

# SKYLINE G

## This is What Leadership Looks Like in Each Generation

*Research Findings Into Multi-  
Generational Leadership  
Perspectives and How to Maximize  
These Perspectives*

## This is What Leadership Looks Like in Each Generation

The workplace is more diverse than ever, especially when it comes to age.

The workforce is currently made up of four distinct generations: baby boomers, Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z. While this mix of ages offers a wealth of perspectives and skills to employers, it can present challenges to companies and leadership -- not only in managing different generations, but also in how each generation perceives leadership of different ages.

No generation is immune to bias. Older generations tend to think young leaders are inexperienced and entitled, while younger generations see experienced leaders as old-fashioned and stubborn. But regardless of these perceptions, each generation has unique leadership strengths.

We've taken a realistic look at the biases each generation faces, what they're really like, and their leadership strengths and weaknesses to get a true sense of what leadership at each generational level looks like.

### Baby Boomers

Baby boomers are those born between 1946 and 1964 and have been in the workforce for decades. While many are still working today, research<sup>1</sup> from Gallup in 2015 found that many are starting to retire. About 50 percent of boomers aged 60 are still working, and only about one-third of those between the ages of 67 and 68 are still in the workforce.

#### **What employees think**

Baby boomers tend to be seen as the keepers of traditional workplace values: loyalty, progression up the career ladder over time, hierarchy, and the expectation the company will reward them for their contribution. While these leaders have the most experience, their younger peers think they are stuck in the past when it comes to technology and leadership style.

In fact, a survey of professionals ages 45 to 74 conducted by AARP<sup>2</sup> in 2013 found 64 percent of these individuals said they have experienced ageism at work or when looking for a new job.

At the same time, baby boomers can be biased against leaders from younger generations who favor building relationships with employees and informal workplace policies.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/181292/third-oldest-baby-boomers-working.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys\\_statistics/general/2014/Staying-Ahead-of-the-Curve-2013-The-Work-and-Career-Study-AARP-res-gen.pdf](http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/general/2014/Staying-Ahead-of-the-Curve-2013-The-Work-and-Career-Study-AARP-res-gen.pdf)

## **What they're really like**

In reality, most baby boomers do believe in a traditional workplace hierarchy, favor formal policies, and take a more hands-off approach to leadership. And while they may be slower to implement new technology, most recognize the value it can bring to managing the workforce and the business as a whole.

## **Leadership strengths**

Baby boomers have spent the most time in the workplace overall, meaning they have the most experience in their industry and in management. Many have been with their organization for decades, giving them a strong understanding of its inner workings. They know the business and culture, allowing them to make informed decisions that will benefit their teams and the bottom line.

In addition, these professionals have benefited from the most leadership development opportunities. They've had the time and resources to grow and improve their leadership skills.

## **Leadership weaknesses**

While baby boomers are the most experienced group of leaders, they can be slow to recognize the need for change in the workplace.

When VitalSmarts<sup>3</sup> surveyed 1,200 employees in July 2016, they found that while leaders want to believe they've created environments filled with innovation and teamwork, employees think the workplace is one of obedience, competition, and predictability.

In addition, senior executives surveyed<sup>4</sup> by SuccessFactors were much more likely to be confident in their company's ability to recruit skilled workers, develop talent for the digital workplace, and plan for succession than millennial executives. And it's no surprise that only 37 percent of millennials in the same survey said senior management is proficient in using technology for competitive advantage.

Because baby boomers favor a traditional workplace hierarchy, leaders are chosen and promoted based on tenure with the company -- instead of skills, performance, and leadership potential. In fact, 76 percent of employees surveyed<sup>5</sup> by Grovo said ineffective managers at their company are frequently rewarded or promoted.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vital-smarts.com/press/2016/07/corporate-culture-chasm-employees-view-their-culture-much-more-negatively-than-management/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.successfactors.com/en\\_us/download.html?a=/content/dam/successfactors/en\\_us/resources/white-papers/leaders2020-global-factsheet.pdf](https://www.successfactors.com/en_us/download.html?a=/content/dam/successfactors/en_us/resources/white-papers/leaders2020-global-factsheet.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://a1.grovo.com/asset/whitepapers/good-managers-bad-managers.pdf>

## Takeaway

Baby boomers may have the most experience in leadership, but that doesn't mean they know everything. Leaders in this generation should still strive to innovate and challenge the status quo, even if they have been using the same processes and strategies for years.

## Generation X

Generation X is generally defined as those born in the mid-1960s through the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although this generation made up 84 percent of the workforce in 2008, according to data<sup>6</sup> from Pew Research, their workplace majority was taken over by millennials in 2015.

### What employees think

Generation X is the forgotten middle child, overshadowed by baby boomers, who tend to be their bosses, and outnumbered by millennials, who are quickly climbing the ranks, ready to take their positions.

But while Generation X is often overlooked, they have huge leadership potential -- 51 percent of those surveyed<sup>7</sup> by Future Workplace in 2015 said that Gen X employees are the most capable generation to lead organizations.

### What they're really like

Generation X as a whole falls somewhere between boomers and millennials when it comes to values, leadership style, technology adoption, and other workplace issues. After watching baby boomers work around the clock, they're more focused on work-life balance than career advancement.

### Leadership strengths

Because Generation X places more value on work-life balance, they focus on the results, not the time spent on projects. As leaders, they respect the time of their employees and recognize those who complete quality work.

In addition, Gen X leaders are less formal with their employees. They're more transparent, open, and available to their team than boomer leaders.

### Leadership weaknesses

While Generation X leaders are more in-tune with the wants and needs of their employees, they still lack experience and development. In the Grovo survey, 98 percent of middle

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/11/millennials-surpass-gen-xers-as-the-largest-generation-in-u-s-labor-force/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://about.beyond.com/press/releases/20151110-Survey-Reveals-That-Millennial-Managers-Are-the-New-Face-of-American-Business>

managers feel managers at their company need more training. And 87 percent of managers said they wish they had received more training when they first took on their role.

### **Takeaway**

Generation X has the potential to be great leaders, but they need to gain more experience. Shadowing senior leadership or presenting the benefits of learning and development opportunities can help to round-out their skills.

## Millennials

Although there is no official definition, millennials are typically classified as those born between 1980 and 1997. Although older generations tend to see them as newcomers to the workplace, more than a third of American workers today are millennials, according to the data from Pew Research.

### **What employees think**

A lot has been said about millennials, and for better or worse, everyone has their opinion on the generation. Overall, older generations see millennials as entitled professionals who overly rely on technology. After all, 85 percent of millennials surveyed<sup>8</sup> by Gallup access the internet from their phones -- more than any other generation.

That reliance on technology isn't always seen as a bad thing. In fact, Generation X and baby boomers surveyed<sup>9</sup> by Workfront rated millennials as the most tech-savvy and creative at work. But at the same time, these generations also rated millennials as the least cooperative, the least likely to take responsibility, and as the biggest complainers.

And while the majority of the workforce is made of millennials, they're still seen as inexperienced. A study<sup>10</sup> published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* in April 2016 found that younger managers face a heightened risk of being rejected by employees and peers because of their perceived lack of expertise and status. But just like any other generation, millennials have unique strengths and weaknesses when it comes to leadership.

### **What they're really like**

Millennials are ambitious and ready to take on leadership positions in order to bring big changes to the workplace. They believe in tech and its ability to transform work, want to invest in innovation, and place greater value on mentoring and leadership development.

And while millennials are still seen as the newcomers in the workplace, many are already taking the reigns, implementing changes, and leading older generations. In fact, a November

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/191459/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.workfront.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/10/workfront-state-of-enterprise-work-report-2015-final-1.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/job.2101/abstract;jsessionid=E572F730E1B9CCEC65F2D0F43CD89340.f02t01>

2015 survey<sup>11</sup> by executive development firm Future Workplace and career networking company Beyond.com found that 83 percent of respondents have seen millennials managing people from the Generation X and baby boomer generations.

### **Leadership strengths**

Millennial leaders are more in-touch with employee needs than older generations. In a September and October 2015 survey<sup>12</sup> of millennials around the globe conducted by Deloitte, respondents said what leads businesses to long-term success is employee satisfaction, loyalty, and fair treatment. They adopt a more inclusive and empathetic leadership style, as they understand the teams they were a part of not long ago themselves.

With this more employee-centric leadership style comes a greater desire to change traditional practices across the company. For example, 38 percent of millennial leaders surveyed<sup>13</sup> by SuccessFactors agreed that their organization devotes resources to training the next generation of leaders, compared with 48 percent of senior leaders. They understand the importance and need for development opportunities at every level of the organization, not just those who are already on top. Millennials want fair opportunities for all employees, understanding that more development benefits the organization with better leaders.

In addition, while older generations are more comfortable with the way things have always been done, millennial leaders are much more likely to question these traditions. In the SuccessFactors survey, millennial executives were less confident in their organization's ability to develop talent for the digital workplace and plan for succession than their peers of older generations.

### **Leadership weaknesses**

While millennials leaders are pushing for change within their organizations, many feel they don't have the skills to do so. Overall, 63 percent of millennials in the Deloitte survey said their leadership skills aren't being fully developed. And while many lead older employees every day, over one-third of millennials surveyed by Future Workplace and Beyond.com said doing so is difficult. So while millennials place less value on the traditional workplace hierarchy, it still exists, complicating their ability to lead effectively.

Millennials aren't the only ones who feel they don't have the right skills for leadership positions -- older generations feel the same way. In the same survey conducted by Future Workplace and Beyond.com, 45 percent of baby boomer and Gen X respondents said that millennials' lack of managerial experience could have a negative impact on a company's culture.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://about.beyond.com/press/releases/20151110-Survey-Reveals-That-Millennial-Managers-Are-the-New-Face-of-American-Business>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-millennial-survey-2016-exec-summary.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.successfactors.com/en\\_us/download.html?a=/content/dam/successfactors/en\\_us/resources/white-papers/leaders2020-global-factsheet.pdf](https://www.successfactors.com/en_us/download.html?a=/content/dam/successfactors/en_us/resources/white-papers/leaders2020-global-factsheet.pdf)

## Takeaway

While millennials catch a lot of flack from other generations, they are innovative leaders. They also look beyond traditional ways that things get done and are eager to contribute even if it means breaking hierarchy protocols.

But despite all their exciting new ideas, they still need to develop their finer leadership skills. Expanding learning and development opportunities and following older leaders, even if they same outdated, can help transform inventive millennials into effective and dynamic leaders.

## Generation Z

Generation Z is typically defined as those born in the late 1990s through the early 2010s. This generation is young, and only the oldest of this cohort are starting to enter the workforce. While most are still in school, Generation Z is the future of the workplace.

### What employees think

Although members of Generation Z are just starting to enter the workplace, older generations have already formed their opinions about them. Because this generation was raised with the internet, social media, and smartphones, older professionals tend to expect them to have poor communication skills.

In addition, because they are so young, older professionals view Generation Z as inexperienced and naive. And while lazy and entitled are adjectives typically reserved for millennials, professionals are attaching these perceptions to Gen Z employees as more enter the workplace.

### What they're really like

Generation Z employees aren't that different from millennials when it comes to their wants and needs. For example, a report<sup>14</sup> from Randstad found that about 40 percent of both millennials and Gen Z employees said they prefer a corporate work environment, 21 percent prefer to work in a co-working space, and 20 percent want to work from home. In addition, both generations agree that communication is the most important quality in a leader.

While Generation Z employees don't have anywhere near the same experience as baby boomers, they are ambitious and eager to learn. They crave learning and development opportunities, and are excited about new technology and its impact on workplace efficiencies.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.randstadusa.com/workforce360/managing-gen-y-z/>

## Leadership strengths

While Gen Z is thought to struggle with communication, it's actually one of their strengths. In Millennial Branding's September 2014 Gen Y and Gen Z Global Workplace Expectations Study<sup>15</sup>, 53 percent of Gen Z respondents said they prefer face-to-face communications. In addition, 39 percent of those surveyed in the Randstad report said in-person communication is the most effective way to communicate with co-workers.

Overall, Generation Z employees tend to prefer more inclusive leadership styles. In addition to communication, Gen Z listed supportive, honesty, confidence, and approachable as the most important qualities in a leader. When these employees do take on leadership positions, we can expect them to embody these qualities and use a more collaborative strategy than older generations.

And while they haven't reached leadership status yet, Generation Z is hungry for these opportunities -- 17 percent of Millennial Branding's Gen Z respondents indicated a desire to start a business and hire others. While 17 percent may seem like a small number, it's an 11 percent increase over millennials surveyed.

## Leadership weaknesses

Although many employees would see an inclusive leadership style as a strength among older leaders, it can actually be seen as weakness among young leaders -- like those in Generation Z. A study<sup>16</sup> published in *Journal of Organizational Behavior* in March 2016 found that when young managers de-emphasize their power by consulting employees, their employees actually think less of them.

That's because employees already think young leaders are inexperienced. So when these leaders ask employees for their input, employees see it as a legitimate request for knowledge and resources. In other words, employees think young leaders need their team to tell them what to do instead of taking charge themselves.

## Takeaway

Generation Z may lack experience, but they understand what it takes to be a great leader in today's workplace. With more confidence and a directive leadership style, Gen Z will be ready to take over leadership positions as they open up.

## Final Thoughts

No generation is better at leadership than another -- each has their own strengths and weaknesses. But when leaders pay attention to and adopt the skills of other generations, they can become more balanced and more effective leaders. Instead of making fast judgments

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<sup>15</sup> <http://millennialbranding.com/2014/geny-genz-global-workplace-expectations-study/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/job.2101/abstract;jsessionid=9A09D5D62640E53708C9376A461AC7B4.f01t01>



against other generations, leaders within various generations should recognize their differences and be open to working on the skills they lack themselves.

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*Here are some questions to consider as you think about working with others that are part of your generation and other generations:*

- *What do you need to consider when interacting with co-workers of your generation?*
- *What do you need to consider when interacting with co-workers of other generations?*
- *What steps can you take to better understand and collaborate with co-workers from other generations?*
- *In consideration of the steps you can take think about:*
  - *Your expectations for how work gets done.*
  - *Your expectations for how people best communicate with each other.*
  - *Your expectations for how you and others should communicate with leaders.*
  - *Your expectations for how you and others should be promoted (i.e., should it be based upon skills, tenor, etc.)*

<sup>17</sup> <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/job.2101/abstract>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/191459/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-millennial-survey-2016-exec-summary.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/11/millennials-surpass-gen-xers-as-the-largest-generation-in-u-s-labor-force/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.randstadusa.com/workforce360/managing-gen-y-z/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://millennialbranding.com/2014/geny-genz-global-workplace-expectations-study/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.achievers.com/press/many-employees-north-america-and-united-kingdom-are-not-happy-work-according-achievers-latest>

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## About Skyline Group

Skyline Group is the leading provider of scalable leadership solutions including leadership coaching, our superior 360 assessment, and leadership coaching technology - C4X. Launched in 2012, C4X is the only coaching solution that gives you the ability to develop all of your leaders consistently and systematically. Learn more at [SkylineG.com](http://SkylineG.com) and [C4X.com](http://C4X.com).



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