From Boomers to Millenials

The Unexpected Strengths of Each Generation's Leaders

by Joe Folkman and Jack Zenger

Picture a modern workplace leadership meeting: A Baby Boomer executive types deliberately on her laptop while referencing printed handouts, a Gen X director efficiently leads the agenda via his tablet, and a Millennial manager seamlessly orchestrates remote team participation through multiple digital platforms. This isn't just a scene of technological evolution—it's a snapshot of how three distinct generations are reshaping the very nature of leadership in today's organizations.

For the first time in history, we're witnessing a unique convergence where three generations – each shaped by dramatically different historical, technological, and cultural forces—are simultaneously holding the reins of corporate leadership. The stereotypes are familiar: Baby Boomers with their traditional work ethic and preference for hierarchy, Generation X with their results-focused independence, and Millennials with their collaborative, tech-savvy approach. But how much truth lies in these generalizations?

Zenger Folkman conducted a comprehensive study of 4,168 leaders, evaluated in the last

three years through 360-degree assessments, which offers fascinating insights into how these generational differences actually manifest in leadership capabilities. The results challenge some long-held assumptions while confirming others, painting a nuanced picture of how each generation brings its own unique strengths to the leadership table.

Differences in Generational Leaders on 19 Leadership Competencies

In order to test the assumptions of the differences between these three generations, we compared the effectiveness ratings of leaders based on 360-degree evaluations. On average, each leader received evaluations from 14 different raters (e.g., manager, peer, direct reports, and others). The 360 -assessment measured effectiveness on 19 different leadership competencies along with employee engagement ratings.

Baby Boomers: The Seasoned Traditionalist

Our research reveals that while Baby Boomers represent just 6.1% of current leaders (in our database), their impact remains significant. These leaders, shaped by the economic prosperity of the post-war era and the civil rights movement, bring a unique perspective to leadership. Their average tenure

in leadership positions spans 25+ years, contributing to their strong customer relationships and ability to maintain employee engagement – areas where they scored notably higher than other generations in our assessment.

While they scored in the 48th percentile overall, the data identified eight areas where Baby Boomers scored significantly lower than other generations:

- **Learning Agility:** Showed resistance to asking for and acting on feedback
- **Change Management:** Less likely to recognize when change is needed
- **Innovation:** More hesitant to challenge standard approaches
- **Results Orientation:** Lower scores in pursuing aggressive goals
- **Initiative:** Less consistent in following through on commitments
- **Problem-Solving:** Less effective at anticipating potential problems
- **Decision-Making:** Slower to make and act on decisions
- **Collaboration:** Lower ratings in promoting cooperation and teamwork

However, Baby Boomers demonstrated notable strengths in two critical areas:

- **Customer and External Focus:** Excelled at understanding and meeting

customer needs
- **Employee Engagement:** Consistently higher scores in maintaining team morale and commitment

Generation X

Making up the majority of current leadership in our database (57.4%), Generation X emerged as the backbone of modern organizational leadership. Shaped by the advent of personal computing and economic uncertainty in their formative years.

> **The most successful organizations leverage complementary capabilities across generations rather than favoring one leadership style over another.**

Generation X's assessment data revealed a complex performance profile. Their challenges emerged in three key areas:

–   **Learning Agility:** Lower scores in an effort to improve based on feedback
–   **Collaboration and Teamwork:** Less effective at promoting cooperation and resolving conflict
–   **Relationship Building:** Lower ratings in building trust and maintaining awareness of others' concerns

> **The key to maximizing generational advantage lies in cross-generational mentoring, complementary team design, and fostering a continuous learning culture.**

However, Gen X leaders showed exceptional strength in four crucial areas:

–   **Strategic Perspective:** Superior ability to see beyond day-to-day operations
–   **Risk-Taking:** Higher comfort levels with balancing risks and rewards
–   **Customer Focus:** Strong skills in helping teams understand customer needs
–   **Goal Setting:** Exceptional at establishing and pursuing stretch goals

Their slightly above-average overall leadership effectiveness scores suggest they're successfully navigating the transition from traditional to modern leadership approaches.

Millennials

Representing 33.7% of current leaders (in our database), Millennials bring a fresh perspective to leadership. As digital natives who entered the workforce during the rise of social media and the gig economy, they excel in building collaborative environments and driving digital innovation.

The assessment data for Millennial leaders, revealed distinct patterns. Their challenges centered on four key areas:

–   **Strategic Perspective:** Lower ability to maintain broad organizational view
–   **Customer Focus:** Less experienced in representing organizational interests
–   **Risk-Taking:** More conservative in decision-making
–   **Goal Setting:** Less skilled at establishing stretch targets

However, Millennials demonstrated significant strengths in five critical competencies:

–   **Learning Agility:** Highest openness to feedback and improvement
–   **Collaboration:** Superior skills in promoting cooperation
–   **Relationship Building:** Strong ability to build trust and maintain connections
–   **Initiative:** Excellent follow-through on objectives
–   **Results Drive:** Consistent achievement of goals and objectives

Notably, Millennial leaders showed the highest scores in diversity and inclusion initiatives, with 73% actively implementing programs to promote workplace equity.

The Generational Leadership Advantage: Leveraging Diversity for Organizational Success

The data reveals a compelling narrative about the evolution of leadership across generations. While each generation shows distinct patterns of strengths and areas for development, the most successful organizations aren't

those that favor one generational leadership style over others, but rather those that strategically leverage their complementary capabilities.

Millennial leaders, early in their executive journey, demonstrate remarkable adaptability and drive for improvement, coupled with a strong desire to prove their worth. While they may lack the depth of experience, their hunger for feedback and willingness to adapt often accelerates their development. Generation X leaders, positioned at the peak of their careers, blend strategic thinking with calculated risk-taking. Their focus on delivering transformative results stems from both their accumulated experience and their prime position to influence organizational direction. Baby Boomer leaders, drawing on decades of experience, lead with a measured confidence that comes from navigating countless business cycles. While they may appear less aggressive in pursuing change, their teams benefit from their deep institutional knowledge and proven judgment, often resulting in higher employee trust and engagement scores. This diversity of leadership approaches creates a powerful foundation for organizational success.

The key to maximizing this generational advantage lies in three critical strategies:

1. **Cross-Generational Mentoring:** Establish formal programs where each generation can share their unique strengths.
2. **Complementary Team Design:** Structure leadership teams to leverage generational diversity.
3. **Continuous Learning Culture:** Create an environment where leaders of all generations are encouraged to develop in their areas of weakness while leveraging their natural strengths.

As we look to the future, the most successful organizations will be those that recognize that generational differences in leadership aren't obstacles to overcome, but rather strategic advantages to embrace.

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