

ASSESSMENT OF LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES BY GENERATION Z

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Purpose: The aim of the text was to identify the leadership competencies that are rated highest and lowest by representatives of Generation Z. Additionally, the aim of the article was to examine whether there are statistically significant differences in the ratings of these competencies between the men and women participating in the study.

Design/methodology/approach: The following research hypotheses were proposed: H1: There are specific leadership competencies that are particularly desired by the surveyed representatives of Generation Z, H2: There are specific leadership competencies that are particularly undesired by the respondents from Generation Z, and H3: There are statistically significant differences in the ratings of leadership competencies between Generation Z men and women.

Findings: The results of the conducted analyses confirm hypothesis H1 - respondents highly value abilities such as admitting mistakes, learning from the past, and supporting new ideas and solutions, indicating a high level of desirability for these specific leadership competencies. Hypothesis H2 is also confirmed by the analysis results, where the ability to predict opinions and the future received the lowest average ratings. Hypothesis H3 is partially confirmed. Although most competencies did not show statistically significant differences in the ratings between women and men, there are significant differences for selected skills.

Research limitations/implications: The limitations of the text include the lack of representativeness of the study, which results in the inability to generalize the findings. Directions for further research may include, among other things, determining differences in the perception of leadership competencies arising from various cultural traditions.

Originality/value: The results may be significant for both the academic community and practitioners. The conducted analysis provides valuable insights into the understanding of generational theory, offering important information about the preferences and expectations of Generation Z in the labor market.

Keywords: leadership competencies, Generation Z.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

In the current labor market context, the coexistence of four generations of employees, shaped by diverse socio-economic contexts, can be observed. These generations are characterized by varying value systems, career goals, levels of engagement, and motivational preferences (Črešnar, Nedelko, 2020; Róžańska-Bińczyk, 2022). Additionally, representatives of these generations differ in their perception of personal development, loyalty to the organization, and dedication to organizational goals (Warwas, Wiktorowicz, Jawor-Joniewicz, 2018, p. 22). Their expectations regarding work ethics, management methods, and the perception of the employee's role within contemporary organizational structures are also diverse (Bińczycki, Łukasiński, Dorocki, 2023, p. 95). Although the topic of intergenerational differences in the labor market and their potential impacts has been a subject of analysis and discussion among business practitioners, researchers, and publicists for several decades (Pollak et al., 2015, p. 182), the latest Generation Z introduces new challenges and distinctive characteristics to the labor market that have not yet been fully identified or understood (Dwivedula, Singh, Azaran, 2019; Chillakuri, 2020).

Researchers emphasize the increasing role of manager-leaders in creating conditions for effective collaboration (Juchnowicz, 2014). The role of leaders in human resource management is considered by many authors to be crucial for the effectiveness of employee performance and for inspiring them to work more efficiently. Understanding which leadership competencies are most valued by Generation Z will enable organizations to better integrate these young employees, ensuring that leaders can effectively motivate, engage, and develop their potential. Considering that Generation Z will constitute an increasingly larger part of the workforce, studying their expectations of leaders is not only important for understanding the dynamics of modern workplaces but also critical for the future success of organizations. Therefore, the main objective of the presented text was to identify the leadership competencies that are rated highest and lowest by representatives of Generation Z. Additionally, the aim of the article was to examine whether there are statistically significant differences in the ratings of these competencies between the men and women participating in the study.

2. Review of the literature

As of December 31, 2022, there were approximately 6 million people belonging to Generation Z living in Poland. Among them, there were 1134.8 thousand aged 15-17, 692.6 thousand aged 18-19, 1828.4 thousand aged 20-24, and 2176.9 thousand aged 25-29 (Demographic Yearbook 2023, p. 139). In the most optimistic forecasts, they currently

constitute no more than 10% of the total number of employed individuals (Wasiluk, Tomaszuk, 2022, pp. 61-62). However, over time, a gradual increase in their presence and role in the labor market can be expected. It is predicted that by 2028, the share of Generation Z in the global workforce will rise to 58% (Responsible Business Forum, 2022). Therefore, considering the specifics and needs of Generation Z becomes not only a strategic issue for enterprises and organizations but also an essential element of long-term human capital development planning.

In the face of easy and widespread access to information, Generation Z is characterized by a different approach to personal development compared to previous generations of employees. Access to on-demand information and the ability to instantly acquire knowledge to solve specific problems are becoming crucial. These individuals tend to focus on acquiring and utilizing only the information they need at a given moment, without developing skills in a cascading or linear manner (Ragin-Skorecka, Motała, Boguszewska, 2023).

In the opinion of employers, these individuals are often perceived as extremely demanding, difficult to work with, and requiring a special approach. They do not hesitate to clearly express their wishes and expect to be noticed and appreciated (Silva Sousa, Colauto, 2021). Unlike previous generations, they are not afraid to question established norms. They often wonder why advancing in the professional hierarchy must take so long (Wiktorowicz, 2016, p. 76; Lanier, 2017).

Generation Z is also characterized by a specific approach to the decision-making process and risk management. Their willingness to make quick decisions, often in conditions of uncertainty, may be linked to experiences from interacting with computer games, which shape the ability to respond swiftly and adapt to changing conditions. These games, through the possibility of experimenting and learning from mistakes in a controlled environment, may have contributed to the development of the belief in the ability to "reset" situations and try different solutions without long-term consequences (Ragin-Skorecka, Motała, Boguszewska, 2023).

This generation is often attributed with laziness, a lack of loyalty, and a somewhat more "relaxed" approach to work (Kukla, Nowacka, 2019). Researchers also highlight their strong egocentric tendencies, which affect their ability to cooperate in groups, willingness to compromise, and sharing (Muster, 2020; Leśniak, 2022, p. 69).

All of this makes working with the younger generation a challenge for management. Generation Z brings a new perspective and fresh approach to work. To effectively lead these young employees, leaders must be flexible, open to change, and willing to adapt to new expectations. Only then will they be able to fully harness the potential of this dynamic generation and guide their companies toward the future (Dąbrowska-Prokopowska, Nowacki, 2020).

Despite the growing interest of researchers in the topic of Generation Z in the labor market, reflected in numerous studies focusing on various related aspects, the issue of how this generation perceives leadership and managerial competencies remains an open and insufficiently explored question. There is a lack of detailed studies concentrating exclusively

on this subject (Wasiluk, 2023). Therefore, addressing the perception of leadership competencies by Generation Z in this text can significantly contribute to filling the existing research gap, thereby highlighting the importance of this issue.

Effective leadership is crucial for the success of any organization (Benmira, Agboola, 2021). Leadership is one of the most complex and multidimensional phenomena, which has been extensively studied over the years and has gained more significance than ever before in today's dynamic and increasingly globalized world. Nevertheless, the topic of leadership continues to provoke intense and intricate debates due to its complexity (Benmira, Agboola, 2021). W. Bennis notes that "leadership is the most studied and least understood topic of any in the social sciences" and "never have so many laboured so long to say so little" (Wirth, 2023).

The art of leadership has evolved over time, adapting to complex societies and new challenges, particularly in the 20th century as a result of the industrial revolution and technological advancements (Haider, 2023). In today's context, it is important to find the appropriate leadership style for different generations (Tortorella et al., 2019; Fotso, 2022). It is essential to consider the leadership competency preferences of new generations (Kusumawati et al., 2023), as these can differ significantly from the preferences of older employees (Forastero, Sjabadhyni, Mustika, 2018). However, some researchers argue that younger and older generations are much more similar than different (Fotso, 2024).

In the context of managing modern organizations, competency models are considered essential and effective tools for supporting the achievement of strategic goals and promoting organizational values. Most companies carefully study and precisely describe important leadership competencies. In the complex reality in which organizations operate, leaders do not always serve as catalysts for positive change. Often, employees themselves are most aware of what actions could improve their work and increase its efficiency (Baczyńska, 2018, p. 115). However, the literature lacks consensus on the set of traits or competencies that could serve as a basis for evaluating leadership effectiveness. Various authors propose their own sets of competencies deemed desirable in leaders (Karna, Knap-Stefaniuk, 2019, p. 56; Jagielska, 2023). This diversity of approaches underscores the complexity and multidimensionality of leadership in a dynamically changing business environment, highlighting the need for continuous research and adaptation of competency models to meet current and future challenges faced by leaders.

3. Research methods

The main objective of the text was to identify the leadership competencies that are rated highest and lowest by representatives of Generation Z. Additionally, the aim of the article was to examine whether there are statistically significant differences in the ratings of these competencies between the men and women participating in the study.

The following research questions were formulated:

RQ 1 – Which competencies are most desired in leaders according to the respondents?

RQ 2 – Which competencies are least desired in leaders according to the respondents?

RQ 3 – Are there statistically significant differences between the ratings of men and women participating in the study?

The following research hypotheses were proposed:

H1: There are specific leadership competencies that are particularly desired by the surveyed representatives of Generation Z.

H2: There are specific leadership competencies that are particularly undesired by the respondents from Generation Z.

H3: There are statistically significant differences in the ratings of leadership competencies between Generation Z men and women.

In the context of determining the leadership competencies expected by Generation Z, a questionnaire developed by the team of A.K. Koźmiński, A.K. Baczyńska, and P. Korzyński (2018, pp. 274-275) was used, which had been utilized in their previous studies. Unlike the original research, where participants described specific individuals, in this study, respondents referred to a hypothetical supervisor, indicating their desired competencies. This approach allowed for the collection of data on the competency preferences of Generation Z in the context of leadership, which can provide valuable insights for the development of competency models in organizations (Table 1).

Table 1.

The questionnaire used to measure leadership competencies

Question mark	Items
L 1	My supervisor should be able to anticipate the opinions of others
L 2	My supervisor should be able to find more interesting opportunities in the market
L 3	My supervisor should demonstrate what is important to them at work, such as attention to detail, results, and collaboration
L 4	My supervisor should effectively encourage others to work hard
L 5	My supervisor should modify their actions based on the information obtained
L 6	My supervisor should identify obstacles and threats
L 7	My supervisor should have intuition and accurately predict the future
L 8	My supervisor should strive for professional perfection and professionalism
L 9	My supervisor should encourage the achievement of important goals that the entire team intends to achieve
L 10	My supervisor should be able to admit their mistakes
L 11	My supervisor should consider different possibilities and scenarios of action
L 12	My supervisor should accurately predict future opportunities for the organization, product, or service
L 13	My supervisor should set high standards of performance
L 14	My supervisor should inspire respect and recognition among the employees of the company
L 15	My supervisor should draw accurate conclusions from past experiences (learn from mistakes)
L 16	My supervisor should create contingency plans (Plan B)
L 17	My supervisor should support new and interesting ideas and solutions
L 18	My supervisor should set ambitious but achievable goals
L 19	My supervisor should be able to inspire and lead others

Cont. table 1.

L 20	My supervisor should adequately assess their capabilities in various situations
L 21	My supervisor should have long-term action plans
L 22	My supervisor should show others the opportunities and threats
L 23	My supervisor should not give up in the face of problems
L 24	The information provided by my supervisor should inspire others to take action
L 25	My supervisor should analyze future events in terms of what worked and what failed

Source: based on (Baczyńska, Koźmiński, Korzyński, 2018, pp. 274-275).

The analyses presented in this text are part of a broader study conducted among representatives of Generation Z in 2022 (from January to December). Data were collected using two methods: a paper-and-pencil interview (PAPI) and an online survey (CAWI). The online survey was hosted on Google Drive. The link to the survey, with a request to complete it, was disseminated via social media, among other channels. Respondents who completed the survey were asked to share it with their acquaintances. For the analyses presented in this text, only questionnaires filled out by individuals with an educational background in social sciences (either completed studies or currently studying) were used—394 individuals in total. Among this group of respondents, there were 232 women (59%) and 162 men (41%).

The responses received from the respondents were coded and subjected to statistical analysis using Statistica 14.0 software.

The reliability of the measurement scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was 0.94. This indicates a very high level of reliability.

To verify hypotheses H1 and H2, basic statistical measures were used: arithmetic mean (M), median (Me), and standard deviation (SD). To verify hypothesis H3, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed.

4. Analiza wyników badań i ich dyskusja

Respondents highly value abilities such as admitting mistakes (L 10, $M = 4.46$), learning from the past (L 15, $M = 4.51$), and supporting new ideas and solutions (L 17, $M = 4.37$). These results highlight that, regardless of gender, respondents appreciate leaders who learn from their mistakes, are open to innovation, and admit their errors. On the other hand, the ability to predict opinions and the future is rated the lowest by the respondents (L 1, $M = 3.09$), indicating a preference for competencies related to concrete actions and responses to current challenges over abstract predictive skills. This underscores that the respondents value openness to change, learning from experiences, and supporting development more than attempts to predict others' reactions.

Other competencies such as intuition and accurately predicting the future (L 7, $M = 3.80$) and setting high standards of performance (L 13, $M = 4.00$) followed. It is worth noting that the median for these two cases was 4. This indicates that most respondents rate these skills as above average but not the most desirable.

Table 2.*Basic descriptive statistics of the studied variables and the results of the Mann-Whitney U test*

Items	Total respondents			Women			Men			Test U Mann-Whitney		
	<i>M</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
L 1	3,09	3,00	1,15	2,94	3,00	1,17	3,31	3,00	1,08	15491,0	-3,07	0,002
L 2	4,23	4,00	0,82	4,25	4,00	0,83	4,22	4,00	0,82	18291,0	0,49	0,626
L 3	4,23	4,00	0,82	4,25	4,00	0,83	4,22	4,00	0,82	18291,0	0,49	0,626
L 4	4,11	4,00	0,87	4,10	4,00	0,89	4,12	4,00	0,84	18770,0	0,02	0,984
L 5	4,11	4,00	0,85	4,03	4,00	0,82	4,23	4,00	0,87	15940,5	-2,74	0,006
L 6	4,31	4,00	0,80	4,27	4,00	0,82	4,36	5,00	0,76	17822,5	-0,95	0,340
L 7	3,82	4,00	0,93	3,80	4,00	0,95	3,86	4,00	0,90	18010,5	-0,74	0,461
L 8	4,04	4,00	0,91	3,98	4,00	0,93	4,12	4,00	0,87	17269,5	-1,45	0,148
L 9	4,25	4,00	0,80	4,31	4,00	0,78	4,17	4,00	0,84	17208,5	1,54	0,122
L 10	4,46	5,00	0,84	4,46	5,00	0,84	4,46	5,00	0,85	18746,0	-0,05	0,962
L 11	4,34	5,00	0,80	4,35	5,00	0,79	4,31	4,00	0,82	18246,0	0,54	0,589
L 12	4,14	4,00	0,82	4,19	4,00	0,81	4,07	4,00	0,83	17267,0	1,47	0,143
L 13	4,00	4,00	0,86	4,01	4,00	0,91	3,99	4,00	0,80	18152,0	0,61	0,542
L 14	4,26	4,50	0,87	4,31	5,00	0,86	4,20	4,00	0,87	17454,5	1,31	0,190
L 15	4,51	5,00	0,77	4,53	5,00	0,78	4,48	5,00	0,75	17865,5	0,98	0,325
L 16	4,21	4,00	0,87	4,28	4,00	0,85	4,12	4,00	0,88	16687,5	2,04	0,041
L 17	4,37	5,00	0,79	4,40	5,00	0,79	4,33	4,50	0,79	17705,5	1,09	0,278
L 18	4,41	5,00	0,81	4,46	5,00	0,81	4,33	5,00	0,81	16947,5	1,87	0,061
L 19	4,21	4,00	0,89	4,21	4,00	0,87	4,21	4,00	0,93	18461,5	-0,32	0,749
L 20	4,30	4,00	0,82	4,33	5,00	0,81	4,27	4,00	0,82	17899,0	0,88	0,380
L 21	4,08	4,00	0,89	4,08	4,00	0,89	4,07	4,00	0,88	18706,5	0,08	0,935
L 22	4,14	4,00	0,88	4,20	4,00	0,80	4,07	4,00	0,99	17947,5	0,81	0,417
L 23	4,32	5,00	0,94	4,30	5,00	0,96	4,35	5,00	0,91	18383,0	-0,41	0,682
L 24	4,19	4,00	0,90	4,20	4,00	0,90	4,18	4,00	0,90	18555,5	0,23	0,819
L 25	4,24	4,00	0,91	4,20	4,00	0,94	4,29	4,00	0,87	17919,5	-0,85	0,394

M – mean, *Me* – median, *SD* – standard deviation, *U* – Mann-Whitney U statistic, *Z* – statistic that results from the normalization of *U*, *p* – probability.

Source: Own work.

The standard deviation in almost all cases does not exceed 1, indicating relatively small variance in the ratings among respondents. Only in the case of the ability to anticipate the opinions of others (L 1) do the respondents' ratings significantly deviate from the mean ($SD = 1.15$). This may suggest individual experiences or expectations.

The similarities in the ratings of leadership competencies by the surveyed women and men suggest that both genders value similar traits in leaders. These include the ability to learn from past experiences (L 15, $M = 4.53$ for women and 4.48 for men), the ability to admit mistakes (L 10, $M = 4.46$ for both groups), setting ambitious but realistic goals (L 18, $M = 4.46$ for women and 4.33 for men), supporting innovation (L 17, $M = 4.40$ for women and 4.33 for men), and identifying risks and obstacles (L 6, $M = 4.27$ for women and 4.36 for men). This indicates that these key competencies are universally desired in an effective leader, regardless of gender.

Research conducted by D. Zehetner-Hirtenlehner (2023) confirms that Generation Z emphasizes social aspects such as team spirit and the work environment. These findings align with the author's study, in which respondents highly rated leaders' abilities to support new ideas and solutions (L 17, $M = 4.37$) and to admit mistakes (L 10, $M = 4.46$). These competencies

highlight the value of openness, collaboration, and transparency in the workplace, which foster a positive atmosphere and strengthen team spirit.

K. Gabrielova and A. Buchko (2021) state that taking actions to strengthen social aspects can reduce intergenerational conflicts and increase the morale and productivity of Generation Z employees. The results presented in this text, showing high ratings for leaders' ability to learn from past experiences (L 15, $M = 4.51$) and support innovation (L 17, $M = 4.37$), suggest that Generation Z values leaders who can learn from mistakes and are open to new solutions. This approach can indeed contribute to reducing intergenerational conflicts by promoting a culture of learning and innovation.

In contrast, S. Arefiev and K. Niemashkalo (2023) emphasize the importance of transactional leadership elements such as clear and prompt communication, clear expectations, and transparent rules, which help Generation Z feel secure. The author's study indicates that competencies such as identifying obstacles and threats (L 6, $M = 4.31$) and creating contingency plans (L 16, $M = 4.21$) are highly rated by respondents, confirming the need for clear and structured actions from leaders.

The analysis of responses from women and men showed that both groups have similar trends in evaluating competencies. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test indicate that, although there are certain specific leadership competencies that are rated differently by women and men from Generation Z (L 1, L 5, and L 16), the majority are perceived similarly by both genders. For the five most desired competencies, no statistically significant differences were found between the ratings of women and men, indicating a shared perception of key skills and traits desired in leaders. This means that both women and men have similar expectations regarding the qualities of an effective leader, particularly valuing the ability to learn from mistakes, set realistic goals, be open to innovation, identify risks, and admit to mistakes.

Various researchers have highlighted the similarities and differences in the evaluation of leadership competencies. For example, D. Bornman (2019) states that Generation Z respondents of both genders prefer transformational leadership over transactional leadership, and both groups view feminine traits as more important for a business leader. These findings contradict earlier studies where masculine traits were considered more critical for success in business and leadership.

The analysis of responses from women and men conducted in this text revealed that both groups have similar trends in evaluating leadership competencies. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test indicate that although there are certain specific leadership competencies that are rated differently by women and men from Generation Z (L 1, L 5, and L 16), the majority are perceived similarly by both genders. These findings support D. Bornman's (2019) assertions about shared preferences for transformational leadership and the recognition of feminine traits as significant.

For the five most desired competencies, no statistically significant differences were found between the ratings of women and men, indicating a shared perception of key skills and traits desired in leaders. This means that both women and men have similar expectations regarding the qualities of an effective leader, particularly valuing the ability to learn from mistakes, set realistic goals, be open to innovation, identify risks, and admit to mistakes.

These results suggest that Generation Z, regardless of gender, appreciates leadership qualities that are more associated with empathy, openness, and collaboration. This may indicate changing leadership standards, where traditionally masculine traits no longer dominate, and traits considered feminine play a more significant role. Therefore, the studies emphasize the need for further development of transformational competencies in leaders to better meet the expectations of Generation Z.

5. Summary

The study focused on the evaluation of leadership competencies by respondents from Generation Z. The average ratings for the vast majority of competencies were high, indicating that respondents consider these skills to be crucial for effective leadership.

The results of the analyses confirm hypothesis H1 - there are specific leadership competencies that are particularly desired by the surveyed representatives of Generation Z. Generation Z respondents highly value abilities such as admitting mistakes (L 10), learning from past experiences (L 15), and supporting new ideas and solutions (L 17), which indicates a high level of desirability for these specific leadership competencies.

Hypothesis 2 - There are specific leadership competencies that are particularly undesired by respondents from Generation Z is also confirmed by the analysis results, where the ability to anticipate opinions and the future (L 1) received the lowest average ratings. This shows that Generation Z respondents value competencies related to concrete actions and responses to current challenges more than those related to abstract predictive skills.

The obtained results indicate that Hypothesis 3 - There are statistically significant differences in the ratings of leadership competencies between Generation Z women and men finds partial confirmation. Although most competencies did not show statistically significant differences between the ratings of women and men, certain skills (L 1, L 5, L 16) do exhibit significant differences. This means that while Generation Z may have similar expectations for most leadership traits, there are specific competencies that are perceived differently by women and men in this age group.

In summary, it is important to highlight the limitations of the study, namely the lack of sample representativeness. This limitation means that the results cannot be generalized to a broader population. However, despite these limitations, the obtained data can be significant

for both researchers and practitioners. The conducted analysis provides valuable insights into generational theory, offering important information about the preferences and expectations of Generation Z in the labor market. This enriches the discourse on effective management and engagement of younger employees in organizations, which should adapt their leadership strategies to better align with the values and expectations of this generation. Adapting management methods to consider these preferences can lead to more effective engagement of younger employees and strengthen their loyalty. In particular, promoting an organizational culture that rewards innovation, openness to change, and the ability to admit mistakes may be key to attracting and retaining talent from Generation Z.

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