Leadership Styles and Their Effect on Generation Z's Work Engagement: A Literature Review

Dirkje Jeuken (2103497)

Behavioral and Social Sciences (TSB)

760990-B-12: Bachelor Thesis

Supervisor: Jolanda Botke

Second Supervisor: Marta Bergmans

1 juni 2025



Abstract

This literature review investigates how different leadership styles influence the work engagement of Generation Z (Gen Z) employees in the workplace. Based on a systematic analysis of twelve peer-reviewed studies, four leadership styles are examined: transformational, transactional, authentic, and servant leadership. The findings show that leadership style significantly influences Gen Z's engagement, with transformational and servant leadership being most effective. These styles promote emotional connection, personal growth, and meaningful work, key values for Gen Z. Authentic leadership also supports, with more limited research, by building trust and openness. In contrast, transactional leadership appears less effective, as its focus on structure and rewards does not align with Gen Z's need for autonomy, purpose, and support. However, the results also suggest that no single leadership style is sufficient on its own. Rather, a thoughtful combination of elements from different styles may be most effective in meeting Gen Z's needs and expectations. The Psychological Contract Theory aligns with these findings by highlighting Gen Z's preference for a hybrid contract, one that combines short-term development with relational support. These insights offer practical guidance for leaders and HR professionals who aim to boost engagement of Gen Z.

Keywords*: Generation Z, work engagement, leadership styles, psychological contract*

Leadership Styles and Their Effect on Generation Z's Work Engagement: A Literature Review

Organizations are increasingly challenged to attract and retain Generation Z (Gen Z), a generation born between 1997 and 2013, that is now entering the workforce in growing numbers. This new generation brings unique perspectives, skills, and expectations to the workplace, emphasizing values such as flexibility, autonomy, and meaningful work (Kwartawaty et al., 2024; Loring & Wang, 2022). However, many leadership styles remain outdated and fail to align with these evolving expectations, contributing to disengagement and high turnover (Stillman & Stillman, 2017; Deloitte, 2019). As workplaces continue to evolve, understanding how to effectively engage Gen Z has become a critical issue (Loring & Wang, 2022).

To understand how leadership styles influence employee engagement, it is essential to first define the concept. Employee engagement refers to a state where employees feel energetic, committed, and deeply involved in their work (Motyka, 2018). Engaged employees are more productive, innovative, and loyal, and their increased collaboration and innovation drive helps organizations succeed and remain adaptable in times of change (Kruse, 2012; Saks, 2006).

Given the importance of engagement for organizational adaptability and success, leadership styles play a central role in shaping these outcomes. Leadership styles influence how employees perceive support, motivation, and autonomy in their work, which are key psychological conditions that foster engagement (Gangai & Agrawal, 2017). Leadership styles, defined as consistent patterns of behavior, strategies, and interactions, used to guide and motivate employees, significantly influence employee engagement (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy, 2014; Northouse, 2021). As Gen Z becomes a growing

part of the workforce, understanding how leadership styles can align with their values is increasingly important (Kwartawaty et al., 2024).

However, most current research on Gen Z remains anecdotal or practitioner based and lacks the empirical depth seen in studies on previous generations (Hafner et al., 2020). While most existing leadership styles and engagement studies focus on Generation X and Millennials (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Prakash & Tiwari, 2021), research on Generation Z remains limited (Stillman & Stillman, 2017). Often, it is assumed that leadership styles effective for Millennials will also apply to Gen Z, overlooking their distinct characteristics and expectations in the workplace (Prakash & Tiwari, 2021).

Stillman and Stillman (2017) emphasize that Gen Z differs significantly from Millennials in terms of work mentality, communication preferences, and leadership expectations. They value flexibility, autonomy, and meaningful work, which calls for a more tailored leadership style. Major events, such as 9/11, the 2008 crisis, and rapid technological advancement, have shaped them (Khatri & Dixit, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2019). This generational difference highlights the risk of applying uniform leadership styles across generations, as one-size-fits-all strategies may prove ineffective (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Despite this, many companies still rely on outdated, generic leadership styles that don't align with Gen Z's values, due to the lack of solid research. This mismatch can make young employees feel disconnected, which may lead to lower engagement (Stillman & Stillman, 2017).

Considering these generational shifts and the current lack of empirical insight, there is a clear need to explore how leadership styles can effectively foster engagement among Gen Z. More theory-based studies are necessary to explore the relationship between leadership styles and Gen Z's work engagement. Such knowledge would enable HRD professionals to design targeted interventions for Gen Z employees that align with their values, ultimately supporting both individual performance and long-term organizational success.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how leadership styles influence the engagement of Gen Z employees, identifying which leadership styles enhance their engagement and which may hinder it. This research aims to offer actionable insights for leaders who seek to connect with Gen Z employees and create a more sustainable and inclusive workplace. By understanding the specific values and expectations of Gen Z, leaders can adapt their leadership style to foster work engagement. The findings can inform the development of targeted leadership training and employee engagement strategies that are aligned with Gen Z's preferences. As a result, organizations may benefit from higher retention rates, improved job satisfaction, and increased productivity among their youngest employees.

To address this gap, the study explores the following question:

"How do leadership styles affect the work engagement of Generation Z employees in organizations?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework will provide an in-depth explanation of the key concepts and theory.

Work Engagement

Work engagement is a fundamental concept in organizational psychology and human resource management, given its strong influence on both individual performance and overall organizational success, which has led to a broader recognition of work engagement as a core aspect of job satisfaction and organizational performance (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). Various scholars have contributed to its conceptualization, leading to multiple definitions. Among these, three frameworks are particularly influential: Kahn (1990), Maslach and Leiter (1997), and Schaufeli et al. (2002).

Kahn (1990) was one of the first researchers to provide a theoretical foundation for work engagement, defining it as the extent to which individuals express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in their job roles. While Kahn's framework was important, it remained largely qualitative and lacked clear empirical measures, making its application in large-scale studies challenging.

A different perspective on work engagement was introduced by Maslach and Leiter (1997), who positioned engagement as the opposite of burnout. Although this approach provided valuable insights, it primarily defined engagement in negative terms, focusing on the absence of burnout rather than on engagement as a distinct, positive psychological state.

A more comprehensive and empirically validated definition of work engagement was developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), who described it as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. According to this framework, vigor reflects high energy levels, resilience, and a willingness to invest effort in one's work. Dedication includes s a strong sense of enthusiasm, pride, and significance in one's tasks, while

absorption refers to deep immersion in work, where employees lose awareness of time due to their intense focus. Unlike previous models, Schaufeli et al. 's conceptualization of work engagement is widely applicable and has been extensively validated through the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which is commonly used in both academic and organizational research.

Given its broad acceptance and empirical robustness, this study adopts the definition proposed by Schaufeli et al. (2002) as the foundation for examining the relationship between leadership styles and work engagement among Gen Z employees. Their multidimensional approach represents the key psychological states associated with engagement and provides a reliable framework for measuring its presence in organizational settings.

Work Engagement in the Context of Generation Z

Although work engagement is a widely studied concept, it is essential to understand how it is experienced by Gen Z, a generation with distinct characteristics and work preferences. Consisting of individuals born between 1997 and 2013, Gen Z has grown up in a highly digitalized and rapidly changing world, which has shaped their expectations regarding work and leadership (Stillman & Stillman, 2017). They are tech-savvy, pragmatic, and entrepreneurial, with a strong preference for quick, tangible results (Brotheim, 2014). At the same time, they value social responsibility and seek meaningful work that aligns with their personal values (Dolot, 2018; Prakash & Tiwari, 2021). Their desire for autonomy, purpose, flexibility, and ongoing feedback is closely linked to their digital upbringing and the dynamic environment in which they were raised (Bălan & Vreja, 2018; Kniffin et al., 2021). These generational characteristics suggests that traditional engagement strategies may not be effective for this generation, and a better understanding of how leadership styles can meet their needs is critical for fostering sustainable engagement (Kwartawaty et al., 2024).

Leadership styles

Leadership styles refer to the behaviors, strategies, and approaches that leaders use to influence, guide, and manage employees within an organization. Yukl (2013) defines leadership style as a consistent pattern of behavior that a leader adopts when directing, motivating, and managing individuals or teams. Leadership style refers to the general and consistent way a leader behaves over a longer period, while leadership behavior means the specific actions a leader takes in certain situations (Derue et al., 2011; Yukl, 2013). These styles shape how leaders behave, communicate, and interact with their teams, ultimately influencing the achievement of organizational goals. In organizational settings, leadership styles significantly affect the overall culture, which in turn, affects how employees engage with the company (Siswanto, 2024). This cultural influence plays a crucial role in how employees perceive their work, interact with colleagues, and contribute to organizational objectives (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy, 2014).

Liden et al. (2014) provide a comprehensive framework that identifies and categorizes different leadership styles, including servant, authentic, transactional, and transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring employees to go beyond expectations by shaping their values and goals. According to Bass (1985), this leadership style "transforms followers to rise above their self-interest by altering their morale, ideals, interests, and values" (p. 20). They do this through behaviors such as idealized influence, acting as role models and inspirational motivation sharing a compelling vision that encourages people to perform at their best (Bass, 1999; Yukl, 1999).

Transactional leadership

Transactional leadership is based on clear expectations and reward systems that ensure structure and consistency (Bass, 1999). It is primarily composed of contingent reward, where leaders provide incentives for achieving targets, and management by exception, where leaders intervene only when standards are not met (Yukl, 1999). While this approach is efficient and stable, this style is less effective for long-term engagement and innovation (Bass, 1999; Yukl, 2013).

Authentic leadership

Authentic leadership emphasizes transparency, self-awareness, and ethical decision-making to foster trust between leaders and employees. Avolio et al. (2004) describe authentic leaders as those who act in alignment with their values while promoting openness and trust with their followers. This leadership style consists of self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa et al., 2008). By promoting openness and trust, authentic leadership enhances employee engagement, making employees feel valued and motivated (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Servant leadership

Servant leadership prioritizes employee well-being and development, focusing on empowerment, emotional support, and stewardship (Liden et al., 2008). Greenleaf (1977) describes it as placing the needs of others first to help them grow and succeed. This leadership style fosters engagement by creating a supportive and purpose-driven work environment, where employees feel genuinely valued and committed.

As shown in Table 1, the four leadership styles: transformational, transactional, authentic and servant, differ in their focus and key characteristics.

Table 1

Leadership Styles

Leadership style	Focus	Key characteristics
Transformational	Inspiring and motivating employees, aligning values and goals	Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, empowerment
Transactional	Clear expectations, rewards, and short-term results	Contingent rewards, management by exception, compliance
Authentic	Transparency, self-awareness, ethical decision-making, trust	Self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing
Servant	Employee well-being, empowerment, development, support	Empowerment, emotional support, stewardship

Psychological Contract Theory

The Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989) provides a useful framework for understanding how leadership styles influence the work engagement of Gen Z employees. This theory describes the implicit, unwritten expectations between employees and employers, which shape attitudes, behaviors, and overall workplace commitment. Psychological contracts can be categorized into transactional and relational.

Transactional contracts are characterized by short-term, monetizable exchanges such as salary or bonuses in return for performance, leading to engagement primarily driven by extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This form of engagement tends to be limited in depth and sustainability, as employees focus on fulfilling specific obligations in exchange for

tangible rewards (Rousseau, 2001). Transactional leadership reinforces this model through contract structure, performance targets, and reward systems. For some Gen Z employees, this can offer clarity and short-term motivation, especially when development opportunities like skill-building or feedback are present. However, without relational elements such as support or purpose, this approach may fail in meeting broader expectations and sustaining engagement.

Relational contracts, in contrast, are based on trust, long-term commitment, and mutual loyalty, involving a broader and more implicit set of expectations, namely career development, support, and recognition (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005). These contracts foster affective commitment and alignment with the organization's values, which are key predictors of deep, long-term employee engagement (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006). Employees in relational contracts are more likely to invest emotionally, showing greater effort and organizational citizenship (Robinson et al., 1994). Servant and authentic leadership align with relational contracts, as they focus on well-being, values, and trust. Gen Z employees values meaningful work and expect transparency and authenticity from leaders, which makes these leadership styles particularly effective in fulfilling their relational expectations. As a result, such leaders are more likely to evoke work engagement for Gen Z workers.

This illustrates how the focus of a leadership style helps explain how it can either strengthen or undermine employees' experience of their psychological contract. Shifts in expectations may signal an evolution in how psychological contracts are understood by newer generations. Such insights are especially relevant for understanding Gen Z's response to leadership styles in today's workplace (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007).

Methods

The following section provides a detailed overview of the methodology used to identify and select the relevant literature for this study.

Search Strategy

A systematic review was conducted, defined as a methodical and transparent process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research on a specific topic (Tranfield et al., 2003), following the identification of relevant studies using carefully selected keywords. The databases World Cat and Web of Science were utilized for the literature search, chosen for their broad academic scope and reliable peer-reviewed content. A variety of keywords and Boolean operators were applied to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research question and to capture all relevant aspects of the topic. The search strategy made use of the Boolean operator AND to ensure that all retrieved articles were relevant to more than one keyword category. This operator was selected because it ensured that only articles containing all the relevant keywords were retrieved, narrowing the search results to the most appropriate literature. It helped to focus the search on studies that addressed multiple aspects of the research question at once. An overview of the keywords and Boolean operators used is presented in Appendix A. The search resulted in a total of 2,150 articles, with 2,097 sourced from World Cat and 53 from Web of Science. The results were screened and filtered based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A detailed description of this process is provided in the following section

Selection Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the studies included, a clear set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied, as outlined in Table 2. These criteria were designed to identify studies that specifically examined the relationship between leadership styles and Gen Z engagement.

This study included only peer-reviewed articles to ensure the use of high-quality and reliable sources. Additionally, only studies published within the last ten years were included, resulting in the removal of older articles from the search results. This time frame was chosen to align with the focus on Gen Z, a topic that had gained significant attention and scholarly interest in recent years. Duplicate records were also removed to prevent redundancy. Studies published in any language were considered, as modern translation tools allowed for accessible and accurate interpretation of research across languages. Both quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies were considered eligible for inclusion, as well as empirical studies. To maintain focus on the research aim, studies were excluded if they lacked a direct focus on Gen Z's work engagement in relation to leadership styles. Studies that focused on leadership styles without a direct link to engagement, or that examined resilience or engagement in non-workplace settings, were excluded. Theoretical papers without empirical data, as well as studies irrelevant to the research question, were also removed.

Table 2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	**Exclusion criteria**
Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies	Studies that focused on leadership styles without linking to engagement
Empirical studies	Theoretical papers without empirical data
Peer-reviewed	Irrelevant to research question
Studies that had been published in all languages	Duplicates
Studies published between 2015 and 2025	Studies that focused on non-workplace contexts

Procedure

Following the initial application of these criteria, all non-peer-reviewed and outdated articles were excluded, and duplicate records were removed. This process reduced the dataset to 218 articles. The titles and abstracts of these remaining studies were then screened for relevance. As a result, 191 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria or lacking alignment with the research question. The remaining 27 articles underwent a comprehensive full-text review to further assess their relevance. After this thorough evaluation, a final selection of studies was made based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

In addition, the snowballing technique was applied to identify further relevant studies. Reference lists of the selected articles were screened, and additional articles meeting the inclusion criteria were included. Figure 1 presents a visual overview of the step-by-step selection process. Additionally figure 2 provides an overview of the articles found through the snowballing method

Figure 1

Scheme Search and Selection Results

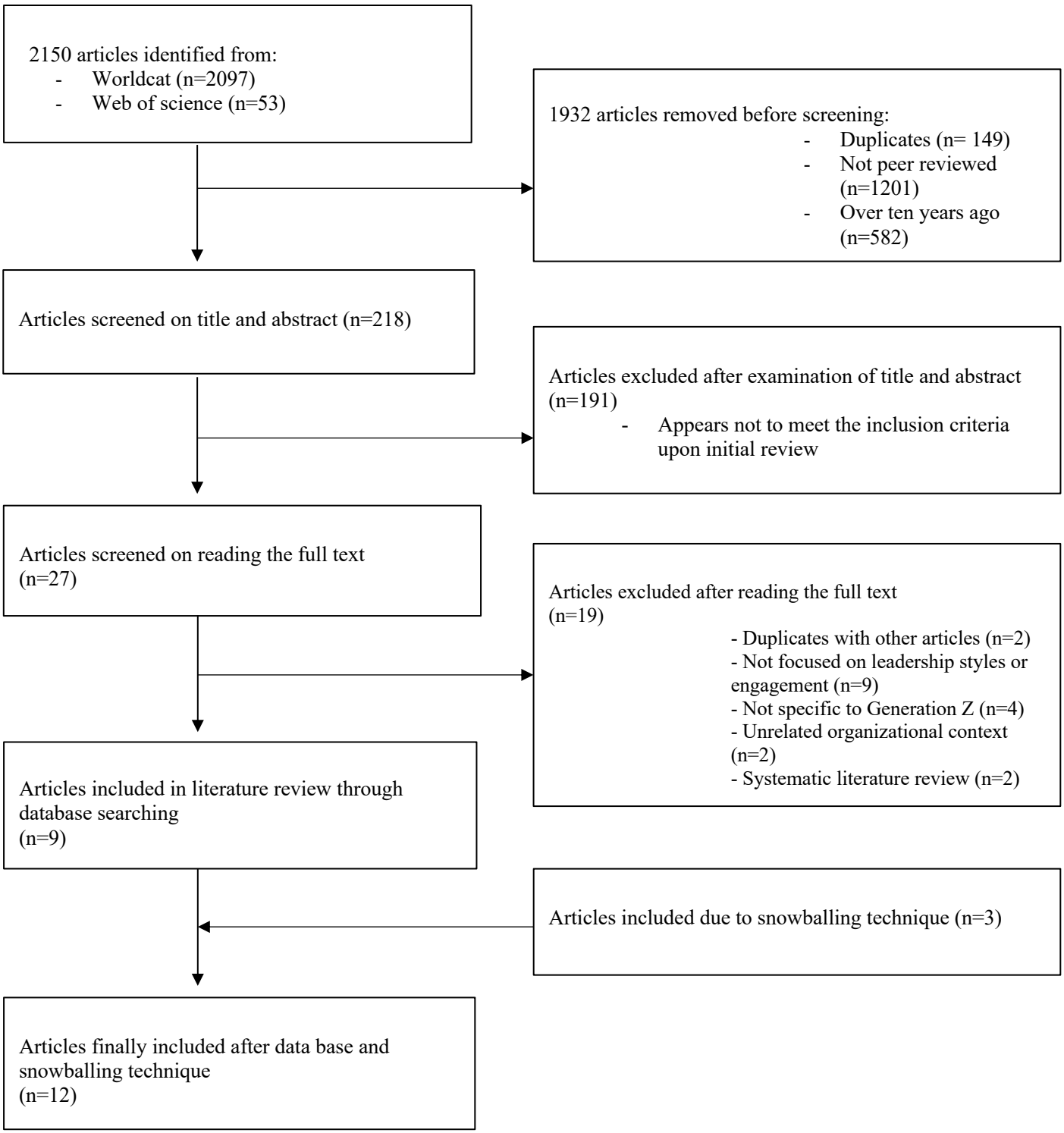
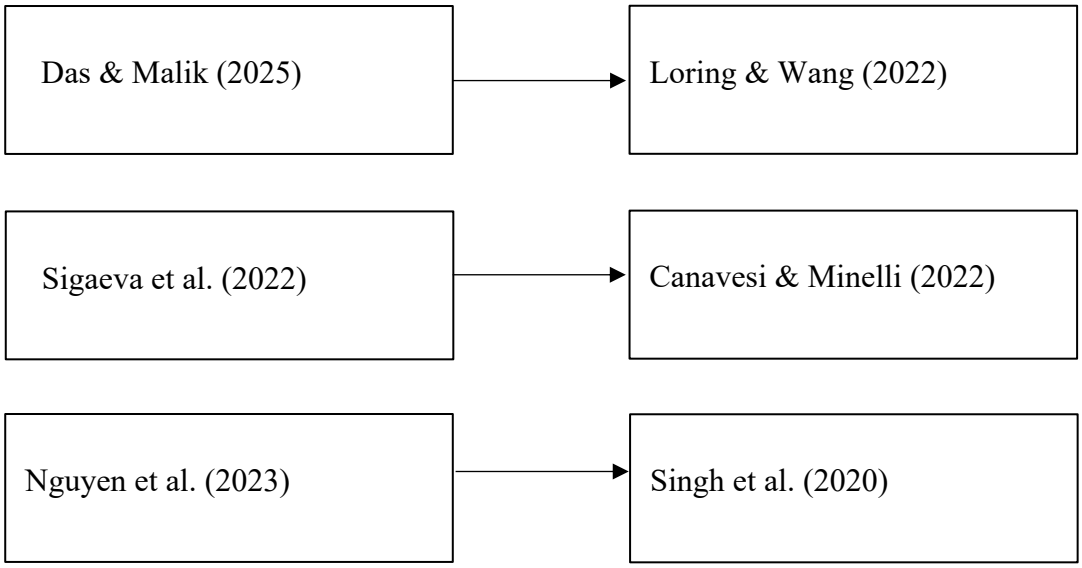


Figure 2

Articles Found Using the Snowballing Technique



Results

This section outlines the key insights regarding the influence of leadership styles on Gen Z's work engagement. The findings were drawn from a systematic analysis of twelve peer-reviewed studies and are visually presented in the results table provided (Appendix C). There are several distinct sections within this results chapter. The first section defines and conceptualizes the main constructs; leadership styles, work engagement, and Gen Z. The second section highlights the relationship between leadership styles and engagement, while the third section focuses on the underlying mechanisms.

Definition and Conceptualization of Leadership Styles

Across the twelve reviewed articles, leadership styles were explained and categorized in different ways. This study applied a four-style classification: transformational, servant, authentic, and transactional leadership to create consistency. Each article was reviewed to determine which of these four styles was examined, based on how the authors conceptualized and described leadership behaviors. Some articles clearly defined one leadership style, while others described behaviors that matched more than one style.

The most common style was transformational leadership, which was discussed in seven articles (Das & Malik, 2025; Kwartawaty et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2021; Loring & Wang, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Pandita & Kumar, 2022; Revuru et al., 2024). Servant leadership was found in six articles (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Kwartawaty et al., 2024; Pandita & Kumar, 2022; Revuru et al., 2024; Sigaeva et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2020), authentic leadership appeared in three (Katsaros, 2025; Sigaeva et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2020) and transactional leadership was mentioned in two articles (Kwartawaty et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2021).

Even when two articles were written in the same style, they don't always mean the exact same thing. For instance, some argued that transformational leadership was about providing a vision, others that it is about facilitating people's development. Nguyen et al. (2023) defined it

as leading change and reaching goals, while Das & Malik (2025) focused on inspiring people with a vision. Lee et al. (2021), on the other hand, discussed creativity and innovation as well. Servant leadership varied too in each article. Some have a greater emphasized on care, others on support and listening. Canavesi & Minelli (2022) discussed helping followers to 'grow'. Revuru et al. (2024) were interested in serving others and their well-being. Sigaeva et al. (2022) associated it with Gen Z and say it builds psychological capital. There were also subtle distinctions with authentic leadership, as well. Singh et al. (2020) discussed making ethical choices and being yourself. Katsaros (2025) added more focus on self-awareness and a moral perspective. Lee et al. (2021) concentrated on rewards and monitoring tasks, and Kwartawaty et al. (2024) saw it more as a tool for performance and task completion in structured contexts. So, the same style was used, but not always in the same way.

There were also articles that did not name a specific leadership style but described leadership behaviors that matched the styles in this review. Loring & Wang (2022) included actions of all four leadership styles. Pandita & Kumar (2022) highlighted HR practices that show servant and transformational traits, including perceived supervisor support, perceived organizational support and co-worker relationships, which aim to increase job engagement among Gen Z. Revuru et al. (2024) talked about leadership behaviors connected to authentic, servant and transformational leadership, especially in relation to Gen Z. Katsaros (2025) focused on inclusive leadership but explained that it shares traits with authentic and servant leadership.

Some articles use different terms such as strategic leadership (Kimonyo, 2025), inclusive leadership (Katsaros, 2025), or destructive leadership (Singh et al., 2020). These leadership styles are conceptually different and do not fit within the four main categories used in this review. Therefore, they were not classified under transformational, transactional, servant, or authentic leadership, which is also reflected in the overview table. This highlights

that leadership styles are not fixed categories, but rather flexible concepts shaped by context, purpose, and interpretation. However, some studies, such as Katsaros (2025) and Kimonyo (2025), showed that alternative styles, while labeled differently, can share behavioral overlaps with existing categories. This makes it even more important to study how these styles are defined and applied, especially when analyzing their effects on Gen Z.

Definition and Conceptualization of Work Engagement

In most of the selected studies, work engagement was defined according to Schaufeli et al. (2002), who describe it as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption". This alignment in conceptualizing work engagement was apparent in research conducted by Das & Malik (2025), Lee et al. (2021), Loring & Wang (2022), Nguyen et al. (2023), and Sigaeva et al. (2022), all of which directly cited or paraphrased this definition in their operationalization of work engagement.

In contrast, Canavesi and Minelli (2022) built on Kahn's (1990) definition, focusing on how employees were physically, cognitively, and emotionally involved in their work. Singh et al. (2020), inspired by Shuck et al. (2016), described engagement as a dynamic psychological state, shaped by energy across thinking, feeling, and doing. Scholars such as Katsaros (2025), Kimonyo (2025), and Revuru et al. (2024) take a more targeted approach in the context of Gen Z. They emphasize emotional connection, value alignment and purpose, factors that are especially relevant for Gen Z. Others, namely Kwartawaty et al. (2024) and Pandita & Kumar (2022), defined engagement in more behavioral terms, seeing it as rooted in motivation, productivity, and active participation.

The definition by Schaufeli et al. (2002) is widely used because it is clear and easy to measure. The three elements, vigor, dedication, and absorption, make it suitable for studying work engagement in large-scale research. In contrast, Kahn (1990) says less about how people devote themselves to the physical, emotional, and cognitive aspect of their work, that

is, more about the experience of engagement. Shuck et al. (2016) define engagement as dynamic and more difficult to quantify. Such distinctions are important: one definition centers more on outcomes, such outcomes include energy, while the others highlight personal experience and meaningfulness.

In summary, the studies show that the definition by Schaufeli et al. (2002) is dominant due to its clarity and suitability for quantitative research, while alternative definitions, including those by Kahn and Shuck, emphasize the more subjective and meaningful experience of engagement. This variation in conceptualization is important, as it influences the research focus. The focus may be directed at measurable outcomes, for example energy and dedication, or at deeper aspects such as personal experience and sense of purpose.

Definitions and Conceptualization of Gen Z

Across the reviewed studies, Gen Z is consistently recognized as a distinct workforce group with unique expectations, values, and engagement drivers. Studies by Das & Malik (2025), Katsaros (2025), Kimonyo (2025), Lee et al. (2021), Loring & Wang (2022), Pandita & Kumar (2022), and Revuru et al. (2024) defined Gen Z based on their birth cohort (typically 1995–2012), by explicitly naming them as the target group, or by referencing their recent entry into the workforce combined with a distinct digital upbringing. The digital upbringing has shaped their communication style, learning preferences, and desire for immediate feedback. Researchers such as Kimonyo (2025) and Revuru et. (2024) emphasize the preferable flexible work arrangements, meaningful work and emotionally intelligent leadership of Gen Z.

Others, including Kwartawaty et al. (2024), Nguyen et al. (2023) and Sigaeva et al. (2022) contrasted Gen Z with other generations namely, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers. These studies often included generational segmentation in their analyses or sampling to highlight intergenerational contrasts in leadership styles preferences and

engagement levels. The studies found both similarities and key differences. Both Millennials and Gen Z prioritize autonomy and growth opportunities; however, Gen Z is typically more focused on emotional connections, mental health support, and alignment with personal values. That's a change from the more career- and advancement-focused outlook of previous generations, such as Generation X. Singh et al. (2020) and Canavesi & Minelli (2022) did not segment their findings explicitly by generation, yet demographic data suggest a large Gen Z presence among participants.

In sum, Gen Z is generally seen as a distinct group in the workforce, but the studies define and include them in different ways. Some use clear age ranges or labels, while others compare them to older generations or include them indirectly through demographic data. This reflects academic interest and the diverse ways Gen Z is conceptualized in the literature.

Relationship Between Leadership Styles and Work Engagement of Gen Z

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership shows a consistent positive relationship with work engagement in all studies. Based on unstructured interviews, Das and Malik (2025) found that Gen Z employees in the Indian banking sector described their leaders as transformational when they felt inspired and motivated, which was linked to higher engagement. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2023) studied tech employees in Vietnam using survey data. They supported the findings of Das and Malik (2025) and added that engagement helped explain the link between leadership styles and innovation at work. Kimonyo (2025), using a mixed methods approach among Gen Z employees in East Africa's technology, finance, and healthcare sectors, confirmed these findings and emphasized that flexibility and purpose-driven leadership enhanced engagement.

Further support comes from Lee et al. (2021), who analyzed survey data from Gen Z workers in various US sectors, and Kwartawaty et al. (2024), who studied different

generations in Indonesia using a mixed-methods approach. Both found that transformational leadership increased engagement. Loring & Wang (2022) also found that transformational leadership had the strongest effect on Gen Z's engagement compared to other leadership styles such as transactional or laissez-faire leadership, using survey data from Gen Z professionals in sales roles. Even when the term wasn't explicitly used, as in Pandita and Kumar's (2022) study of IT professionals in India, leadership behaviors reflecting transformational traits, like support and development, were linked to higher engagement. Likewise, Revuru et al. (2024) describes key behaviors of transformational leadership such as feedback, appreciation, and growth encouragement as important drivers of Gen Z work engagement. Qualitative research is used, based on young employees in the Indian manufacturing industry.

In sum, transformational leadership support specific components of work engagement: it enhances vigor by energizing Gen Z employees with purpose, fosters dedication by aligning work with their personal values, and promotes absorption by offering a compelling vision that encourages deep focus (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Breevaart et al., 2014). Across diverse contexts, studies confirm that Gen Z responds well to transformational leaders who inspire, motivate, and offer flexibility, purpose, and shared meaning, which are key drivers of engagement for this generation.

Transactional Leadership

In contrast to the more consistently positive findings on the other reviewed leadership styles, transactional leadership appears in fewer studies and shows weaker or mixed results. For example, Lee et al. (2021) and Kwartawaty et al. (2024) found that transactional leadership has lowered Gen Z's engagement. Similarly, Loring and Wang (2022) reported mixed outcomes, suggesting that transactional approaches may not align with Gen Z's expectations for flexibility and purpose.

Overall, the findings indicate that transactional leadership is less frequently linked to high engagement among Gen Z employees, especially when compared to transformational or servant leadership.

Authentic leadership

While authentic leadership appears in fewer studies, it is associated with positive effects. Sigaeva et al. (2022) employed a quantitative survey method targeting Gen Z employees in the Russian hospitality sector. This research showed that authentic leadership improved engagement by building trust through transparency and ethics. Similarly, Singh et al. (2020) found a positive effect but noted that servant leadership was slightly more effective in their results, based on a questionnaire survey among 100 hotel employees in Malaysia. Additionally, Revuru et al. (2024) described authentic leadership behaviors such as honesty, self-awareness, and integrity. These behaviors made Gen Z feel more emotionally connected and helped build trust at work, elements that align well with the generation's values and their preferences in leadership styles. Katsaros (2025) conducted a survey among 305 Gen Z employees in the Greek telecommunications sector and their supervisors. Although the study focused on inclusive leadership, outside the four main styles in this review, it highlighted significant overlap with authentic leadership. The findings showed that inclusive leadership enhanced Gen Z's adaptive performance, with work engagement and job satisfaction acting as partial mediators.

In conclusion, authentic leadership appears to strengthen all three dimensions of work engagement: it supports vigor through psychological safety, enhances dedication by aligning with personal values, and fosters absorption by promoting meaningful and transparent work interactions (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Maximo et al., 2019). These behaviors help build trust and emotional connection, two factors that Gen Z highly values. Although the number of studies

on authentic leadership is more limited, findings suggest that authenticity has clear potential to enhance Gen Z's work engagement.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership also has a positive influence on work engagement, although the strength of the effect differs slightly across studies. To start, Canavesi and Minelli (2022) used open-ended questionnaires among junior employees in a large Italian consultancy firm, to explore how servant leadership influenced employee engagement. This research showed that servant leadership increased young employees' physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement at work, which supported the psychological conditions needed for engagement, as described by Kahn (1990). Similarly, Singh et al. (2020) found that servant leadership had a strong positive effect and worked even better than authentic leadership in their sample. On the other hand, Sigaeva et al. (2022) also observed a positive effect, but in their study, authentic leadership had a slightly stronger effect than servant leadership. Pandita & Kumar (2022) described leadership behaviors such as empathy and support, key traits of servant leadership, that helped engaging Gen Z. Likewise, Revuru et al. (2024) reported that servant leaders who cared and supported their employees helped create a safe and engaged workplace for younger workers.

In sum, servant leadership is consistently linked to Gen Z engagement, with key drivers including emotional support (Revuru et al., 2024), empowerment (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022), and care for well-being (Singh et al., 2020). In more detail, this leadership style supports vigor through emotional support and resilience, promotes dedication by empowering employees, and enhances absorption by fostering an inclusive and trusted work environment where Gen Z can focus and thrive (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Singh et al., 2020; Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). While the strength of the effect varies, the overall impact is clearly positive.

Table 3 presents a comparative summary of the key findings related to all four leadership styles: transformational, transactional, authentic, and servant.

Table 3

Summary of Key Results

Leadership style	Overall Effect on Generation Z's Work Engagement	Key elements Noted in Studies	Representative studies
Transformational	Consistently positive across all studies	Flexibility, purpose, emotional connection, personal development	Das and Malik (2025), Nguyen et al. (2023), Kimonyo (2025), Loring and Wang (2022)
Transactional	Weaker or mixed; sometimes negative	Structure, clear expectations, performance feedback	Lee et al. (2021), Kwartawaty et al. (2024), Loring and Wang (2022)
Authentic	Generally positive; fewer studies	Trust, honesty, self-awareness, openness, ethical behavior	Sigaeva et al. (2022), Singh et al. (2020), Revuru et al. (2024), Katsaros (2025)
Servant	Positive; strong in most studies	Empowerment, emotional support, care for well-being	Canavesi and Minelli (2022), Singh et al. (2020), Revuru et al. (2024)

Mediator Mechanism

One of the reviewed studies highlighted a factor that helped explain how leadership styles influenced Gen Z's work engagement. Sigaeva et al. (2022) highlighted psychological capital as an important mediator between authentic leadership and servant leadership on work engagement. Psychological capital includes confidence, hope, resilience, and a positive outlook; qualities that are important for Gen Z. Especially because they deal with fast-changing workplaces and want to grow personally.

Several other studies mentioned antecedents of engagement, such as support, trust, or development, but did not test these as mediating variables. Moderators as for example, personality characteristics and generational factors, were not discussed, but may provide potential directions for future research.

Discussion

This study set out to answer the question: *"How do leadership styles in organizations affect the engagement of Generation Z employees?"* Although leadership and engagement have been widely studied, most literature focuses on Generation X and Millennials, while empirical research on Gen Z remains limited (Hafner et al., 2020; Stillman & Stillman, 2017). This is critical as Gen Z now enters the workforce with distinct needs and expectations. To address this gap, this study conducted a systematic review of twelve academic articles. The findings show that different leadership styles influence Gen Z's work engagement in various ways, depending on how leadership styles and work engagement are defined.

In this review, leadership style is understood as a consistent pattern of behavior that leaders display when guiding, motivating, and managing individuals or teams, reflecting how they interact with others and influence workplace outcomes (Yukl, 2013). Work engagement, based on the definition by Schaufeli et al. (2002), is a positive, fulfilling work-related state, marked by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Several studies suggests that transformational and servant leadership can effectively strengthen Gen Z's dedication and absorption dimensions of engagement, by offering meaning, support, and growth opportunities that match their psychological needs (Breevaart et al., 2014). Similarly, the trust and safety associated with authentic leadership may indirectly enhance their vigor, highlighting the importance of psychological security and fostering trust in Gen Z's work experience (Maximo et al., 2019; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

The results of this review indicate that various leadership styles, particularly transformational, servant, and authentic leadership, show a positive relationship with work engagement among Gen Z. However, the reviewed studies also demonstrate that there is no one-size-fits-all leadership style that is universally effective for Gen Z. What stands out is that

engagement tends to increase when there is a balance between personal development (transformational leadership), relational support (servant leadership), and transparency (authentic leadership). Based on these insights, a blended leadership style is better suited to the complex expectations of Gen Z.

To better understand these results, the Psychological Contract theory offers a valuable explanatory perspective. The findings indicate how Gen Z cognitively appraises leadership behaviors and the extent to which they are likely to invest themselves in their work roles, a pattern that aligns well with the Psychological Contract theory. While Rousseau (2001) theoretically separated transactional and relational contracts, our results seem to indicate a hybrid model: one in which Gen Z desires short-term growth and autonomy (transactional), in safe emotion-centric relationships with clear values (relational). This idea is supported by Racolţa-Paina and Irini (2021), who argue that younger generations combine individual development goals with a strong need for authentic, value-based leadership. Furthermore, Rodriguez et al. (2019) note that loyalty from Gen Z is based on how congruent their personal goals are with the organization. This reflects the psychological contract theory's focus on purpose and growth as key drivers of Gen Z engagement.

Mentorship, vision, and professional growth further support this need, suggesting that leadership styles which foster learning and development are well-aligned with Gen Z's deeper motivational needs (Racolţa-Paina & Irini, 2021; Kwartawaty, 2024; Nquyên, 2023). A plausible explanation for this preference can be found in broader societal trends that emphasize meaning and ethics, suggesting that leadership approaches grounded in vision and personal relevance may connect more strongly with Gen Z (Nguyen et al., 2023; Revuru & Bandaru, 2024). Transactional leadership, with its focus on rules, control, and formal rewards, may offer clarity and structure but appears misaligned with Gen Z's psychological contract, which emphasizes purpose, autonomy, and relational connection (Rovinson &

Morrison, 2000). Gen Z grew up in a digital world where quick access to information and direct communication are standard (Bălan & Vreja, 2018). This digital upbringing may help explain their preference for flatter organizational structures and collaborative leadership, as these align with their familiar interaction patterns and expectations (Twenge & Campbell, 2012).

In sum, the foundations of the Psychological Contract model offer insight into why leadership styles that are focused on growth, feedback, and relational support are more likely to promote work engagement among Gen Z, by recognizing that these styles satisfy the unwritten exchange contract that Gen Z employees have developed with their organizations.

Limitations

While the reviewed studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between leadership styles and Gen Z's work engagement, several limitations should be acknowledged. One key limitation is variation in research contexts, such as sector (tech, hospitality, NGO), geographic location (India, Vietnam, Uganda), and sample characteristics, which can influence the generalizability of the findings. Context matters, as perceptions of leadership styles and engagement drivers are shaped by cultural and societal norms. (House et al., 2004). For example, Singh et al. (2020) finds servant leadership to be more effective than authentic leadership, whereas Sigaeva et al. (2022) conclude the opposite. This contrast underscores how sectoral and cultural differences influence the interpretation of leadership effectiveness.

A separate but related limitation is the tendency to treat Gen Z as a monolithic cohort. Even within this generation there is significant diversity in educational level, cultural background, career stage, and organizational environment (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). These influences can frame what Gen Z-ers expect of leaders and how they view leadership styles. Although servant and transformational leadership may appeal to many Gen Z employees, they may be more difficult to implement or less commonly practiced in highly structured or

hierarchical environments, for example the military or banking sector (Ozcelik, 2015). These internal generational differences are underexplored in this review.

Additionally, the current review focuses primarily on individual leadership styles and their direct relationship with Gen Z engagement. However, work engagement is also shaped by broader organizational factors such as team dynamics, HR practices, and company culture Siswanto, 2024). As highlighted by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), employee engagement is influenced by a wide range of job and organizational resources, including social support, autonomy, and a positive team climate. Similarly, Paauwe and Boselie (2005) argue for a more holistic view of HRM-performance relationships, emphasizing the importance of institutional context and organizational systems. By focusing narrowly on leadership styles, this study may overlook broader contextual factors that shape engagement outcomes.

Moreover, while this review grouped leadership styles into four main categories, the underlying definitions and behavioral emphases varied across studies. For example, ‘transformational leadership’ was associated with both vision-sharing and developmental support, depending on the source. These definitional variations may have influenced reported effects on engagement and should be considered when interpreting results.

Finally, another limitation is the conceptual overlap between leadership styles in the reviewed literature. Some studies use different terminology, such as inclusive or strategic leadership, but describe behaviors that closely matching the four styles addressed in this review. While these were categorized accordingly to maintain consistency, this approach may have led to oversimplification. It also demonstrates how leadership theory and practice are advancing beyond narrow definitions, which may influence the clarity and comparability of findings.

Future research

Given the discussed shortcomings, it would be interesting to address future perspectives. First, further research in more industries and geographical locations is also required. Cultural norms and values may influence both, the form of leadership styles and how Gen Z perceive and experience work engagement (House et al., 2004). Instead, cross-cultural or multi-country studies might be able to provide more information about how generalizable our findings are at present.

Additionally, future research should explore the variability from within Gen Z: education level, cultural background, and work setting might be related to how Gen Z employees experience leadership styles. Investigating these differences can help develop leadership styles that are more tailored to the diverse subgroups within Gen Z, leading to a more nuanced understanding of what makes leadership styles effective for this generation.

Notably, future studies would also benefit from a more holistic approach, considering not only leadership styles but also the interaction with other organizational factors, for example team climate, HR practices, autonomy. This would provide more clarity in terms of the circumstances within which leadership style will be successful in stimulating Gen Z's active involvement at work and thus extend the current understanding of the role of leadership styles in this process (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Paauwe & Boselie, 2005).

In addition, the conceptual inconsistency across studies, where similar leadership styles are defined or applied differently. Future research should use validated instruments, such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1995) or Servant Leadership Questionnaire ((Liden et al., 2008), to ensure consistent measurement and enable more reliable cross-study comparisons.

Finally, future studies could explore more flexible or hybrid leadership frameworks that combine elements from multiple styles. Since several articles referenced non-traditional styles

such as inclusive or strategic leadership, it may be valuable to study these more explicitly. Examining how blended or adaptive leadership styles resonate with Gen Z could lead to a more nuanced understanding of effective leadership in today's dynamic work environments.

Practical implications

This review provides actionable advice for HR teams to attract and retain Gen Z employees. Gen Z seeks leaders offering regular feedback, support career development, and create psychological safety (Racolţa-Paina and Irini, 2021). This means that leaders need to adopt a coaching approach: listening, supporting and developing. Building on this, a key insight of Interviewee B (Appendix E, Interview B) is that effective leadership for Gen Z begins with self-awareness and personal development of the leader. Leaders who are willing to reflect, recognize patterns, and be professionally vulnerable foster trust, equality, and connection. Interviewee B (Appendix E, Interview B) also noted that many leaders lack training in meaningful communication, such as active listening and asking open-ended questions. Providing communication training for leaders would help leaders better engage Gen Z.

Furthermore, social responsibility also matters, as shown in literature and interview A (Appendix D, Interview A). Therefore, companies should actively communicate about their Corporate Social Responsibility policies and involve young employees in social or environmental projects. When employees feel their work contributes to a better world, their engagement increases (Racolţa-Paina & Irini, 2021; Appendix D, Interview A).

Additionally, how leadership styles are perceived by Gen Z makes a difference. Businesses can rely more on regular feedback from employees, such as 360-degree reviews or surveys, which can reveal discrepancies between what leadership styles are supposed to be and what leadership styles are. This helps leaders learn how they can improve in ways that more effectively meet the needs of Gen Z.

Moreover, generation-conscious leadership is essential; leaders must learn to recognize their generational lens and open themselves to other perspectives (Appendix E, Interview B). This requires shifting from judgment to curiosity, for instance, not “why do they always want time off?” but “what does flexibility mean to you?” Such a mindset fosters openness and reduces intergenerational misunderstandings.

In addition to these formal feedback tools, interviewee A (Appendix D, Interview A), emphasizes the importance of integrating regular personal contact between managers and their team members. Meetings should address both work and employee’s well-being. Face-to-face conversations help build trust and emotional safety and allow managers to identify early signs of disengagement. As Bencsik et al. (2016) point out, emotional support and personal attention are important for Gen Z. Combining structured feedback systems with personal connection offers a more complete approach to leadership styles that resonates with the expectations of this generation.

Building further on this need for connection and purpose, interviewee A also emphasizes that organizations should invest in onboarding and long-term relationship building (Appendix D, Interview A). Practices such as buddy systems, intervision groups, and peer mentoring help new employees feel welcome and supported. For example, in SynTouch (Appendix D, Interview A), the “SynTouch Young” group offers young employees a safe space to share experiences and build relationships.

Finally, both interviewees highlight the value of intergenerational mentoring programs (Appendix D, Interview A; Appendix E, Interview B). One powerful approach is reverse mentoring, where younger employees support leaders in understanding technological, social, and cultural developments. At the same time, older colleagues contribute experience, stability, and strategic insight, while Gen Z brings fresh perspectives and digital fluency. This two-way knowledge exchange strengthens engagement among younger professionals and fosters a

more inclusive, adaptive, and learning-oriented workplace. Through mutual respect and open dialogue, generational diversity becomes not a challenge to manage, but a shared strength.

Conclusion

This review set out to examine how leadership styles influence the work engagement of Generation Z employees. Based on a systematic review of twelve academic studies, the findings show that transformational, servant, and authentic leadership styles, characterized by purpose, support, and trust, are most effective in fostering Gen Z's engagement. No single leadership style appears sufficient; instead, a blended approach offers the strongest alignment with Gen Z's values and needs. Theoretically, this review contributes by reinterpreting the psychological contract for younger generations. It suggests that Gen Z expects a hybrid model that combines short-term autonomy and growth with long-term relational support and authenticity, which adds nuance to existing frameworks. Practically, the findings offer guidance for organizations seeking to attract, engage, and retain Gen Z talent. Leaders who adapt their style to individual and situational contexts, while emphasizing meaning, transparency, and connection, are more likely to build engaged and committed teams. In a rapidly changing and value-driven workplace, the ability to lead with both flexibility and purpose will define the leaders who successfully connect with Gen Z.

Reference list

Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Walumbwa, F. O., Luthans, F., & May, D. R. (2004). Unlocking the mask: A look at the process by which authentic leaders impact follower attitudes and behaviors. *The Leadership Quarterly, 15*(6), 801–823. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.09.003

Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The Job Demands-Resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 22*(3), 309–328. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115

Bakker, A. B., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2008). Positive organizational behavior: Engaged employees in flourishing organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 29*(2), 147–154. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.515

Bălan, R. M., & Vreja, L. O. (2018). Generation Z and its perception of work. *Annals of the University of Oradea, Economic Science Series, 27*(1), 678–684.

Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1995). *MLQ Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire: Manual*. Mind Garden.

Bencsik, A., Horváth-Csikós, G., & Juhász, T. (2016). Y and Z generations at workplaces. *Journal of Competitiveness, 8*(3), 90–106. https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2016.03.06

Breevaart, K., Bakker, A. B., Hetland, J., Demerouti, E., Olsen, O. K., & Espevik, R. (2014). Daily transactional and transformational leadership and daily employee engagement. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 87*(1), 138–157. https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12041

Brotheim, H. (2014). Introducing Generation Z. *American Jails*, *28*(5), 15.

Canavesi, A., & Minelli, E. (2022). Servant leadership and engagement of junior employees: A qualitative analysis. *European Journal of Management Studies, 27*(1), 44–59.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-021-09389-9

Coyle-Shapiro, J. A.-M., & Conway, N. (2005). Exchange relationships: Examining psychological contracts and perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*(4), 774–781. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.4.774

Coyle-Shapiro, J. A.-M., & Shore, L. M. (2007). The employee–organization relationship: Where do we go from here? *Human Resource Management Review, 17*(2), 166–179. Https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.03.008

Das, A. K., & Malik, P. (2025). Ascertaining factors inducing engagement and stay intention among Gen Z: a qualitative study in the Indian context. *Journal of Business and Management Research, 14*(1), 1–20. https://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-09-2023-3994

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-2271-7

Deloitte. (2019). *The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019*. https://www2.deloitte.com

Derue, D. S., Nahrgang, J. D., Wellman, N., & Humphrey, S. E. (2011). Trait and behavioral theories of leadership: Integration and meta-analytic test of their relative validity. *Personnel Psychology, 64*(1), 7–52. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744 6570.2010.01201.x

Dolot, A. (2018). The characteristics of Generation Z. *e-mentor, 74*(5), 44–50. https://doi.org/10.15219/em74.1351

Gangai, K. N., & Agrawal, R. (2017). Leadership and engagement: Perception or reality? *Management and Labour Studies, 42*(3), 194–207. https://doi.org/10.1177/0258042X17718726

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Paulist Press.

Hafner, C., Hamilton, J., & Petty, M. (2020). Generation Z in the workforce: New attitudes

and values. *Journal of Organizational Psychology, 20*(5), 14–27. https://doi.org/10.33423/jop.v20i5.3674

House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., & Gupta, V. (2004). *Culture, leadership, and organizations: The GLOBE study of 62 societies*. Sage Publications.

Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal, 33*(4), 692–724. https://doi.org/10.5465/256287

Katsaros, K. K. (2025). Inclusive leadership and engagement among Gen Z telecom workers. *Journal of Inclusive Management, 18*(2), 56–74. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14080163

Khatri, N., & Dixit, V. (2016). Impact of generational events on leadership expectations. *South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases, 5*(1), 34–44.

Kimonyo, J. (2025). Strategic leadership and Gen Z engagement: A mixed-method study in East Africa. *African Journal of Management, 11*(1), 91–112. https://doi.org/10.47604/ejbsm.3250

Kniffin, K. M., Narayanan, J., Anseel, F., et al. (2021). COVID-19 and the workplace: Implications, issues, and insights for future research and action. *American Psychologist, 76*(1), 63–77. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000716

Kruse, K. (2012). Employee engagement is not the same as happiness. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com

Kwartawaty, D., Santoso, A., & Lestari, M. (2024). Comparing leadership impact across generations in Indonesian organizations. *Southeast Asian Leadership Review, 9*(1), 23 39. https://doi.org/10.55927/fjmr.v3i9.11009

Lee, C., Park, J., & Kim, H. (2021). Generational leadership preferences: Evidence from Gen Z in the U.S. workplace. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 15*(2), 22–34.

Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Zhao, H., & Henderson, D. (2008). Servant leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment. *The Leadership Quarterly, 19*(2), 161177. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.01.006

Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Liao, C., & Meuser, J. D. (2014). Servant leadership and serving culture: Influence on individual and unit performance. *Academy of Management Journal, 57*(5), 1434–1452. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.0034

Loring, B., & Wang, C. (2022). Leadership and engagement among Chinese Gen Z employees. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Studies, 10*(4), 12–31.

Luthans, F., & Youssef, C. M. (2007). Emerging positive organizational behavior. *Journal of Management, 33*(3), 321–349. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206307300814

Lyons, S. T., & Kuron, L. K. J. (2014). Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the evidence and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 35*(S1), S139–S157. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1913

Maximo, N., Stander, M.W., & Coxen, L. (2019). *Authentic leadership and work engagement: The indirect effects of psychological safety and trust in supervisors*. SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 45(0), a1612.

Motyka, B. (2018). Employee engagement and performance: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Management and Economics, 54*(3), 227–244. https://doi.org/10.2478/ijme-2018-0018

Nanjundeswaraswamy, T. S., & Swamy, D. R. (2014). Leadership styles. *Advances in Management, 7*(2), 57–62.

Nguyen, T. T. T., Phan, T. H., & Pham, Q. H. (2023). The mediating role of engagement in leadership and innovation: Evidence from Vietnamese IT firms. *Journal of Innovation Management, 11*(1), 102–119.

Northouse, P. G. (2021). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). Sage Publications.

Ozcelik, G. (2015). Engagement and retention of the millennial generation in the workplace through internal branding. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 10(3), 99–107. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v10n3p99

Paauwe, J., & Boselie, P. (2005). HRM and performance: What next? *Human Resource Management Journal, 15*(4), 68–83. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.17488583.2005.tb00296.x

Pandita, D., & Kumar, A. (2022). HR practices and Gen Z engagement: The role of leadership support. *South Asian Journal of Human Resources, 14*(2), 98–117. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-07-2020-2294

Prakash, Y., & Tiwari, M. (2021). Understanding Gen Z's expectations from leadership: A comparative review. *International Journal of HR Studies, 11*(1), 27–43. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijhrs.v11i1.18165

Racolţa-Paina, N. D., & Irini, D. (2021). Generational expectations and leadership perceptions: A Gen Z perspective. *Journal of Workplace Behavior, 12*(2), 54–69.

Revuru, R., & Bandaru, M. (2024). Leadership practices for sustaining work engagement: A Gen-Z perspective. *Journal of Workplace Psychology, 19*(1), 67–86. https://doi.org/10.33844/ijol.2024.60424

Robinson, S. L., Kraatz, M. S., & Rousseau, D. M. (1994). Changing obligations and the psychological contract: A longitudinal study. *Academy of Management Journal, 37*(1), 137–152. https://doi.org/10.5465/256773

Rodriguez, M. J., Green, M. T., & Ree, M. J. (2019). Leading Generation Z: New challenges in the workplace. *Journal of Business Diversity, 19*(3), 56–63.

Rousseau, D. M. (1989). Psychological and implied contracts in organizations. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, 2*(2), 121–139. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01384942

Rousseau, D. M. (2001). Schema, promise and mutuality: The building blocks of the

psychological contract. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 74*(4), 511–541. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317901167505

Saks, A. M. (2006). Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 21*(7), 600–619. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940610690169

Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 3*(1), 71–92. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015630930326

Shuck, B., Zigarmi, D., & Owen, J. (2016). Psychological needs, engagement, and work intentions: A Bayesian multilevel model. *Journal of Management, 42*(5), 1303–1329. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316633739

Sigaeva, T., Klimina, A., & Ivanova, E. (2022). Authentic and servant leadership for Gen Z: Evidence from Russian hospitality. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 16*(1), 87–99. https://doi.org/10.3390/su142013105

Singh, G. K. P. A., Subramaniam, A., Mahomed, A. S. B., Mohamed, R., & Ibrahim, S. (2020). Role of authentic leadership, servant leadership and destructive leadership behaviour on employee engagement in Malaysian hospitality industry. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 10*(9), 113–125. https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i9/7514

Siswanto, J. (2024). Employee engagement and retention: Analyzing the role of leadership styles and organizational culture. *ResearchGate.* https://doi.org/10.59613/global.v2i6.177

Stillman, D., & Stillman, J. (2017). *Gen Z @ work: How the next generation is transforming the workplace*. HarperBusiness.

Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a methodology for developing

evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British Journal of Management, 14*(3), 207–222. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.00375

Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, S. M. (2012). Who are the millennials? Empirical evidence for generational differences in work values, attitudes and personality. In *Managing the New Workforce* (pp. 15–31). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9780857933010.00006

Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. (2008). Authentic leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management, 34*(1), 89–126. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206307308913

Yukl, G. (1999). An evaluative essay on current conceptions of effective leadership. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 8*(1), 33–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/135943299398429

Yukl, G. (2013). *Leadership in organizations* (8th ed.). Pearson Education.

Appendix A

Keywords

Database	Keywords or combination	Retrieved article(s)
World Cat	"Leadership" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	795
	"Leadership styles" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	243
	"Leadership styles" AND "gen z" AND "job involvement"	182
	"Transactional leadership" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	22
	"Authentic leadership" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	93
	"Transformational leadership" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	70
	"Servant leadership" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	74
	"Leadership styles" AND "post-millennials" and "engagement"	162
	"Leader behavior" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	456
Web of science	"Leadership" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	41
	"Leadership styles" AND "gen z" AND "engagement"	2
	"Leadership styles" AND "gen z" AND "job involvement"	0
	"Servant leadership" AND "engagement" AND "Gen z"	2

“Authentic leadership” AND “engagement” AND “gen z”	1
“Transformational leadership” AND “engagement” AND “gen z”	5
“Transactional leadership” AND “engagement” AND “gen z”	0
“Leader behavior” AND “engagement” AND “gen z”	2
“Post-millennials” AND “engagement” AND “leadership styles”	0

Appendix B

Review articles

Author(s) & years	Title	Sector/ population	Design + sample size	Main findings
Canavesi & Minelli (2022)	Servant Leadership and Employee Engagement: A Qualitative Study	Junior consultants working in the Strategy and Management Consulting practice of a global consulting firm in Italy	Mixed-method design: - Quantitative SL-7 survey (7-point Likert, n = 151) - Qualitative phenomenological study using semi-structured questionnaires - Total sample: 151 junior employees participated in both phases	1. All seven dimensions of servant leadership scored high, indicating a strong overall presence. 2. Empowerment and team cohesion appeared to be the key drivers linking servant leadership to increased employee engagement 3. Key factors hindering engagement included organizational pressure, inadequate work-life balance, and remote work issues like reduced oversight and task ambiguity.
Das, A. K., & Malik, P. (2025).	Ascertaining factors inducing engagement and stay intention among Gen Z: A qualitative study in the Indian context.	Gen Z employees working in India's private Banking, Financial Services, and Insurance sector.	Qualitative approach: unstructured interviews, N = 22 employees	1. Six factors enhance Gen Z engagement and intention to stay: transformational leadership, employee investment, egalitarian practices, work-life balance, job crafting, and sustainability. 2. Transformational leadership showed the strongest link to both engagement and retention. 3. The study emphasizes measuring stay intention and highlights the importance of leadership, growth, and a transparent, supportive work culture.
Katsaros (2025)	Gen Z Employee Adaptive Performance: The Role of Inclusive Leadership and Workplace Happiness.	Gen Z employees in the Greek telecommunication industry.	Quantitative approach: surveys, three-wave design with 305 Gen Z employees and 61 supervisors.	1. Inclusive leadership has a direct positive effect on Gen Z employees' adaptive performance. 2. Work engagement and job satisfaction partially mediate this relationship. 3. Affective organizational commitment does not mediate the relationship.

Kimonyo, T. (2025)	Influence of Strategic Leadership on Generation Z Employees: A Strategic Approach to Organizational Performance.	Gen Z employees in the technology, finance, and healthcare sectors.	Mixed-method design: -Quantitative survey (n = 245) -Qualitative interviews with strategic leaders (n = 15) -Total sample: 260 participants across both phases	1. Gen Z values strategic leadership that emphasizes inclusivity, ethical transparency, flexibility, and purpose-driven work. 2. Leaders who communicate openly and offer meaningful tasks significantly increase engagement. 3. Organizations practicing strategic leadership reported a 20% increase in productivity and a 15% increase in retention. 4. Key mechanisms: psychological safety, feedback, autonomy, and societal impact.
Kwartawaty et al. (2024)	Effectiveness of leadership styles on Generation Z: The role of transformational leadership in enhancing engagement, efficiency, and job satisfaction.	Gen Z employees from various backgrounds; study conducted in Semarang, Indonesia	Mixed methods: Surveys, interviews, FGDs. Sample size not clearly specified, limited to Semarang region.	1. Transformational Leadership is the most effective and preferred style for Gen Z, promoting engagement, growth, and purpose. 2. Transactional and Servant Leadership show mixed results—structure and support are appreciated, but lack of inspiration or slow decision-making can hinder impact. 3. Autocratic Leadership is least effective, clashing with Gen Z's need for autonomy, flexibility, and inclusion. 4. Effective leaders for Gen Z integrate technology, communicate transparently, and adapt their style to be more inclusive and empowering.
Lee et al. (2021)	Factors impacting work engagement of Gen Z employees: A regression analysis.	Gen Z employees working across various sectors via Amazon Mechanical Turk (USA).	Quantitative research: correlation and multiple regression analyses, N=69	1. Transformational leadership had the strongest positive impact on employee engagement. 2. Autonomy and work-life balance were also positively and significantly related to engagement. 3. Transactional leadership, CSR, and technology showed no significant impact in the regression analysis.

Loring and Wang (2022)	Engaging Gen Z in professional selling: a systematic literature review	Gen Z professionals in sales roles	Systematic literature review of 21 studies	1. Gen Z's need for mentoring and job control are key antecedents of engagement. 2. Engagement leads to better performance and lower turnover. 3. Gen Z also expects competitive rewards and face-to-face interaction, not just digital tools.
Nguyen et al. (2023)	Encouraging employees' innovative behavior via the mediating effect of work engagement and the moderating effect of their proactive personality: the case of Generation Z in Vietnam	Gen Z employees working in various industries in Vietnam	Quantitative study; N = 352	1. Transformational leadership has the strongest positive effect on employee engagement among Gen Z, followed by learning climate, trust, and self-efficacy. 2. Time pressure positively affects engagement; job insecurity negatively affects it. 3. Proactive personality moderates the link between engagement and innovation: Gen Z employees with higher proactivity show stronger innovation when engaged.
Pandita, D., & Kumar, A. (2022).	Transforming people practices by re-structuring job engagement practices for Generation Z: An empirical study.	Gen Z employees in IT start-ups in India	Quantitative study; surveys; N = 302 employees	1. The study identifies three key drivers of job engagement for Gen Z: Perceived Supervisor Support, Perceived Organizational Support, and Co-worker Support. 2. PSS has the strongest positive effect on job engagement, followed by POS and COP. 3. Gen Z employees value mentoring from supervisors, organizational support that reflects care and inclusion, and peer collaboration.
Revuru et al. (2024)	Leadership Practices for Sustaining Work Engagement: A Gen-Z Perspective	Gen Z employees working in the IT industry in India	Qualitative study; face-to-face and telephonic interviews; N = 104	1. Gen Z employees expect leaders to demonstrate authenticity, empathy, clear communication, and to "walk the talk". 2. They value meaningful work, opportunities for growth, feedback, and recognition. 3. Work-life balance, flexibility, and "Me Time" are critical for sustaining engagement.

				4. The top non-monetary reason Gen Z employees would leave is lack of personal time.
Sigaeva et al. (2022)	In search of effective Gen Z engagement in the hospitality industry: Revisiting issues of servant and authentic leadership.	Employees working in hospitality in Krasnodar (Russian hospitality sector).	Quantitative study; N = 393 employees	1. Both servant leadership (and authentic leadership positively impact psychological capital and work engagement among Gen Z employees. 2. However, AuthL has a greater impact on both PsyCap and WorkE than ServL. 3. PsyCap mediates the relationship between leadership style and work engagement.
Singh et al. (2020)	Role of Authentic Leadership, Servant Leadership and Destructive Leadership Behaviour on Employee Engagement in Malaysian Hospitality Industry	Hotel employees in Malaysia (Klang Valley area), multicultural context, half of the respondents being part of Generation Z	Quantitative research: Questionnaire survey; N=100	1. Authentic leadership → significant positive effect on employee engagement 2. Servant leadership → significant positive effect on employee engagement 3. Destructive leadership → no significant effect on employee engagement 4. Servant leadership has slightly stronger impact than authentic leadership in hotel context 5. Key mechanisms: Psychological safety, trust, ethical behaviour, empowerment, and mutual respect

Appendix C

Results table

Author & Year	Leadership style(s) studied	Definition of WE	Generations	Relationship between WE and LS	Mechanism Type
Canavesi & Minelli (2022)	Servant Leadership (ServL)	Employee engagement refers to the physical, cognitive, and emotional involvement of employees in their work roles (Kahn, 1990).	It focuses on young employees who have just entered the workforce (1–3 years of experience)	ServL → WE (Gen Z)+	
Das, A. K., & Malik, P. (2025).	Transformational Leadership (TfL	"A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002).	Gen z	TfL → WE (Gen Z) +	
Katsaros (2025)	Inclusive Leadership (IL)	WE refer to the positive emotional connection employees have with their work, contributing to outcomes such as motivation, adaptability, and performance.	Gen Z	IL → WE (Gen Z) +	
Kimonyo (2025)	Strategic leadership (SL)	WE refer to Gen Z's motivation, satisfaction, productivity, and retention driven by alignment between personal values and leadership practices.	Gen Z	SL → WE (Gen Z) +	
Kwartawaty et al. (2024)	Transformational Leadership (TfL) Transactional Leadership (TsL) Servant Leadership (ServL)	Work engagement is defined as motivation, productivity, and employee involvement, which are enhanced by inspirational and supportive leadership.	Gen Z, compared to older generations	TfL → WE (Gen Z) + TsL → WE (Gen Z) – ServL→ WE (Gen Z) +	
Lee et al. (2021)	Transformational Leadership (TfL) Transactional Leadership (TsL)	Work engagement is defined through three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption, as per Schaufeli et al. (2002). These reflect enthusiasm, intense involvement, and deep focus at work.	Gen z	TfL → WE (Gen Z) + TsL → WE (Gen Z) -	
Loring & Wang (2022)	The article does not explicitly mention leadership styles. However, it describes various leadership behaviors that reflect elements of authentic, servant,	A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002).	Gen Z	TfL → WE (Gen Z) + TsL → WE (Gen Z) +- AuthL → WE (Gen Z) + ServL → WE (Gen Z) +	

	transformational, and transactional leadership.				
Nguyen et al. (2023)	Transformational Leadership (TfL)	Employee engagement is defined by Schaufeli et al. (2002): a positive work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.	Gen Z, Gen X, Gen Y and Baby Boomers	TransfL → WE ++ → Innovative Behavior + Transformational leadership has the strongest positive effect on work engagement, and engagement mediates the relationship between leadership and innovative behavior.	
Pandita, D., & Kumar, A. (2022).	The study does not examine formal leadership styles, but highlights leadership behavior that reflect servant (ServL) and transformational (TfL) leadership.	Job Engagement (JOB) is defined as a positive psychological state in which employees are emotionally and cognitively connected to their work.	Gen Z	ServL / TransfL → WE (Gen Z) + PSS → WE (Gen Z) ++ Support-based practices reflecting servant and transformational leadership boost Gen Z's engagement, especially via supervisor support.	
Revuru et al. (2024)	Specific leadership styles are not explicitly named, but the study describes practical behaviors aligned with authentic, servant, and a few elements of transformational leadership (TfL)	Work engagement is described as the psychological state in which Gen Z employees feel mentally, emotionally, and energetically connected to their work.	Gen Z	AuthL → WE (Gen Z) + ServL → WE (Gen Z) +	
Sigaeva et al. (2022)	Authentic Leadership (AuthL) Servant Leadership (ServL)	"A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (based on Schaufeli et al., 2002).	Gen z, Gen x, gen y	AuthL → WE (gen Z) + ServL → WE (gen Z) + However, Authentic Leadership has a stronger effect on work engagement than Servant Leadership.	Mediator PsyCap
Singh et al. (2020)	Authentic Leadership (AuthL) Servant Leadership (ServL)	"A dynamic, job-associated optimistic psychosomatic condition, operationalized by the strength and path of cognitive, emotional and behavioural energy" (Shuck et al., 2016).	Although the article does not present segmented analyses, the reported demographics allow for age-based segmentation, with nearly half of the respondents being part of Gen Z	ServL → WE ++ AuthL → WE + However, Servant Leadership has a slightly stronger effect on work engagement than Authentic Leadership.	

Appendix D

Summary Interview A

This interview was conducted with Johan Jeuken, HR Director and founder of a Dutch IT consultancy firm. He shared his insights on leading a multigenerational workforce, with a particular focus on Generation Z, who currently represent around 40% of the organization's employees. According to Jeuken, Gen Z shows high levels of motivation and engagement, but mainly within regular working hours. Unlike previous generations, they strongly value work-life balance and are less inclined to engage in work-related activities outside of those hours. Jeuken observed that Gen Z employees have distinct expectations regarding their work environment. They seek flexibility, purpose, and social responsibility from their employer, but at the same time often require emotional support, clear guidance, and frequent feedback. This combination of autonomy and structure presents a challenge that organizations must learn to navigate.

To meet these needs, the company has implemented a coaching-based leadership style. Team leaders hold regular one-on-one conversations with employees to discuss both professional and personal well-being. Daily stand-up meetings provide ongoing feedback and support. In addition, new employees under 30 are invited to join the "SynTouch Young" group, where they engage in peer support and intervision-style sessions. The organization also promotes younger team leaders who can more easily connect with Gen Z colleagues and understand their communication style and needs. Jeuken emphasized the importance of face-to-face interaction, particularly in building trust and offering emotional support. He described a case in which the absence of such personal contact led to the premature departure of a young employee. To address generational differences, the organization has also provided leadership training focused on intergenerational management, encouraging older leaders to adapt their approach by showing greater empathy and openness.

Finally, Jeuken noted that the psychological contract framework is useful in understanding Gen Z's implicit expectations. Many young employees are reluctant to voice dissatisfaction unless prompted, which makes proactive communication and regular check-ins essential. He sees the findings of this thesis as a valuable reinforcement of existing practices and a reminder of the importance of continuous attention to leadership development and employee engagement strategies.

Appendix E

Summary Interview B

This interview was conducted with Yvonne van de Graft, a lecturer at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and an experienced trainer in leadership and generational awareness. She works with Careerwise, an organization that researches and supports young professionals, and regularly delivers courses on how to effectively lead Gen Z in the workplace.

According to Van de Graft, effective leadership for Gen Z starts with self-awareness and personal growth. Leaders must be willing to reflect on their own patterns, show vulnerability, and relate to their team members on a human level. She emphasized that leadership is not about managing tasks, but about building relationships based on trust, equality, and openness.

Van de Graft noted that Gen Z employees have grown up in a culture where personal development and mental well-being are central. As a result, they expect both autonomy and clear structure at work. While they value freedom, they also need firm boundaries and regular feedback. Many leaders struggle with this balance and often underestimate the emotional support Gen Z needs to stay engaged.

To support this generation, Van de Graft recommends mentorship programs, particularly reverse mentoring. These programs allow younger employees to share their knowledge of digital trends and social developments with older leaders. According to her, this two-way learning not only strengthens engagement but also creates a more inclusive and learning-oriented culture. She described mentoring as one of the most powerful tools for bridging generational gaps.

Van de Graft also mentioned the importance of daily practices that encourage connection. She advises leaders to ask simple questions, for example: “What gives you

energy?" and "What drains you?" to spark meaningful conversations in teams. In her view, leadership is deeply relational and should create space for employees to bring their full selves to work. She was surprised by how few leaders have been trained in having meaningful conversations with their team members, even though these interactions are essential for building trust and engagement. In her experience, many leaders lack basic communication skills such as active listening, asking open questions, and creating space for reflection. Van de Graft emphasized that structured training in these areas could significantly improve leadership effectiveness and team dynamics.

Overall, she sees the growing presence of Gen Z in the workforce as an opportunity for organizations to rethink traditional leadership models and invest in a culture of curiosity, dialogue, and mutual growth.