of evidence, drawing on the quality ratings from the appraisal phase. Step 5 (Synthesis and interpretation): the resulting themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical propositions of Social Exchange Theory and transformational leadership frameworks to generate integrative conclusions about cross-generational leadership effectiveness.

The steps in the synthesis procedure were not quantitative in character but based on statistical aggregation. Rather, it sought to form an integrative conceptualization of the generational perspectives of leadership styles as a determinant of workplace performance in order to provide a unified explanation of the cross-generational leadership efficacy.

4. Results

Overall, the synthesis of the studied works indicates some uniformity in the generation of the leadership preferences in relation to their employees with respect to employee performance. In the literature, the appropriateness of leadership proves to be dependent on fit between leadership styles and generational expectations, but not universal applicability of one and the other approach.

At the beginning of the review, it is necessary to state that most of the studies used in this review have cross-sectional designs; therefore, the associations described in this section are purely correlational, and do not indicate causation.

Baby Boomers who had their career growth mostly in hierarchical and rule governed organizational settings proved more in line with directive and transactional forms of leadership. These styles put a high value on structure, predictability, and external rewards which are all appealing to the values of this cohort of stability and procedural clarity (Grubb, 2016). Amongst the Baby Boomers, transactional leadership was linked to an increase in organizational allegiance, role definition, as well as fidelity to organizational values and objectives. In contrast to younger generations, this reflects a stronger preference for structure and stability.

Generation X on the other hand had a very strong interest in both empowering and transformational styles of leadership. This generation of the workforce appreciates autonomy, competence, and trust, and they react well to leaders who hold the strategic direction but give them freedom in the execution of the tasks (Alghamdi, 2018; Kraus, 2017). Enabling leadership was always associated with increased flexibility, involvement, and quality strategic performance among the employees in Generation X. Compared to Baby Boomers, Generation X shows a greater preference for autonomy and flexibility.

Millennials had the same focus of independence as Generation X but had a stronger alignment to transformational, coaching, and empowering leadership styles. Research shows that the styles of leadership that focus on inspiration, collaboration, and ongoing developmental feedback are especially helpful in the case of this group (Salomaa, 2024). These leadership styles were linked to more innovation, involvement, and alignment in purpose which were ways of fulfilling the need of the Millennials to have meaningful and growth-oriented work experiences.

There is emerging evidence that it is exactly Generation Z that is becoming more inclined towards authentic, servant, and shared leadership styles. This generation appreciates inclusiveness, teamwork, openness, and online literacy in the leadership process (DeCarvalho, 2025). A higher level of creativity, inclusiveness, and internet engagement among the generation Z employees were compared with the leadership styles that emphasized psychological safety, ethical behaviour, and participative decision-making processes.

An excellent alignment between leadership expectations and employee expectations regarding leadership across generations consistently corresponded with positive employee performance outcomes. Engagement and turnover were identified as the important areas where empowering leadership, specifically, helps to encourage the engagement among Generation X and Millennials and simplifies their attrition due to supporting independence and growth (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). The relationships and cooperative leadership styles also contributed to the optimization of the innovation and team work, particularly with the Millennials, generation Z, jointly, by promoting trust and collaborative problem-solving (Hoch, 2013; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Wang & Duan, 2025). On the other hand, the effectiveness of transactional leadership continued among the Baby Boomers, but in connection with younger cohorts, the use of this leadership style usually limited the level of creativity and discretionary work.

Comparative analysis of these results is associated with conclusive findings of apparent generation differences in the efficacy of leadership (see Table 2). Key leadership styles do not cut across between cohorts; on the contrary, their performance can be defined by the ability of leaders to determine generational variations and change their strategies (Anderson et al., 2017).

One of the major lessons gained during the synthesis is a definite change in the leadership preferences between generations. The leadership styles of older generations (e.g., Baby Boomers) are more influenced by the preference to structured and reward-based leadership, younger generations (especially, Millennials and Gen Z) are more inclined towards more flexible, participative, and relationship-based leadership styles. This trend indicates that the effectiveness of leadership is not general, but rather it relies on the compatibility between the leadership behaviours and the generational expectations.

4.1. Bridging Strategies for Multigenerational Leadership:

The literature also highlights the significance of bridging strategies in order to deal with the generational diversity. Recent intergenerational leadership models emphasise adaptive and integrative leadership approaches that deliberately bridge generational expectations rather than treating cohorts as isolated groups (Singh, 2025). The ambidextrous nature of leadership that combines directive actions and supportive ones stands out as special to work with multigenerational teams. Ambidextrous leaders can act both to meet the needs of the older and the younger generations by maintaining the balance between the structural stability on one hand and flexibility and innovation at the other hand (Alghamdi, 2018; Rosing et al., 2011).

Complementary strategies, like reverse mentoring the younger employees provide digital skills to their senior colleagues, and backgrounded intergenerational educational programs have also proven highly valuable too. The strategies assist in overcoming the generational stereotypes, fostering mutual respect, and harnessing the unique strengths of each generation with the purpose of building more unified and creative organizational cultures (Ramírez-Herrero et al., 2024).

Although the results show that there are definite patterns of generational inclinations in leadership preferences, the evidence is not completely consistent between researches. According to some studies, transformational leadership works well with all the generations whereas others show that the effectiveness of transformational leadership differs depending on organisational context and cultural setting. Throughout the literature reviewed, a particular trend appears: the effectiveness of leadership depends on the consistency between the leadership behaviour and the expectations of the generation and not on the generality of the effectiveness of a particular leadership style. This points to the significance of contextual and generational sensitivity of leadership practice.

These findings can be theoretically explained through Social Exchange Theory, which suggests that employees reciprocate leadership behaviours that align with their expectations and values. When leadership styles match generational preferences, employees perceive higher organisational support, resulting in stronger engagement and performance outcomes. Conversely, misalignment disrupts this exchange relationship, leading to disengagement and reduced performance. This explains why leadership effectiveness varies across generational cohorts rather than being universally applicable.

Table 4: Cross-Generational Comparison Matrix

Generation	Preferred Leadership Style	Feedback Preference	Performance Outcomes
Baby Boomers	Directive / Transactional	Formal, structured recognition	High in stability, loyalty, and procedural adherence
Generation X	Empowering / Transformational	Balanced, autonomy-driven	High in adaptability, strategic execution
Millennials	Transformational / Shared / Empowering	Continuous, developmental feedback	High in innovation, collaboration, and purpose alignment
Generation Z	Participative / Servant / Agile	Instant, tech-enabled feedback	High in creativity, inclusivity, and digital fluency

Figure 2: Unified Model of Generational Leadership Fit and Employee Performance

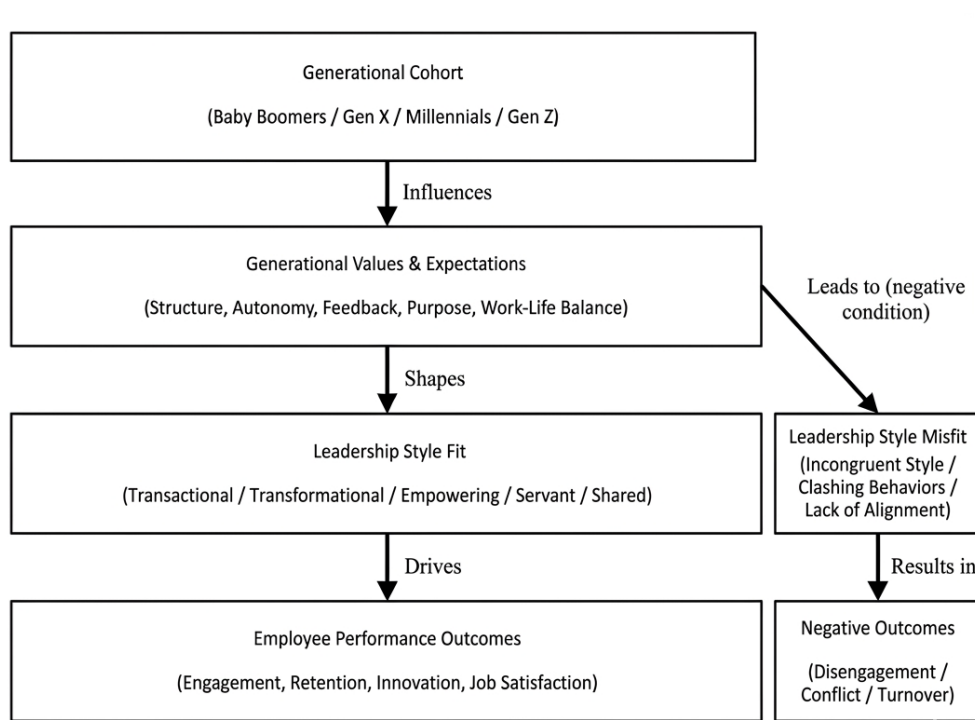


Figure 2 presents the unified model of generational leadership effectiveness derived from the systematic synthesis. The model illustrates how generational cohorts shape distinct values and expectations, which influence the perception and evaluation of leadership styles. Leadership-generation fit, defined as the alignment between leadership behaviours and generational expectations, acts as the central mechanism determining leadership effectiveness. When alignment is achieved, positive employee performance outcomes such as engagement, innovation, retention, and job satisfaction are enhanced, whereas misalignment leads to disengagement and reduced performance.

However, the results are not completely universal in research. Although there is some research that shows that some forms of leadership like transformational leadership is effective on all generations, other studies have found out that the effectiveness of these types of leadership differs depending on the organisational environment, and the culture. This brings to light the role of context in relation to the effectiveness of leadership.

5. Conclusion

The patterns identified in this review are best understood through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET), which proposes that organisational relationships are governed by norms of reciprocity: employees who perceive that their leader's behaviour meets their expectations and needs are more likely to reciprocate with higher engagement, commitment, and performance (Anderson et al., 2017). From a SET perspective, the generational leadership preferences documented across the reviewed studies are not merely stylistic: they represent the terms of exchange that employees implicitly bring to their workplace relationships. Baby Boomers, whose exchange calculus is anchored in loyalty and structural predictability, respond to transactional leadership because it fulfils the reciprocity norm of effort-for-reward that their formative organisational experiences have conditioned (Grubb, 2016). For Generation X, empowering leadership represents a reciprocal exchange of trust for autonomy — a fundamentally different but equally coherent social contract (Alghamdi, 2018). For Millennials and Generation Z, the exchange is increasingly relational and values-based: transformational and servant leadership fulfil the need for authentic connection, purpose, and psychological safety, and employees reciprocate with discretionary effort, creativity, and organisational citizenship behaviours (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025; DeCarvalho, 2025).

The cross-generational comparison matrix (Table 2) reveals a consistent pattern that extends beyond individual preferences: as one move from Baby Boomers through to Generation Z, the preferred exchange currency in leadership relationships shifts from extrinsic and structural rewards toward intrinsic and relational ones. This is a theoretically significant finding because it suggests that the evolution of workforce generational composition is systematically shifting the motivational architecture of organisations — a shift that leadership frameworks grounded exclusively in transactional models are ill-equipped to accommodate. This review therefore contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness in multigenerational contexts is not a function of any single style's intrinsic superiority, but of the fit between a leader's behavioural repertoire and the generationally shaped exchange expectations of their followers. Ambidextrous leadership — the capacity to integrate both directive and developmental behaviours — emerges from the synthesis as a particularly promising framework for multigenerational contexts, as it enables leaders to calibrate their style to the exchange needs of different cohorts without abandoning consistency or strategic coherence (Rosing et al., 2011; Alghamdi, 2018).

Practically, the findings indicate specific, actionable strategies for HR professionals and leadership development practitioners. For Baby Boomer employees, structured performance appraisal systems, tenure-based recognition programmes, and clearly delineated reporting hierarchies are associated with higher commitment and role clarity (Grubb, 2016). For Generation X workers, flexible work arrangements, decentralised decision-making, and outcome-based accountability systems are linked to greater engagement and strategic performance (Alghamdi, 2018). For Millennials, continuous developmental feedback, mentoring relationships, collaborative goal-setting, and

transparent communication of organisational purpose are associated with improved retention and innovation (Salomaa, 2024; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025). For Generation Z, psychological safety initiatives, inclusive team practices, digital communication channels, and authentic leadership behaviours — including visible ethical conduct — are linked to higher creativity and organisational commitment (DeCarvalho, 2025; Manoj, 2025). Intergenerational learning programmes, including reverse mentoring arrangements where younger employees share digital expertise with senior colleagues, are associated with reduced stereotyping, improved mutual respect, and more cohesive organisational cultures (Ramírez-Herrero et al., 2024).

The systematic review synthesises piecemeal evidence on the subject of generational differences in leadership perceptions and their impact on employee performance, advancing the understanding of leadership effectiveness in multigenerational workplaces. The review contributes to the field of leadership research by mapping evidence across five leadership styles and four generational cohorts, demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is contingent on the fit between leader behaviours and the generationally shaped expectations of followers (Deepalakshmi et al., 2024). By doing this, the study expands the social exchange and attribution view perspectives explaining how the generational lenses influence workers perception towards leadership behaviours and their subsequent performance-based consequences. The current research contributes to the body of theory a lot because it combines the disjointed bodies of leadership and generational research in a single cross-generational framework. In contrast to the previous research that explore leadership styles or generational generations separately, the conceptualisation of leadership effectiveness as a product of leadership-generation fit within this review extends Social Exchange Theory and leadership contingency frames to a multigenerational framework. Moreover, the research eliminates discrepancies in existing literature by proving that the effectiveness of leadership is not universal but rather depends on the generational expectations, the organisational context and flexibility of leadership.

Theoretically, this review is important to the literature as it offers a cross-generational framework that relates the leadership styles with differentiated performance outcomes such as engagement, innovation, retention, and job satisfaction. In its findings, the article demonstrates that generational intelligence and leadership agility are paramount processes on which leaders manoeuvre complex workforce diversity. The review highlights how the conceptualization of leadership should be a dynamic, adaptive process by highlighting how generational differences are dynamic categories instead of being fixed, depending on changes in the generational values and workplace conditions. Specifically, this review refines Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating that the “exchange currency” in leader–follower relationships is generationally conditioned: what constitutes a valued reciprocal exchange varies systematically across cohorts, shifting from extrinsic-structural rewards for Baby Boomers to intrinsic-relational ones for Generation Z. It also advances transformational leadership theory by showing that its effectiveness is not universal but is associated with particular generational value systems — most strongly among Millennials and Generation Z — while its impact may be limited or even counterproductive when applied without contextual adaptation to Baby Boomer employees who have a stronger preference for transactional clarity (Grubb, 2016; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Regarding managers, the results indicate that organisations need to go beyond the notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership and have a generation-sensitive leadership development model. In particular, the organisations can use:

- i. Adaptive leadership training systems which will enable managers to alternate transactional, transformational and empowering behaviours according to the composition of the workforce.
- ii. Customised feedback systems, in which Baby Boomers are given periodic, formal performance reviews, and Millennials and Generation Z are given constant feedback, which is enabled by technology.
- iii. cross-generational mentoring programs (reverses mentoring) to provide knowledge exchange and minimize stereotyping between generations.
- iv. Analytics-based HR data-driven to evaluate leadership-employee fit and identify the risk of engagement or turnover based on generational groups.
- v. Such specific measures will help organisations become effective leaders and use generational diversity as one of their strategic strengths.

Although the reviewed literature is extensive, some of the limitations allow specifying the ways in which future research could be undertaken. The common use of cross-sectional study designs limits the knowledge on how both the generational leadership preferences change with time. The longitudinal research is thus necessary to record the dynamic changes in the expectations of leadership at different stages of the career and in different organizations. Moreover, there is a high level of Western bias in literatures, which make the application of the findings to non-Western and emerging economies rather limited. The cross-cultural and comparative research would be an insightful contribution to the interaction between cultural norms and the perception of generational leadership. Lastly, the empirical research about Generation Z is relatively scarce and the new generation representing Generation Alpha does not receive much academic focus yet which highlights the necessity of future-oriented studies that would predict imminent changes in the workforce. There are a number of methodological weaknesses of this review as such that deserve to be critically considered. To start with, the review is also prone to publication bias: only peer-reviewed and full-text and English-language articles were included, excluding possible grey literature, practitioner reports, and non-English studies, which may create a systematic bias in favor of positive and statistically significant results. Second, the six databases of the search, albeit broad, do not fully address all the important disciplinary traditions; papers in the journals of industrial-organisational psychology or human resource development that are not indexed on the chosen databases might have been overlooked. Third, the use of narrative and thematic synthesis, which is suitable to the heterogeneity of the study designs involved, does not allow to quantitatively aggregate the effect sizes; thus, it cannot be concluded on the strength of relationships between leadership styles and performance outcomes but on the direction and consistency of such associations. Fourth, the design decision directly impacts on generalisability of the results: due to the fact that individual studies differ in their measurements, sampling conditions, nationality, and industry, the synthesised conclusions reflect patterns that can be observed across the studies and not the estimates of the exact effect to be observed in any one particular organisational context. The readers, however, need to take the cross-generational leadership preferences found herein as evidence-based tendencies and not prescriptive rules.

To sum it up, the review indicates that generational intelligence and leadership agility are not only no longer optional capabilities to being a successful leader in the modern organization, but also a necessary requirement to achieve competence. Organizations

should be able to engage their staffs better, innovate, retain them, and improve their performance in multigenerational and increasingly diverse workplaces by addressing generational differences and following adaptive leadership methods (Pollak, 2019).

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study did not require ethical approval because it will be based solely on a secondary analysis of previously published literature and did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants. Therefore, approval from an institutional research ethics committee was not required, and informed consent to participate was not applicable.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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