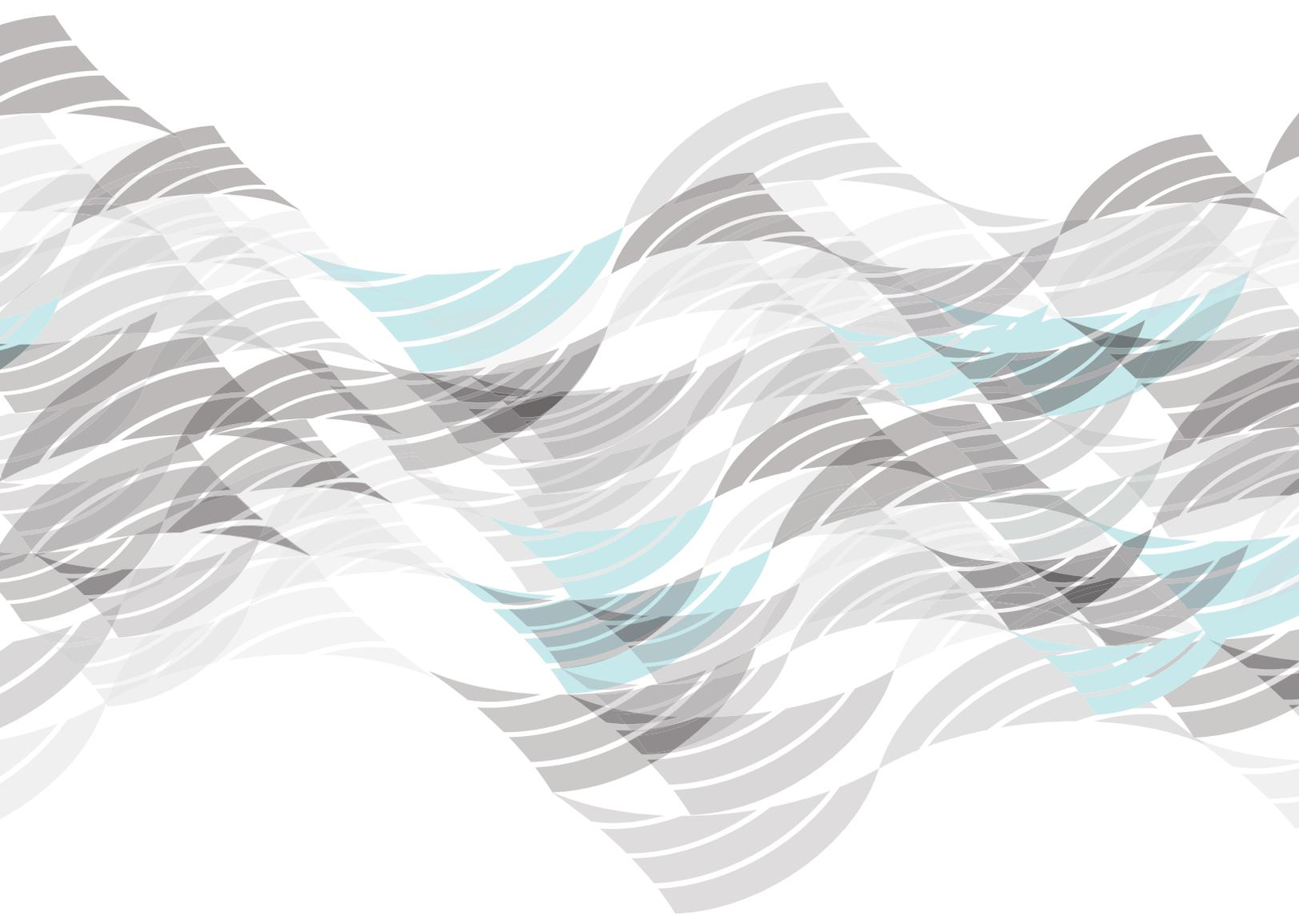




# What Makes a Leader Effective? U.S. Boomers, Xers, and Millennials Weigh In

By Jennifer J. Deal, Sarah Stawiski,  
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# Introduction

Conventional wisdom suggests that Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials in the United States are fundamentally different from one another. And certainly there are real differences—including the way we dress, the way we consume information, the music we listen to, and ideas about appropriate personal behavior.

Many organizational leaders are anticipating a substantial upheaval in work culture and expectations as more Millennials enter the workforce and more Baby Boomers retire. But will there need to be wholesale changes in how leaders need to behave to be effective?

To better understand the generational dynamics at work, we asked a cross section of leaders what they think makes a leader effective. What we found is that—when it comes to leadership—the generations are more alike than different.

## Generations at Work in the USA

Most of the workforce in the U.S. is made up of three generations: Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1963), Gen Xers (born 1964 to 1979), and Millennials (born after 1980).<sup>1,2,3</sup>

The post-war generation was called the Baby Boom because of the rapid increase in birth rate at the end of World War II. Baby Boomers weren't born when WWII ended, but experienced post-war prosperity that resulted in middle-class Americans having access to utilities such as central heating, running hot water, household appliances, televisions, and automobiles. Though during their youth Baby Boomers were thought of as being anti-authority,<sup>4</sup> currently they are typically characterized as materialistic workaholics who are at the top of the authority structure, and are focused on their own personal fulfillment, acquisition of things, status, and authority.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

Generation X is the cohort born in the U.S. between 1964 and 1979. They grew up during the end of the Vietnam War, the 1973 oil crisis, the 1979 energy crisis, the 1980s economic recession, Black Monday in 1987, Watergate, and Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Bush. As a result of these experiences, this generation is thought to have developed a greater sense of economic uncertainty and greater skepticism about people in positions of power, especially when it comes to employers. Gen Xers are often described as individualistic, willing to take risks, self-reliant, entrepreneurial, more accepting of ethnic diversity and less accepting of authority than previous generations, and valuing work-life balance.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup>



Millennials (born 1980-2000) grew up with greater access to computers than did either Gen Xers or Baby Boomers. This earlier start with computers has led to a commonly held belief that they are better with technology-mediated communications and media, and with digital technologies in general. Another common perception is that they are needy and entitled because their time in elementary and secondary school was characterized by everyone being rewarded for participation, with no real differentiation for performance level.<sup>12</sup>

## Generational Cohorts

	Baby Boomers (1946-1963)				Generation Xers (1964-1979)			Millennial Generation (1980-2000)				
Birth Years	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Approximate Current Ages	68	63	58	53	48	43	38	33	28	23	18	13

# Survey Results: What Makes a Leader Effective?

Since March 2008, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) has conducted the World Leadership Survey, an ongoing, online survey to provide information on trends in leadership, as well as issues that leaders have to deal with every day such as what employees want in their leaders, trust and ethics in effective organizations, employee engagement and retention, generational differences, and attitudes about work. The survey is administered online in 15 different languages (see About the Research for survey details).

To better understand what Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials think makes a leader effective, we asked 5,940 respondents native to the United States how much each of the following characteristics helps a leader to be effective:

- **Hierarchical** leadership is characterized by placing importance on social rank, following tradition, and abiding by the rules.
- **Autonomous** leadership is characterized by self-reliance, and working and acting independently.

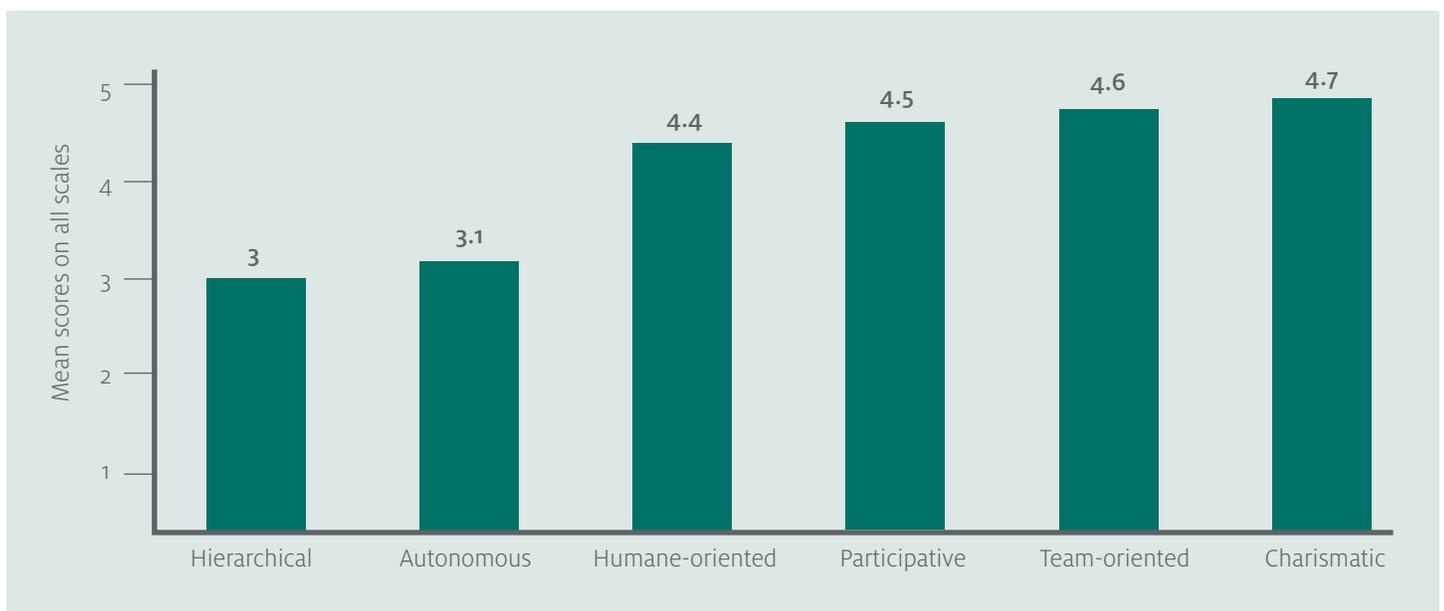
- **Humane-oriented** leadership is characterized by helping others, generosity, and compassion.
- **Participative** leadership is characterized by collaboration and inclusiveness.
- **Team-oriented** leadership is characterized by helping teams deal with conflict, working together, and developing cohesion.
- **Charismatic** leadership is characterized by strong enthusiasm, and by inspiring and motivating others.

The survey found that all three generations largely agree about what makes leaders effective.

**Effective leaders are participative, team-oriented, charismatic, and humane-oriented.**

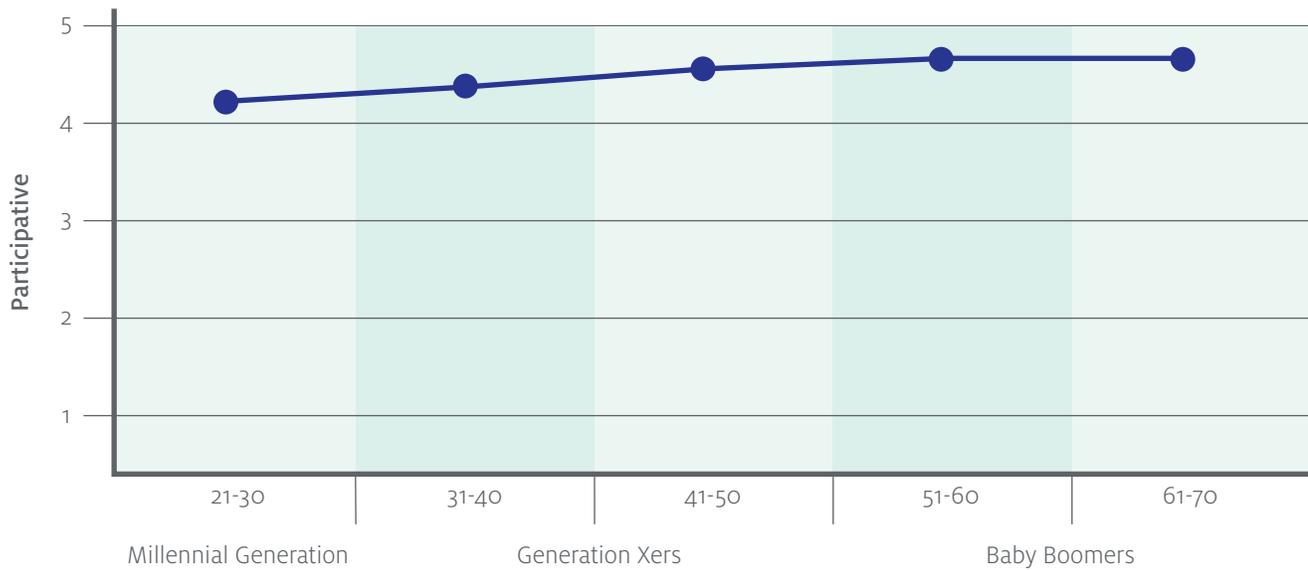
The generations are less sure that being hierarchical and autonomous helps a leader to be effective.

## U.S. Managers' Beliefs about Effective Leadership

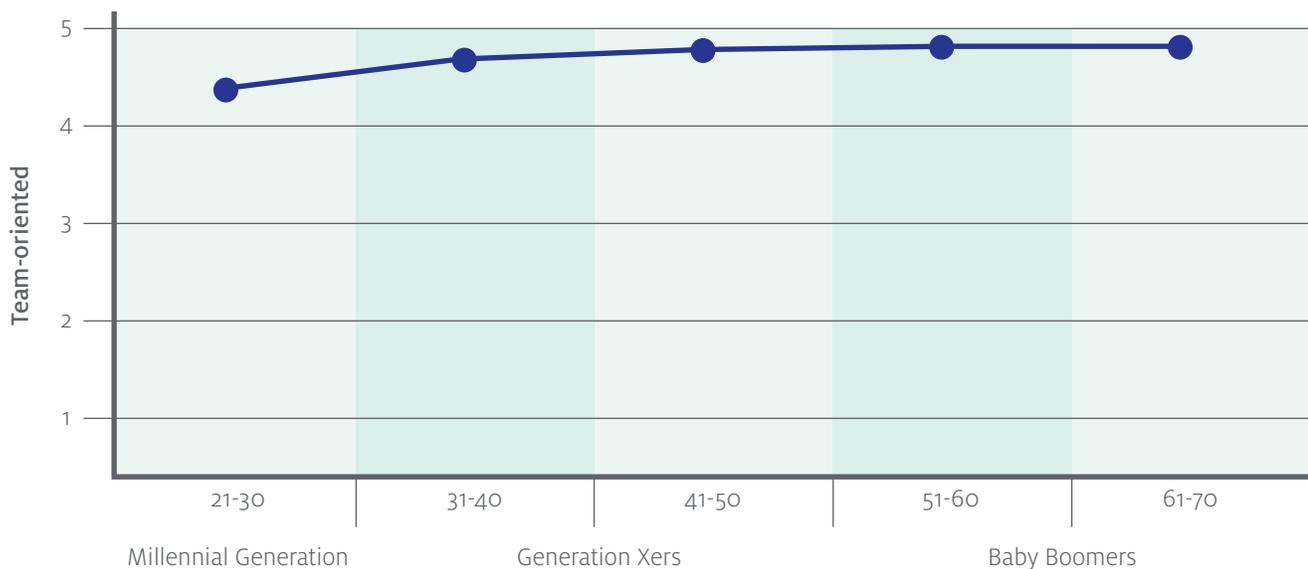


Older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to say that being participative, team-oriented, and humane-oriented helps a leader be effective. This is contrary to the common perception that Gen Xers and Millennials appreciate leaders who are participative, team-oriented, and humane much more than Baby Boomers.

## How Important it is for a Leader to be **Participative**



## How Important it is for a Leader to be **Team-oriented**

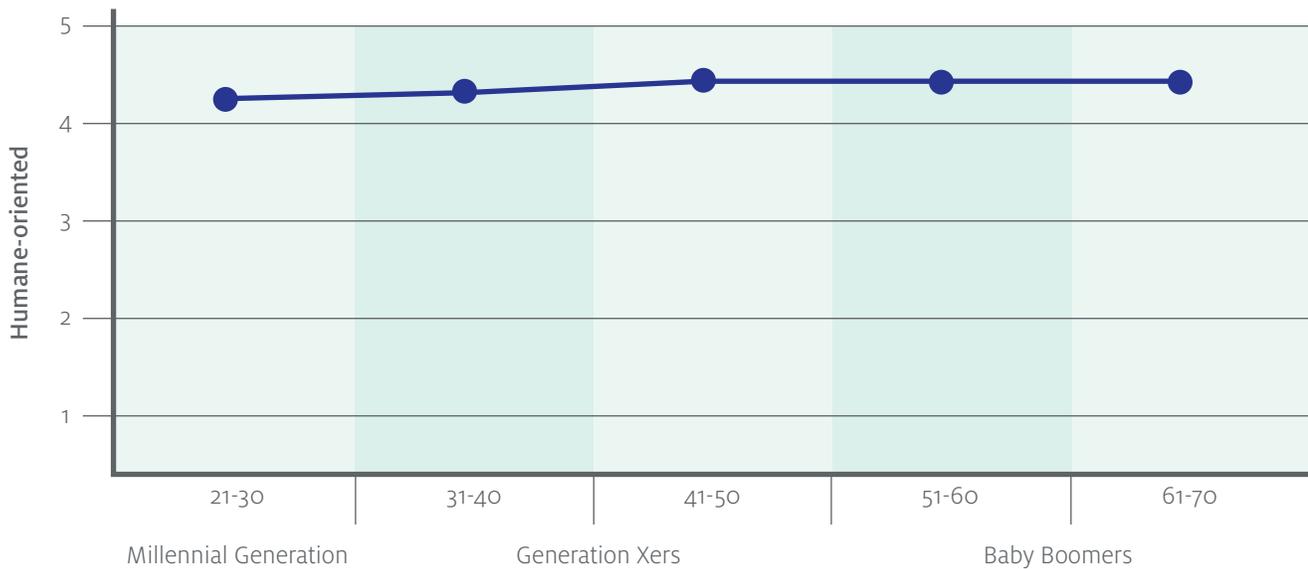


# Survey Results: What Makes a Leader Effective?

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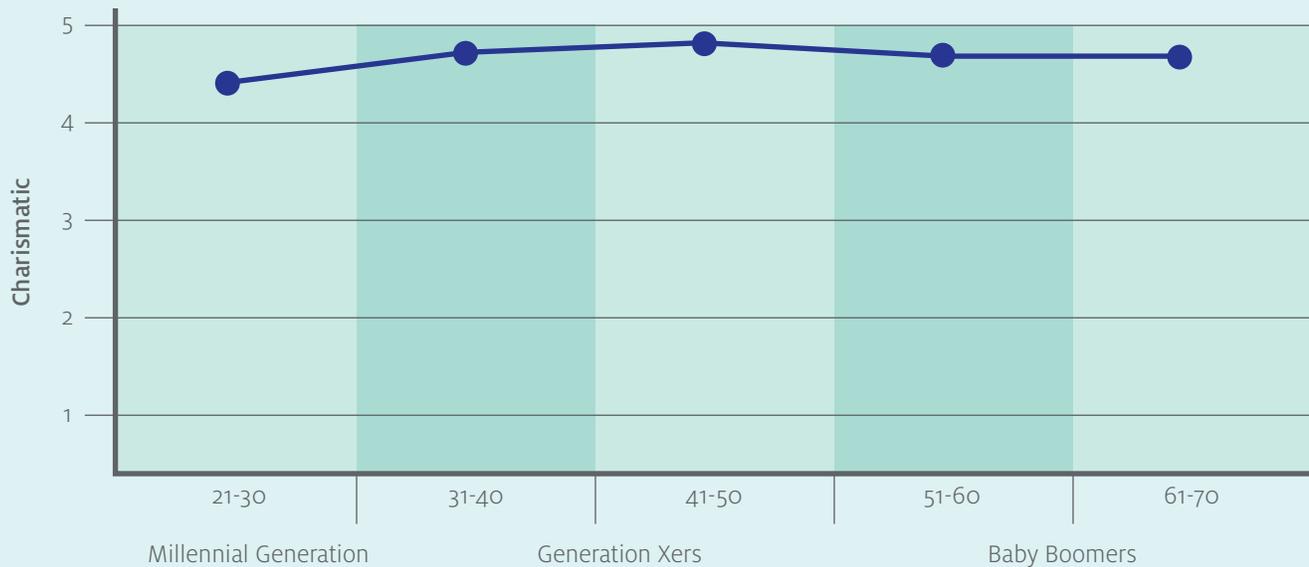


## How Important it is for a Leader to be **Humane-oriented**



The importance of charisma shows another interesting generational twist. All three generations agree that a leader needs to have charisma to be effective. However, younger people perceive charisma as being significantly less helpful to effective leadership than older people do.

## How Important it is for a Leader to be Charismatic



The idea that leaders use charisma to connect with their followers is believed to be a standard part of effective leadership. A “cult of personality” is perceived to dominate, and personal influence (arising largely from the effective use of charisma) is a defining characteristic of an effective leader. The celebrity culture—including the appeal of celebrity CEOs—is strong. One would think that younger people would place a greater emphasis on charisma than older people. But they don’t.

We don’t know for sure why they don’t. Perhaps as people grow older, a leader’s charisma and perceived reliability are seen as contributing more to their effectiveness. This would be consistent with people placing more reliance on their belief in their leader’s trustworthiness as they get older.

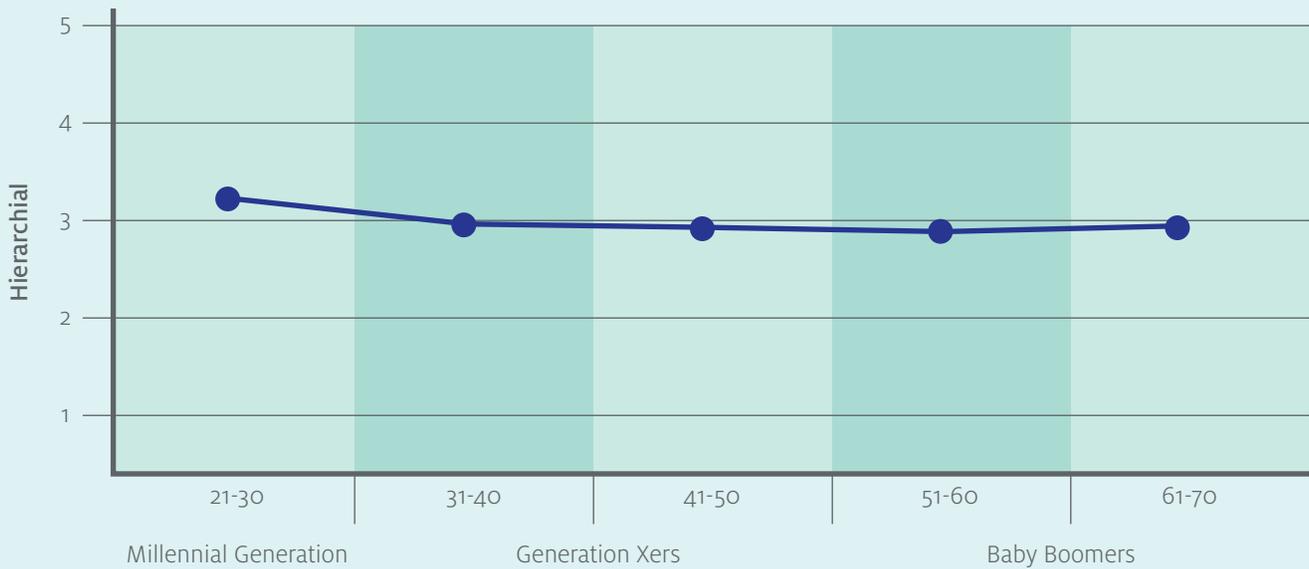
Another explanation may be that younger people are less attuned to the effects of leader charisma because they grew up with more technology-mediated communication. If technology as a medium of interaction reduces the impact of charisma, people who grew up with less technology (older generations and those who have less access to technology) would place more emphasis on the importance of charisma for effective leadership because they have seen charisma have a greater effect.

# Survey Results: What Makes a Leader Effective?

(continued)

A leader behaving in a hierarchical manner was not seen as contributing to effective leadership as being participative, team-oriented, charismatic, or humane-oriented were for any of the generations. However, Millennials were more likely than Gen Xers or Baby Boomers to say that acting in a hierarchical manner helped a leader's effectiveness.

## How Important it is for a Leader to be **Hierarchical**

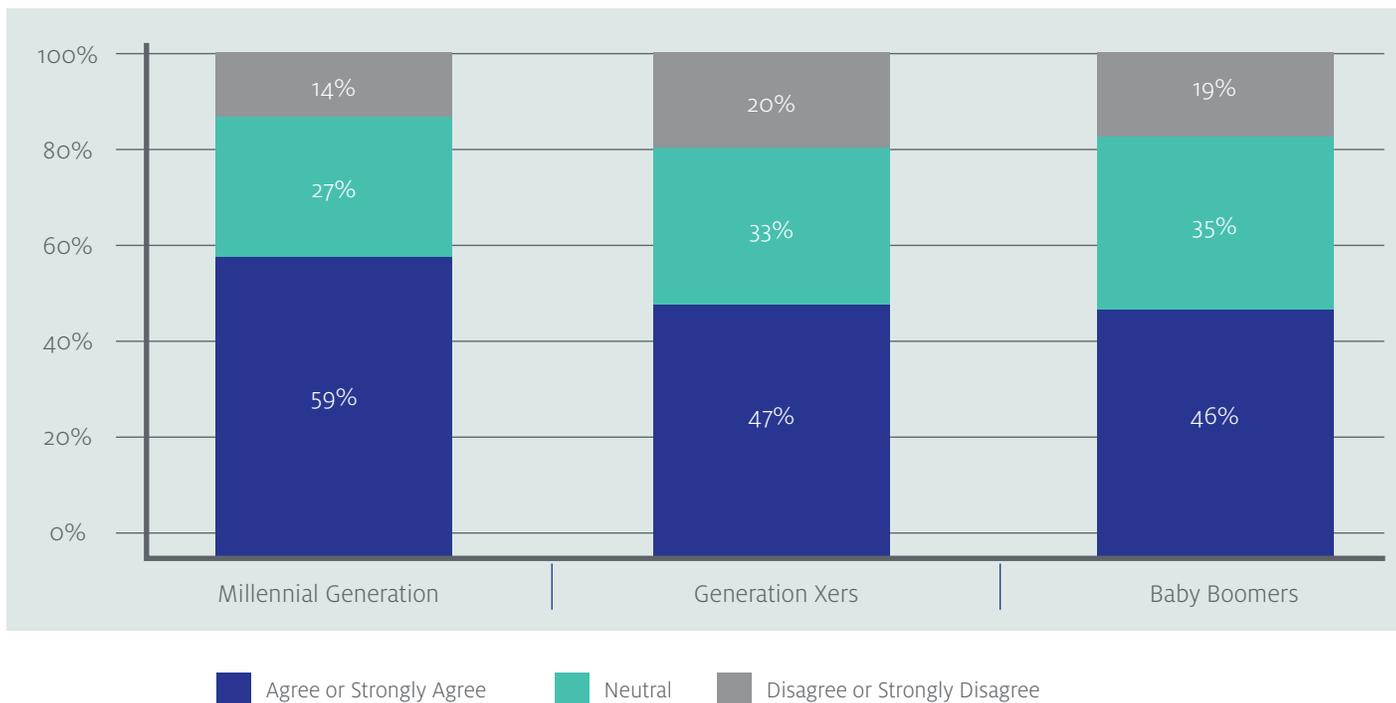


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Similarly, Millennials are substantially more likely than Gen Xers and Baby Boomers to believe they should defer to their manager.

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## “If your manager tells you to do something, you better do it”



The data demonstrate that there is a wide range of perspectives regarding authority across all generations. This suggests that the reality about generational responses to organizational authority does not match neatly with the stereotype that Millennials reject authority. The reality is that currently Millennials are more amenable to their managers telling them what to do than are Gen Xers and Boomers.

So, to be effective, leaders should be . . .

. . . participative, team-oriented, humane-oriented, and charismatic.

They should not . . .

. . . focus on being hierarchical and autonomous.

These preferences are true for people of all generations. So, contrary to popular belief, younger and older employees have very similar ideas about what makes a leader effective.

# Developing Leaders for All Generations

Employees of all ages and at all levels believe that effective leaders are humane-oriented, participative, team-oriented, and charismatic. So, what should leaders be doing to live up to these expectations? And what is the role of learning, development, and human resources functions?

At the core of what employees—Millennials, Xers, and Boomers—want to see in their leaders is consideration for others.

Consideration is shown when leaders respect and invite others' opinions (participative), help teams work more effectively with one another (team-oriented), inspire and excite others to do their best work (charismatic), and show compassion toward others at work (humane). In general, a good way for leaders to live up to these expectations is to demonstrate that they see value in others. Here are some ideas for HR professionals seeking to develop effective leaders for all generations.

**Be aware that the leadership challenge has less to do with generational differences and more to do with fostering behaviors such as showing consideration for others that produce desired outcomes for employees of all generations.**

In what ways is consideration for others a norm in groups or teams—and in the organization overall? Does the organization support participative, team-oriented, humane, and charismatic approaches to leadership? Do performance reviews, organizational competencies, learning objectives, or other metrics support leadership behaviors that connect with employees of all generations?

**Take a close look at the organizational culture as well as the formal policies and practices.**

For example, what are the culture's beliefs about organizational authority? Understanding how employees view organizational authority has important implications for organizations because it can impact how they perceive organizational policies and how they approach directives from their managers and other superiors. To some degree, compliance with authority is important for ensuring rules are followed and order is maintained. At the same time, questioning authority is also a healthy practice.

For example, employees who are willing to question authority may prevent mistakes from happening or poor decisions from being made. But they are less likely to do that if the organizational culture does not find it acceptable.

**Do not focus your resources on tailoring leadership and management solutions to specific generations.**

Don't spend time, energy, and funds on creating solutions to generational differences in expectations of leaders that do not appear to exist. Instead, focus on helping all leaders learn how to be more participative, humane-oriented, charismatic, and team-oriented. People of all generations will appreciate the result.

**Communicate the World Leadership Survey findings to managers at all levels.**

Find ways to get the message across that, when it comes to what they believe makes a leader effective, employees of all generations are more alike than they are different. Managers will be more effective when they do not get caught up in assumptions about generation gaps, and when they put away assumptions that conflict or other challenges on their teams are rooted in generational differences.

## As you work directly to develop leaders, suggest the following specific ideas to help them practice behaviors that will be viewed as effective by Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers:

### To be more participative:

When making decisions about how work is done or how to handle a challenge, make it a habit to ask your team to suggest ideas. Be genuinely open to suggestions—or clearly communicate when you are not. Make sure that you routinely implement ideas of others, not just your own. Asking for others' ideas and input but never building on them or implementing them is not participative, it is just an exercise in futility for employees.

### To be more team-oriented:

Schedule meeting agendas and team project timelines with a little bit of time built in so there is opportunity to talk about what is happening with the work the group is doing. Teams benefit if they have the time to support one another in addressing challenges, provide constructive feedback, reflect on lessons learned, and celebrate accomplishments. Helping the team to connect in these ways will both make you more likely to be seen as a team-

oriented leader, and your team will become more efficient and effective over time as they are better able to leverage their learning.

### To be more humane-oriented:

Learn what your subordinates and coworkers need. Think about how you can help them work more effectively and achieve their goals. Be understanding when employees have personal conflicts that they have to deal with, even if it interferes with work. While it can be challenging to show compassion to a team member who unexpectedly has to attend to a personal need during an inopportune moment, with good employees it will pay off over time. High-performing employees who feel they have to make too many sacrifices for work or do not have the support needed when a personal situation arises will be dissatisfied and may disengage, or leave entirely.

### To be more charismatic:

Charisma at work is often about others connecting to your enthusiasm. Show passion for your work and respect for people you work with. Emotions are contagious, so when you project enthusiasm, optimism, and excitement, your team members are more likely to feel similarly.

### Another benefit:

Studies have shown that leaders who are perceived as positive are also perceived as being more effective.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Many leaders in the workforce today are under the assumption that managing three generations—Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials—is about bridging the vast divides among them. While there are differences among the generations in cultural norms (such as opinions about tattoos), frames of reference (such as vinyl records versus CDs versus MP3s), and number of years working, the generations' expectations and beliefs about what makes a leader effective are quite similar. Managers at all levels benefit from knowing that effective leadership is effective leadership, regardless of the age of the leader or the person being led.

Human resources, learning, and talent functions benefit when they operate from the same knowledge. Rather than tailoring leadership training and messages around assumed generational differences, HR leaders can focus on developing specific skills and creating a leadership culture that will support employees across generations.

# About the Research

The World Leadership Survey has continued to collect data online since its inception in March 2008. Participants in the research come through partner organizations, interested individuals, and enrollment in CCL programs.

Participants fill out a survey online that is hosted by Clear Picture Corporation and takes them approximately 20 minutes to complete. In thanks for their participation, participants receive a free CCL Guidebook to download immediately upon completion of the survey. Questions about the survey are sent to the World Leadership Survey e-mail account at [WorldLeadershipSurvey@ccl.org](mailto:WorldLeadershipSurvey@ccl.org).

The sample included 5,940 respondents native to the United States (note: the number of responses varies from item to item and therefore the valid sample size for each scale reported in this paper fluctuates as well). Of the respondents reporting race, the majority (82.6%) were White, 8.4% were Black, 2.1% were Asian, 1.5% Hispanic, 2% Multiracial, and 3.5% reported "Other." The respondents' ages ranged from 22 to 78 with a mean age of 46.

The U.S. sample also had a range of education levels represented, with 26.1% having a high school education, 29.6% having a bachelor's degree, and 36% reporting having a graduate or professional degree. The remainder of the respondents (8%) reported "Other".

It is important to note that this is not a random sample of leaders, managers, or employees in the U.S., and is likely not fully representative of the working population in the U.S. Our sample consists of people who are employed, are currently proactively working on their own development, and who were willing to take 20 minutes of their own time to participate. Though it is not a representative sample, it is a good sample of managers and professionals at higher levels in organizations who are currently employed and are engaged in improving their work skills. They offer insight into how people who are either in current leadership roles or have aspirations for leadership roles think about life in organizations.

## Endnotes

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