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## Empathetic Leadership in Managing Generation Z

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### Abstract:

**Purpose:** This paper examines the relationship between leadership style, feedback practices, and the mental well-being of younger employees in contemporary organizations. It focuses particularly on Generation Z and analyzes how empathetic management and future-oriented feedback may better address the psychological and professional needs of this cohort. The study also considers intergenerational differences in the workplace and their implications for leadership effectiveness..

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study adopts a conceptual research approach based on a critical review of literature on generational diversity, emotional intelligence, mental well-being, and feedback practices. The analysis integrates perspectives from leadership studies, organizational behavior, and employee well-being research. Particular attention is given to empathetic leadership and the Feed Forward model as tools for supporting younger employees.

**Findings:** The analysis suggests that effective management in the 21st century requires adapting leadership styles and communication practices to the distinct expectations of different employee generations. Generation Z appears to be more vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and reduced psychological resilience, which increases the importance of supportive leadership and psychologically safe work environments. The findings indicate that

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*empathetic leadership and future-oriented feedback may enhance motivation, engagement, and mental well-being among younger employees.*

**Research limitations/implications:** *The study is conceptual and based primarily on literature analysis rather than empirical testing. Future research could include cross-generational comparative studies, industry-specific analyses, and empirical assessments of the impact of empathetic leadership and Feed Forward practices on employee well-being and performance. Additional research could also explore the long-term effects of feedback style on resilience and retention among younger workers.*

**Practical recommendations:** *Organizations should adapt leadership and communication practices to the needs of a multigenerational workforce. Managers should strengthen empathetic leadership competencies and use feedback methods that reduce defensiveness and support growth, particularly in relation to younger employees. Regular, constructive, and future-oriented feedback may improve employee development, workplace relationships, and mental well-being.*

**Keywords:** *Empathetic leadership, feedback, Feed Forward, Generation Z, mental well-being, multigenerational workforce.*

**JEL Codes:** *M12, M14, J24, J28.*

**Paper type:** *Conceptual paper.*

**Declaration of interest statement:** *The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.*

## **1. Introduction**

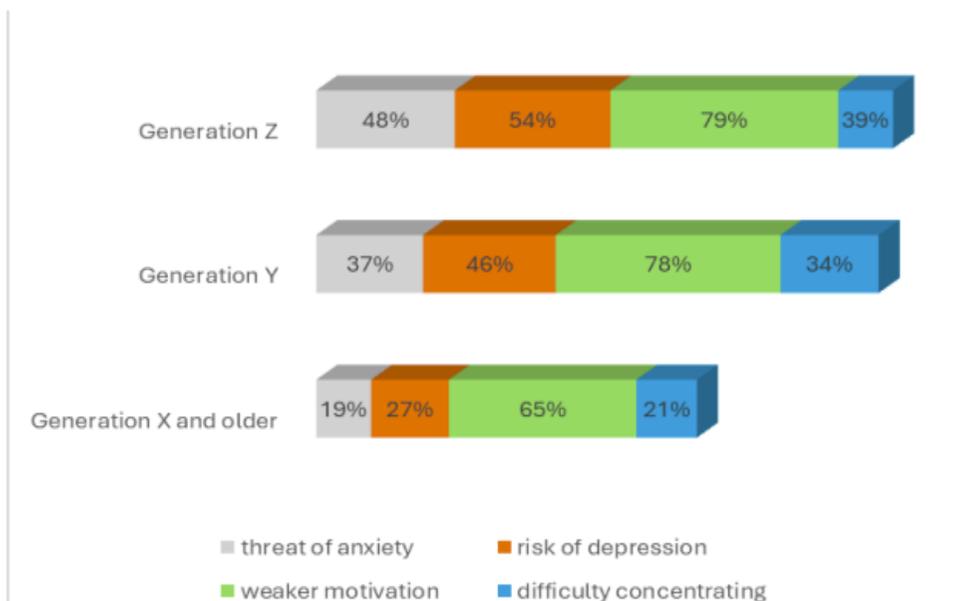
Contemporary organizations operate in an environment shaped by rapid technological change, economic uncertainty, demographic transformation, and evolving employee expectations. Under these conditions, effective leadership increasingly depends not only on managerial competence or formal authority, but also on the ability to adapt communication and management practices to the characteristics of a diverse workforce.

One of the most visible dimensions of this diversity is generational differentiation. In today's labor market, Generation X, Generation Y (Millennials), and Generation Z frequently coexist within the same organizational structures, bringing with them different values, expectations, communication preferences, and attitudes toward work (Twenge, 2010; Deal *et al.*, 2010; Kuszewska and Sobierajski, 2023). As a result, generational diversity has become an important issue in organizational behavior, leadership studies, and human resource management.

Among the generations currently active in the labor market, Generation Z deserves particular attention. As the first cohort to grow up fully immersed in a digital environment, Generation Z has been shaped by permanent connectivity, rapid information exchange, social media dynamics, and high exposure to uncertainty and evaluation.

These conditions have influenced not only work preferences and communication styles, but also psychological resilience and mental well-being. Recent studies suggest that younger employees are more likely to report anxiety, stress, emotional overload, and lower resilience than older generations (Cohen *et al.*, 2022; Deloitte, 2024; Mindgram and SW Research, 2024). This makes Generation Z a particularly important group in discussions on leadership style, workplace communication, and employee well-being.

**Figure 1.** Mindgram, SW Research, Report 2024b: Study on the well-being of Polish employees



**Source:** Own study.

In response to these developments, leadership models based on empathy, emotional intelligence, and psychological safety are gaining significance. Empathetic leadership emphasizes understanding employees' needs, recognizing their emotional states, and building supportive relationships grounded in trust and constructive communication. In multigenerational workplaces, such an approach may be especially relevant because it allows leaders to adjust their management style to varying levels of sensitivity, motivation, and communication preferences.

In the case of younger employees, empathetic leadership may play an additional role by supporting mental well-being and reducing the negative effects of workplace stress.

An equally important element of leadership in this context is feedback. Feedback remains one of the most influential managerial tools in shaping employee development, engagement, and performance. Research indicates that effective internal communication and feedback culture significantly influence employee motivation, engagement, and organizational effectiveness (Baran *et al.*, 2025; Górká *et al.*, 2025).

However, its effectiveness depends not only on frequency or clarity, but also on the form in which it is delivered and the emotional impact it generates. Traditional corrective feedback models may be experienced by younger employees as overly critical or threatening, especially in contexts where psychological resilience is lower.

By contrast, future-oriented approaches such as Marshall Goldsmith's Feed Forward model may offer a more developmental and less defensive framework for leadership communication (Goldsmith, 2007; Stone and Heen, 2014).

Although the literature has extensively examined generational differences in work attitudes, leadership, and employee feedback, less attention has been paid to the intersection of these fields, particularly in relation to the mental well-being of Generation Z employees.

Existing studies often analyze generational preferences, psychological resilience, or feedback effectiveness separately, while comparatively fewer contributions explore how empathetic leadership and future-oriented feedback practices may jointly support younger employees in multigenerational organizational settings.

This paper addresses that gap by examining the role of empathetic leadership and adaptive feedback in supporting the mental well-being, engagement, and development of Generation Z employees.

The article contributes to the literature by integrating research on generational diversity, employee mental well-being, and leadership communication, while also highlighting the practical relevance of Feed Forward as a supportive management tool in contemporary organizations.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses generational diversity, psychological resilience, and the relevance of leadership style in contemporary organizations. The third section examines feedback as a managerial tool, with particular emphasis on younger employees and the potential advantages of future-oriented feedback models. The final section presents the conclusions, practical implications, and directions for future research.

## 2. Generational Diversity, Psychological Resilience, and Leadership Style

Generational diversity is now a defining feature of contemporary organizations. The coexistence of employees from Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z creates both opportunities and challenges for managers. On the one hand, multigenerational teams may contribute to knowledge exchange, innovation, and complementary skills.

On the other hand, differing expectations regarding work, communication, feedback, authority, and career progression may create tensions and require more adaptive leadership approaches (Twenge, 2010; Deal *et al.*, 2010; Norena-Chavez and Thalassinos, 2022).

Generation X is often associated with a strong work ethic, high self-reliance, and an acceptance of organizational hierarchy. Employees from this generation generally value job security, clear expectations, and long-term career development. Millennials, in contrast, are more likely to seek flexibility, work-life balance, and organizational values aligned with their personal beliefs. They also tend to prefer collaborative work and regular feedback from leaders (Deloitte, 2023).

Generation Z, the youngest cohort currently entering the workforce, differs further in its socialization patterns and workplace expectations. Having grown up in a digital and highly networked environment, this generation is accustomed to speed, accessibility, and continuous interaction.

In professional contexts, these employees often expect flexibility, openness, rapid communication, regular appreciation, and opportunities for personal growth. They are also more likely to value authenticity, inclusion, and psychological safety in the workplace (HR Daily Advisor, 2024).

These intergenerational differences mean that a single, uniform leadership model is unlikely to be effective across all employee groups (Hersey *et al.*, 2007). Instead, organizations increasingly require leaders who are capable of adapting their communication, motivation, and feedback strategies to the distinct characteristics of different generational cohorts.

Mental well-being has become an increasingly important topic in organizational research and practice, particularly in relation to younger employees. Recent findings suggest that Generation Z demonstrates lower psychological resilience and higher susceptibility to anxiety, emotional stress, and mental overload than older employee groups (Cohen *et al.*, 2022).

This trend has become especially visible in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, which intensified uncertainty, digital dependency, and emotional strain among younger individuals.

In Poland, data reported by Mindgram and SW Research (2024) indicate that nearly half of employed members of Generation Z experience symptoms associated with anxiety. Similar concerns are reflected in broader European studies of youth mental health, which suggest that younger adults face heightened emotional strain in the post-pandemic environment (FEPS-Europe, 2022).

Such findings imply that younger employees may require more supportive managerial approaches and better-adapted communication practices than previous generations (Tokarz-Kocik, 2024).

The lower resilience of younger workers does not imply lower capability or ambition. Rather, it suggests that the context in which they have developed socially and professionally differs substantially from that of older cohorts.

Continuous exposure to digital stimuli, fast-paced interaction, performance pressure, and social comparison may intensify vulnerability to criticism, stress, and uncertainty. In workplace settings, this can affect how younger employees respond to managerial communication, performance evaluations, and developmental feedback.

These developments increase the importance of leadership models grounded in empathy, emotional intelligence, and psychological safety. Goleman (1997) emphasized that emotional intelligence is a critical leadership competence because it enables leaders to understand others' emotions, regulate their own responses, and build constructive interpersonal relationships. In multigenerational workplaces, such competencies become even more important because leaders must navigate different expectations, sensitivities, and communication styles.

Empathetic leadership involves recognizing and understanding employees' emotions, needs, and individual circumstances (Gut and Haman, 2014). It is not simply a matter of kindness, but a leadership practice grounded in attentive listening, trust-building, constructive communication, and meaningful support.

For younger workers, especially those from Generation Z, such an approach may be particularly important because it reduces perceived threat, increases openness, and supports emotional stability in the workplace.

In practical terms, empathetic management may include regular one-to-one meetings, active listening, respectful feedback, recognition of employee effort, and support in dealing with professional and emotional challenges. Such practices can improve the motivation and engagement of younger employees while also strengthening their sense of belonging and psychological security. As a result, empathetic leadership may contribute not only to well-being but also to higher productivity, stronger commitment, and healthier workplace relationships.

### **3. Feedback as a Tool of Effective Leadership in Multigenerational Organizations**

Feedback is one of the most important communication tools available to managers. It plays a critical role in employee development, competence building, motivation, and performance improvement. Effective feedback helps employees understand what they are doing well, which areas require further development, and how they can improve their future behavior and results (Almarode *et al.*, 2022; Duckor and Holmberg, 2022).

At the same time, feedback is often one of the most difficult elements of managerial communication. This is especially true when it concerns developmental shortcomings, mistakes, or behavioral issues. While feedback is intended to support improvement, it may also generate defensiveness, frustration, shame, or disengagement if delivered in an overly critical or poorly timed manner (Stone and Heen, 2014).

These risks are especially important in the context of younger employees, who may be more sensitive to direct criticism and more strongly influenced by the emotional tone of managerial communication.

Generation Z has been shaped by a social environment characterized by immediacy, interactivity, and continuous digital response. Social media, instant communication, and visible metrics of approval have created a context in which feedback is often fast, frequent, and emotionally rewarding. As a result, younger employees may enter the workplace with expectations for more regular feedback, quicker recognition, and more supportive communication than older generations.

Research from Zensai (2023) indicates that members of Generation Z strongly expect regular feedback and often perceive it as an opportunity for learning and development. This suggests that younger employees do not reject feedback itself; rather, they may respond more positively to feedback that is developmental, respectful, and future-oriented. If feedback is experienced as excessively critical, vague, or punitive, it may undermine confidence, increase stress, and negatively affect motivation.

This issue is particularly important in light of the mental health vulnerabilities discussed earlier. For some younger employees, corrective feedback delivered by a manager may be one of the few moments in their professional lives when someone communicates directly and explicitly that improvement is necessary.

Without an appropriate leadership style, such moments may generate stress, a sense of inadequacy, and emotional withdrawal. Therefore, the effectiveness of feedback depends not only on content but also on method, tone, timing, and perceived intention.

One of the traditional models used in managerial feedback is the FUKO framework, which focuses on facts, feelings, consequences, and expectations. This model offers clarity and structure and can help leaders communicate feedback in an organized way. Its strength lies in presenting observable facts, explaining the emotional and practical impact of employee behavior, and articulating expectations for the future.

However, despite these advantages, traditional corrective feedback models may be experienced by younger employees as overly evaluative or overly focused on past mistakes. In such cases, feedback may be perceived as criticism rather than developmental guidance. This creates a risk that the conversation will reduce psychological safety instead of strengthening learning and engagement.

An alternative approach is the Feed Forward model, popularized by Marshall Goldsmith (2007). Unlike traditional feedback, Feed Forward shifts the focus from past shortcomings to future possibilities. Rather than analyzing what went wrong in detail, the model emphasizes what can be done better going forward. This makes the conversation less defensive and more oriented toward development, growth, and constructive action.

The logic of Feed Forward is also consistent with growth-oriented thinking and developmental learning (Dweck, 2013). By emphasizing future behavior and improvement potential, the model supports a mindset focused on learning rather than failure. This can be particularly beneficial for younger employees who may experience strong emotional reactions to criticism but remain highly open to guidance that is framed positively and constructively.

In practical terms, the Feed Forward approach may be summarized in three steps. First, the leader identifies the relevant behavior or situation. Second, the leader invites reflection by asking about the reasons behind that behavior. Third, the discussion moves toward future expectations, desired behavior, and developmental possibilities. In this way, the conversation becomes a shared reflection on improvement rather than a one-sided judgment of past performance.

Such an approach may increase the sense of safety, openness, and agency among younger employees. Because the emphasis is placed on learning and improvement, rather than blame, Feed Forward may reduce frustration and defensive reactions while strengthening developmental motivation. This is particularly important in relation to Generation Z, whose expectations for communication are closely tied to recognition, growth, and relational quality.

From a managerial perspective, the value of Feed Forward lies in its ability to combine performance support with psychological sensitivity. It does not eliminate accountability or standards, but it changes the emotional structure of the conversation. In this sense, it can be understood as a practical tool of empathetic

leadership, especially in organizations seeking to support employee well-being while also maintaining high performance expectations.

Overall, the analysis suggests that feedback should not be treated as a purely technical communication tool. In multigenerational organizations, feedback is also a relational and psychological intervention. Leaders who adapt their feedback methods to employee needs, especially those of younger generations, may be better able to strengthen resilience, motivation, and workplace well-being.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Contemporary leadership requires more than technical competence and formal authority. In multigenerational organizations, effective management increasingly depends on the ability to adapt leadership style and communication practices to the distinct expectations of different employee groups. This is particularly important in relation to Generation Z, whose workplace experiences are strongly shaped by digital socialization, expectations of immediacy, and greater vulnerability to stress and anxiety.

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that empathetic leadership is particularly well suited to the needs of younger employees. By fostering trust, active listening, psychological safety, and respectful communication, empathetic management can support both well-being and organizational effectiveness. In this sense, emotional intelligence is not merely an interpersonal asset but a strategic leadership competence in the contemporary workplace.

The paper also highlights the role of feedback as a central element of supportive leadership. While traditional feedback models may remain useful in some contexts, younger employees may respond more positively to future-oriented and development-focused approaches. The Feed Forward model appears especially relevant in this regard because it encourages reflection, growth, and openness to change while reducing the emotional burden often associated with criticism.

From a theoretical perspective, the paper contributes to the literature by linking research on generational diversity, leadership, feedback, and mental well-being. From a practical perspective, it suggests that organizations should invest in leadership development models that combine empathy with adaptive communication and future-oriented feedback practices.

Such an approach may improve employee motivation, resilience, and mental well-being while also strengthening workplace relationships and long-term organizational performance (Cwiąkała *et al.*, 2025; Kasperczyk *et al.*, 2025).

The article is conceptual in nature and therefore has limitations typical of literature-based analyses. Future studies should empirically examine the impact of empathetic

leadership and Feed Forward practices on employee well-being, resilience, and performance across different generations and organizational settings. Comparative studies could also explore whether the observed dynamics differ across cultures, industries, and levels of organizational maturity.

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