



# Coaching A Multi-Generational Workforce —

## NOT JUST THE POST-MILLENNIALS...

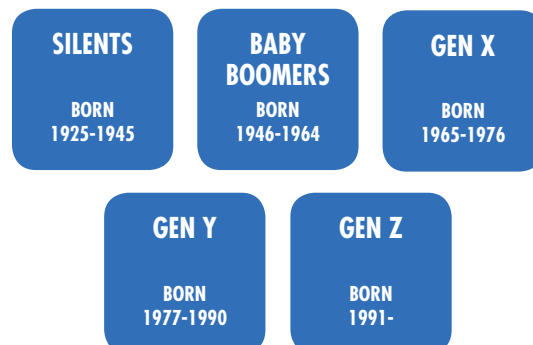
How do the various generations differ from each other, and what are the practical implications? David Ringwood describes a recent large scale study of leaders in Europe and considers how these insights can be used in coaching practice.

We all have our unique journey in life and have been shaped both by our own experiences and also the times we have lived through. We often find it easier to identify with those who have shared similar experiences because we 'know where they are coming from.' It can feel more effortless when we work at the level of shared assumption and familiarity, but what happens when this is not the case?

Organizations continually seek to motivate, engage and develop their employees, and especially (but not only) the next generation of leaders and high potentials. The war for talent, the need for results and the agenda towards greater inclusion increasingly demand that leaders understand the dynamics and practical implications of different facets of diversity such as gender, and cultural and generational differences.

One reason that the topic of generational differences continually arises is because it is something of a moving target. The relentless

advance of technology, the availability and immediacy of information, and changing values and aspirations, among many other considerations, all contribute to the way new generations are shaped motivationally and how they present behaviorally in the organizational context. To mitigate subjectivity and in the interests of an evidence-based approach, Management Research Group (MRG) conducted a large-scale empirical study that identifies how, in specific terms, the respective generations differ from each other, and what this might mean for coaching a multi-generational workforce.



**NEW RESEARCH**

MRG recently completed two large-scale studies in Europe involving nearly 60,000 leaders across many generations from a wide range of industries, ranging from CEO level to non-management roles across over twelve European countries. Once the different generations had been defined and described (recognizing that this alone attracts debate), we then measured both the behavioral and motivational characteristics of these groups to see where they aligned and how they differed.

**BEHAVIORAL OBSERVATIONS**

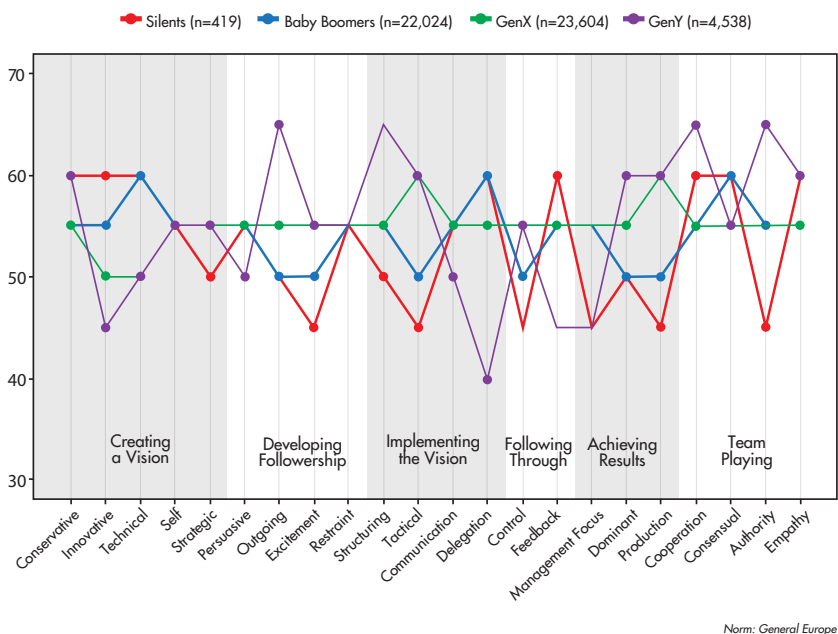
In the first study 50,585 leaders completed the Leadership Effectiveness Analysis (LEA). The LEA is a descriptive, behaviorally-oriented instrument, providing scores on 22 dimensions of leadership behavior. Figure 1 shows the generational profiles of Self LEAs compared to a general European population, showing the median values for each generation against the 22 LEA behaviors.

Broadly speaking, we find fewer differences across all 22 behaviors between the older generations. The Boomers are generally closer to their predecessors, while Generation X is closer to Generation Y.

Generation Y is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, their scores are more extreme relative to the other cohorts in the study. Secondly, we might think about where the trajectory is heading for each of the 22 scored behaviors. For example, being Outgoing (acting in an extroverted, friendly and informal manner) is becoming an increasingly overt behavior for the newer generations, whereas Delegation (enlisting the talents of others to help meet objectives) is on the wane. There seems to be a growing emphasis on precision and process (Structuring) but less on letting

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**FIGURE 1. GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES ON THE LEA**  
- LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS ANALYSIS



Norm: General Europe

people know whether they have met expectations (Feedback). There might be many circumstantial or contextual reasons for these trends. Our focus is to measure the changes occurring rather than speculate on the social, cultural and technological variables, or on the implications of these trends. But they should give pause for thought.

**MOTIVATIONAL OBSERVATIONS**

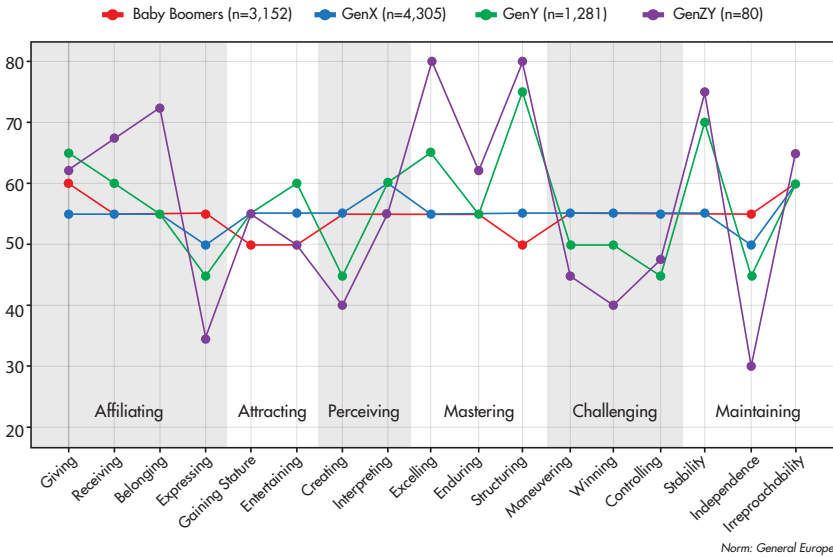
The second study sampled 8,818 individuals ranging from CEO level to non-management roles. Each participant completed the Individual Directions Inventory (IDI) questionnaire (see Figure 2). The IDI is a descriptive instrument, providing scores on 17 dimensions of individual motivation.

just as Generation Y was in the behavioral study.

We can see some interesting patterns and correlations between the two studies. Generation Z is motivated to feel more connected to others (Belonging), and interestingly continues the generational trajectory that demonstrates the greatest behavioral orientation towards more informal, extroverted relationships (Outgoing). Similarly, the behavioral attention to detail seen in the Generation Y cohort is also evident at the level of motivation in Generation Z (Structuring).

Another characteristic of Generation Z worth observing are the elevated levels in intrinsic

**FIGURE 2. INDIVIDUAL DIRECTIONS INVENTORY**



Data distribution is similar to that seen in the Behavioral Study, in that Boomers are closest to the subsequent cohort (Generation X), and Generation Y is closest to Generation Z. Generation Z (the most recent generation) is also the most extreme of the four groups in motivational factors,

motivation, for example for Excelling (bringing high expectations of success and achievement) that are unique to that cohort. Interestingly, there is far less emphasis on doing this in a self-sufficient manner (note the low scores for Independence). Instead, a greater drive to receive support and

empathy from others (Receiving). In fact, Generation Z (because of the biases that can be inherent in motivational factors), may work on the assumption that the purpose of relationships (which they strongly desire) are to serve their needs without necessarily

recognizing the need to reciprocate.

When we think of this in terms of continuing trajectory, perhaps it is unsurprising (albeit judgemental)

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that the prior Generation (Y) have been referred to as Generation Me, and that *Time Magazine* (May 2013) referred to this generation as ‘lazy, entitled narcissists who live with their parents.’ Generation Z might well be continuing that trend.

#### MOTIVATION: WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Behavior and motivation can be quite different. Behaviors are often related to situation or context, so how much of our behavior actually reflects who we are intrinsically? Conversely, motivational factors are generally more stable over time and are less likely simply to reflect circumstance or situation. The formative years (especially the first 10-12 years) are instrumental in shaping these factors, although motivation does evolve and change over the course of our lifetime through experience and extrinsic influences.

Motivational considerations are intriguing for coaches and leaders alike. We can only observe the behaviors of colleagues or clients of any generation, and we are likely to make judgements and inferences on that

subjective basis. How well do we really understand what motivates them? On what basis do we make our assessment?

Motivation is at the core of each of us as individuals. It shapes how we experience the world, what we find emotionally rewarding and behaviorally compelling, and what we seek to avoid or resist. It influences the way we perceive and interpret the world. Those who value autonomy and independence, for example, are likely to interpret support from others as a form of control or interference. We may think we’re helping, but this is based on our own preferences or untested assumptions. Highly competitive people might enter the room with an oppositional ‘you versus me’ mindset, something that people without this characteristic would not understand. While the MRG study doesn’t describe that level of granularity, it does help us get closer to understanding some of the implications of generational differences in motivation, and provides indicators as to how these insights can be used in coaching practice.

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#### COACHING MULTIPLE GENERATIONS

One useful approach when coaching across generations is to move away from the dimensional approach provided by the psychometric tools and to consider how each generation might respond in terms of practical topics or themes such as:

- Support needs
- Informational needs
- Decision-making preferences, and factors considered in decision-making

- Risk appetite
- Pace/speed
- Need for recognition, attention and validation
- Affiliating and inclusion needs

This is a short list of examples, easily derived from the psychometric scales, that directly impact day-to-day interactions across the generations. Knowing how generations are aligned or different has little value if we can't get to the 'so what' implications. So rather than relying on psychometric labels, we have found it more useful to think at a thematic level, using our data and measurements to understand the needs and orientations of all generational cohorts, and to build greater mutual understanding, trust and appreciation on this basis.

We can see, for example, that Generation Z will really want to make decisions collectively and to have a voice in those decisions. They will be sensitive to exclusion

in a way that previous generations might underestimate, simply because they don't have the same level of affiliative needs. Coaching at this thematic level, using generational data such as the these two MRG studies, is based on raising awareness: both providing more objective data for self-awareness and also a more rounded and significantly less subjective awareness of others, relying less on our own individual biases and assumptions.

This is the crux of the issue. Generational differences are real, fascinating and empirically measurable, but if that's all we see then we are missing important complexity. For the whole picture we must also consider cultural and gender differences, organizational context and objectives, plus, of course, individual differences. Every single person is unique in who they are, their life journey and what is important to them. How's that for diversity?!

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Ringwood is Vice President of Client Development EMEA at Management Research Group ([www.mrg.com](http://www.mrg.com)), an international leader in creating high-quality assessment tools and conducting extensive research in leadership, career development/personal growth, sales and service. He works extensively with organizations around the world to help them identify critical leadership practices for personal and organizational success, and brings expertise in assessment tools and related coaching practices and methodologies.