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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**From Preference to Performance: A Mixed-Methods Examination of Leadership Drivers of Generation Z Engagement and Retention**

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**| ABSTRACT**

The increasing presence of Generation Z in the workforce has intensified scholarly and practitioner interest in identifying leadership approaches that effectively engage and retain this cohort. While existing research has largely focused on identifying generational preferences, limited empirical work has examined how specific leadership behaviors influence measurable organizational outcomes. This study addresses this gap by examining the relative and combined effects of fairness, structured leadership practices, and empathetic leadership behaviors on employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention intent among Generation Z workers. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining survey data from 250 Generation Z employees across multiple industries with qualitative insights derived from leadership observations and prior interview-based research. The study evaluates both the independent and interactive effects of perceived fairness in organizational decision-making, clarity and structure in leadership practices, and empathetic engagement by supervisors. Findings indicate that perceived fairness is the strongest predictor of retention intent, while structured leadership practices are most strongly associated with employee engagement. Empathy contributes significantly to workplace satisfaction but demonstrates limited effectiveness when not supported by transparent and structured leadership processes. Importantly, the results suggest that the integration of fairness, structure, and empathy produces more robust outcomes than any individual leadership dimension alone. The study contributes to leadership theory by extending generational research beyond preference-based analysis and proposing an integrated framework for leadership effectiveness. Practical implications suggest that organizations seeking to engage and retain Generation Z employees must adopt leadership approaches that combine relational awareness with structured and equitable organizational practices.

**| KEYWORDS**

Generation Z; leadership; employee engagement; retention; workplace environment; fairness; organizational structure; empathy; organizational behavior; leadership theory

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**1. Introduction**

The entry of Generation Z into the workforce has introduced new challenges and opportunities for organizational leadership. As the first generation to enter the workplace fully immersed in digital environments and rapid social change, Generation Z employees are frequently characterized as valuing transparency, immediacy, and meaningful engagement (Twenge, 2017; Schroth, 2019). Consequently, a growing body of research has sought to identify the leadership styles and workplace conditions most likely to attract and retain this cohort.

Despite this expanding literature, much of the existing research remains descriptive in nature, emphasizing generational preferences without sufficiently examining how leadership behaviors influence measurable organizational outcomes (Schroth, 2019). As a result, there remains limited empirical clarity regarding which leadership practices most effectively drive engagement, satisfaction, and retention among Generation Z employees.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining three leadership dimensions—fairness, structure, and empathy—and their relationship to key workplace outcomes. While each of these dimensions has been explored independently in prior research, fewer studies have examined their combined effects within a unified framework (Colquitt, 2001; Kahn, 1990).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Generation Z and Workplace Expectations**

Generation Z employees are often described as seeking clarity, fairness, and meaningful workplace engagement (Schroth, 2019; Twenge, 2017). Prior research suggests that this cohort places a high value on transparency in decision-making, structured pathways for career advancement, and leadership that demonstrates both competence and responsiveness. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z employees tend to expect immediate access to information and consistent feedback, making ambiguity in leadership practices particularly problematic (Twenge, 2017).

### **2.2 Leadership Theories and Their Limitations**

Transformational leadership has been widely recognized for its emphasis on vision, inspiration, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). While this approach is effective in motivating employees, it may lack the structural mechanisms necessary to translate motivation into sustained performance outcomes.

Servant leadership emphasizes empathy, listening, and prioritizing employee needs (Greenleaf, 1977). This approach has been associated with increased trust and organizational commitment. However, critics have noted that an overemphasis on relational leadership may limit decisiveness and organizational clarity.

Transactional leadership focuses on structure, performance expectations, and reward systems (Burns, 1978). While this approach provides clarity and consistency, it may fail to address the relational and motivational needs of employees, particularly among younger cohorts.

### **2.3 Toward an Integrated Leadership Approach**

The limitations of existing leadership frameworks suggest the need for a more integrated approach that combines relational and structural elements of leadership. In particular, leadership effectiveness may depend not only on individual traits but also on the interaction between fairness in decision-making, clarity in organizational structure, and empathetic engagement with employees (Colquitt, 2001; Kahn, 1990).

This study builds on this premise by examining how these dimensions interact to influence workplace outcomes, particularly among Generation Z employees.

## **3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

This study proposes that leadership effectiveness is shaped by the interaction of three key dimensions: fairness, structure, and empathy.

Fairness, rooted in organizational justice theory, refers to the perceived equity and transparency of organizational decisions, including promotions, compensation, and performance evaluations (Colquitt, 2001). Structure reflects the clarity of expectations, consistency of feedback, and presence of defined organizational processes, which are critical components of employee engagement (Kahn, 1990). Empathy refers to the ability of leaders to understand and respond to employee needs and concerns, a concept central to relational leadership theories such as servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977).

Based on existing literature and prior research, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1:** Perceived fairness in leadership decisions is positively associated with employee retention intent.

**H2:** Structured leadership practices are positively associated with employee engagement.

**H3:** Empathetic leadership behaviors are positively associated with workplace satisfaction.

**H4:** The interaction of fairness, structure, and empathy produces stronger workplace outcomes than any individual leadership dimension alone.

## 4. Methodology (Light Citations Where Appropriate)

### 4.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was employed to provide both breadth and depth of analysis. Mixed-method approaches are particularly useful in leadership research, as they allow for the integration of quantitative patterns with qualitative context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### 4.2 Participants

The quantitative sample consisted of 250 Generation Z employees across industries including technology, education, hospitality, and manufacturing. Participants were recruited through email distribution, in-person engagement, and social media outreach.

### 4.3 Data Collection

Survey instruments measured perceptions of:

- Fairness in organizational decision-making
- Clarity and structure in leadership practices
- Empathy in supervisor behavior

These constructs align with established frameworks in organizational justice, engagement theory, and relational leadership research (Colquitt, 2001; Kahn, 1990; Greenleaf, 1977).

### 4.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to leadership effectiveness and employee experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Fairness and Retention Intent

Perceived fairness emerged as the most c

onsistently cited determinant of employee retention intent. A substantial majority of respondents (92%) identified fairness in leadership decisions—including promotions, compensation, and performance evaluations—as a critical factor influencing their willingness to remain with an organization.

Importantly, respondents who reported low perceived fairness demonstrated disproportionately higher intent to leave, suggesting a strong directional relationship between perceived equity and organizational commitment. This pattern was consistent across industries, indicating that fairness may function as a foundational driver of retention regardless of organizational context.

Relative to other leadership dimensions examined in this study, fairness demonstrated the most direct and immediate relationship with retention outcomes. While other factors contributed to engagement and satisfaction, fairness appeared to serve as a threshold condition—its absence significantly undermined employee commitment even when other leadership behaviors were present.

## **5.2 Structure and Employee Engagement**

Structured leadership practices were strongly associated with higher levels of employee engagement. Approximately 87% of respondents indicated a preference for clearly defined expectations, consistent feedback mechanisms, and structured career pathways over more flexible but less defined leadership approaches.

Participants consistently reported that clarity in role expectations and access to structured development opportunities contributed to increased motivation and performance. In contrast, environments characterized by ambiguity or inconsistent communication were associated with lower engagement levels and increased frustration.

When compared to empathy, structured leadership practices demonstrated a more consistent relationship with engagement outcomes. While empathetic leadership contributed to positive perceptions of the workplace, structure provided the operational clarity necessary for sustained engagement and performance.

## **5.3 Empathy and Workplace Satisfaction**

Empathetic leadership behaviors were positively associated with workplace satisfaction, with approximately 85% of respondents indicating that empathy improved their overall work experience. Employees reported greater satisfaction in environments where leaders demonstrated understanding, responsiveness, and emotional awareness.

However, the data suggest that empathy alone is insufficient to drive broader organizational outcomes. Respondents frequently noted that empathetic leadership, when not supported by clear expectations or equitable decision-making, diminished in perceived value over time. In such cases, empathy was often viewed as performative rather than actionable.

Compared to fairness and structure, empathy demonstrated a more limited relationship with retention and engagement outcomes. While it played a meaningful role in shaping employee satisfaction, its effectiveness was significantly enhanced when combined with structured and transparent leadership practices.

## **5.4 Interaction Effects of Leadership Dimensions**

The interaction of fairness, structure, and empathy produced the strongest overall outcomes across engagement, satisfaction, and retention intent. Respondents consistently reported the highest levels of workplace engagement and organizational commitment in environments where all three leadership dimensions were present simultaneously.

This finding suggests that leadership effectiveness is not driven by isolated behaviors but by the integration of relational and structural elements. In particular, fairness appears to establish trust, structure provides clarity and direction, and empathy enhances the relational quality of leadership interactions.

The absence of any one dimension weakened overall outcomes. For example, structured environments lacking empathy were perceived as rigid, while empathetic environments lacking structure were described as inconsistent and unclear. Similarly, environments perceived as unfair undermined engagement regardless of the presence of empathy or structure.

## **5.5 Qualitative Insights**

Qualitative observations reinforced and expanded upon the quantitative findings. In multiple cases, employees described leaders who demonstrated empathy but failed to provide clear expectations as well-intentioned but ineffective. These environments were often characterized by confusion, inconsistent performance standards, and reduced accountability.

Conversely, organizations that combined structured leadership practices with transparent decision-making and consistent communication were associated with higher levels of employee trust and engagement. Employees in these environments frequently described leadership as both supportive and reliable, highlighting the importance of integrating relational and operational dimensions of leadership.

These qualitative insights suggest that leadership effectiveness is experienced not only through individual behaviors but through the consistency and alignment of leadership practices over time.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the relationship between leadership behaviors and workplace outcomes among Generation Z employees. Consistent with prior research, empathy was found to positively influence workplace satisfaction. However, the results suggest that empathy alone is insufficient to sustain engagement or retention, particularly in the absence of structured leadership practices and perceived fairness.

This finding challenges the increasing emphasis on empathy-centric leadership models, which often assume that relational engagement is sufficient to drive employee outcomes. While empathy remains an important component of effective leadership, the present study suggests that its impact is contingent upon the presence of complementary structural and procedural elements.

In particular, fairness emerged as a central determinant of retention intent, reinforcing the importance of transparency and equity in organizational decision-making. This aligns with broader organizational justice literature, which highlights the role of perceived fairness in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. The strength of this relationship suggests that fairness may function as a foundational condition for organizational commitment.

Similarly, structured leadership practices were found to play a critical role in driving engagement. For Generation Z employees, clarity in expectations, feedback, and career pathways appears to be essential for sustained motivation and performance. This finding extends existing leadership research by emphasizing the importance of operational clarity alongside relational engagement.

Taken together, these results support a more integrated understanding of leadership effectiveness. Rather than prioritizing individual leadership traits, effective leadership appears to depend on the interaction between fairness, structure, and empathy. Each dimension contributes uniquely to employee outcomes, but their combined presence produces the most consistent and robust effects.

### 6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to leadership theory by shifting the focus from isolated leadership traits to integrated leadership systems. Existing models often emphasize either relational or structural dimensions of leadership, but rarely both in a unified framework. The present findings suggest that leadership effectiveness is best understood as a dynamic interaction between these dimensions.

This has implications for how leadership is conceptualized in both research and practice. Specifically, it suggests that future models of leadership should account for the interplay between emotional intelligence, organizational structure, and perceived fairness, rather than treating these elements as independent constructs.

### 6.2 Practical Implications

For practitioners, the findings highlight the limitations of relying solely on empathy-based leadership approaches. While empathy contributes to workplace satisfaction, it must be supported by clear expectations, consistent processes, and equitable decision-making to produce meaningful organizational outcomes.

Organizations seeking to engage and retain Generation Z employees should prioritize:

- Transparent and fair decision-making processes
- Clearly defined roles and career pathways
- Leadership development programs that integrate relational and structural competencies

## **7. Conclusion**

This study extends existing research on Generation Z workplace preferences by examining the relationship between leadership behaviors and measurable organizational outcomes. While prior research has largely emphasized the importance of empathy in leadership, the findings of this study suggest that empathy alone is insufficient to drive sustained engagement and retention.

Instead, leadership effectiveness appears to depend on the integration of fairness, structured leadership practices, and empathetic engagement. Among these dimensions, fairness emerged as the most influential predictor of retention intent, while structured leadership practices were most closely associated with employee engagement. Empathy, while important for workplace satisfaction, demonstrated its greatest impact when combined with transparent and structured leadership processes.

These findings contribute to leadership theory by supporting a more integrated understanding of leadership effectiveness, particularly in the context of emerging workforce dynamics. For organizations, the implications are clear: leadership strategies that balance relational awareness with structural clarity and equitable decision-making are more likely to produce consistent and sustainable outcomes.

Future research should further explore the longitudinal impact of these leadership dimensions and examine how integrated leadership frameworks can be operationalized across different organizational contexts.

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