



Exploring the influence of leadership style and organisational culture on succession planning for Generation Z

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DECLARATION

I, Motshamonyane Jacob Phasha, declare that this research dissertation titled: "Exploring the influence of leadership and organizational culture on succession planning for Generation Z," and the work presented in this dissertation, are solely my own and have been generated from my original research. This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Business Administration degree at the North-West University Business School. To the best of my knowledge and belief, no material previously published or written by others, except when appropriately referenced, is included in this work.

Motshamonyane Jacob Phasha.

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Romans 14:8

To Dr. AAW Ayeni, thank you for your excellent leadership, support throughout the study, and guidance.

To my mother, Mologadi wa Mphela le Konadi; siblings; partner; children; niece; family; and friends, I express my heartfelt gratitude for your unwavering support, prayers, and encouragement throughout this journey.

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DEDICATION

1 Corinthians 10:31

ABSTRACT

The study examines succession planning and leadership development for Generation Z (Gen Z) within organizational contexts, focusing on leadership styles, cultural dynamics, developmental needs, and organizational readiness. The research employed a qualitative design, and thematic analysis was conducted of participants' insights to explore how organizations prepare younger employees for leadership roles and facilitate their transition into them.

The findings revealed that Gen Z is motivated by participative, coaching, servant, and transformational leadership styles, while authoritarian approaches were consistently rejected. Leadership that emphasizes mentorship, empowerment, and inclusion was seen as critical for succession readiness. Organizational culture emerged as a decisive factor: Hierarchical, rigid cultures acted as barriers, whereas inclusive, evolving cultures enabled trust, innovation, and engagement. Structured but adaptable cultures strike a balance between stability and flexibility, whereas cultural misalignment undermines retention and pipeline sustainability. The succession planning practices were found to be uneven across organizations and departments.

Formal frameworks strengthened continuity but were inconclusively applied and poorly communicated. Informal and ad-hoc approaches, along with reactive recruitment, weakened leadership pipelines and disengaged younger employees. The exclusion of Gen Z from succession discussions was also identified as a critical gap, leaving organizations vulnerable to leadership vacuums. The development needs of Gen Z were articulated, which included mentorship and coaching, project ownership, cross-functional exposure, soft skills training, digital leadership training, and consistent feedback and recognition.

Participants stressed that without this support, younger leaders' risk being technically competent but strategically underprepared. Organizational readiness was mixed, with some organizations moderately prepared and partial frameworks in place. In contrast, others were structurally unprepared, relying on ad-hoc or recruitment-driven approaches. Leadership mindset readiness emerged as key, with resistance to change among senior leaders being identified as a significant impediment to succession planning.

It is concluded that effective succession planning for Gen Z requires more than technical training or operational continuity; success depends on including adaptive leadership styles, cultivating inclusive cultures, formalizing succession frameworks, addressing developmental priorities, and strengthening organizational readiness through strategic foresight.

KEYWORDS: Leadership styles; Succession planning; organizational culture; Generation Z; Manufacturing industry; South Africa

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GEN Z	GENERATION Z
GDP	GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT
HR	HUMAN RESOURCES
ESG	ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL, AND GOVERNANCE
FDI	FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT
CSR	CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
AI	ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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1. CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW

The manufacturing sector in South Africa faces growing pressure to remain competitive in a global economy while addressing challenges posed by generational change, technological disruptions, and organizational shifts. Leadership succession is now a key concern, as companies need to prepare younger generations to take on strategic roles without sacrificing operational discipline, safety, and compliance. Generation Z, now entering the workforce in large numbers, has distinct expectations of inclusivity, innovation, and ongoing feedback. These expectations often challenge the traditional hierarchical structures found in industrial settings.

1.1.INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of a profitable organization is essential not only for its internal corporate success but also for the broader community and the national economic landscape it supports (Sheehy & Farneti, 2021). Profitable businesses significantly contribute to the socioeconomic fabric by creating employment opportunities, transferring skills, supporting local suppliers, and providing goods and services that enhance living standards (Pradana et al., 2022). Moreover, their sustained success translates into direct benefits for local government through increased tax revenues, improved gross domestic product (GDP), and reduced welfare dependence (Apostol et al., 2022; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2022). A robust and dynamic corporate sector further contributes to a nation's global competitiveness by producing more complex and diversified products, thereby enabling participation in higher-value global markets (Le, 2022).

These economic gains empower governments to fund essential public services, such as free education, healthcare, and infrastructure development, as well as address issues like national debt and high unemployment rates (Oliinyk et al., 2021; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2022). Additionally, a thriving business ecosystem can stabilize the macroeconomic environment by lowering interest rates, encouraging domestic borrowing, and attracting foreign direct investment, particularly when supported by sustainable corporate policies (Lee & Werner, 2023). Over time, these corporate contributions help strengthen the local currency and foster intergenerational socio-economic growth and environmental resilience (Bonnedaahl et

al., 2022). However, a company's ability to remain sustainable and profitable in the long term relies heavily on its internal strategies, which must be crafted by individuals who understand both the microeconomic dynamics of the business and the broader macroeconomic trends shaping its operating environment (Oliinyk et al., 2021).

Corporate agility, relevance, and resilience require deep insight into internal factors such as workforce capabilities, organizational culture, and leadership, as well as external factors including market shifts, technological trends, and global economic cycles (Lee & Werner, 2023). Successful strategies are often the result of accumulated institutional knowledge and learning from past failures and achievements (Koporcic et al., 2025). Showry & Manasa, (2014) made it known that at the core of this institutional knowledge is leadership, which not only influences business decisions but also defines corporate culture, driving organizational performance and adaptability. Effective leadership is essential for maintaining relevance in competitive markets (Takawira & Mutambara, 2023). For instance, Nokia's decline has been attributed to its leadership's inability to foster innovation, while Amazon's continued growth is credited to visionary and adaptive leadership (Gokul & Monisha, 2023; Kazemi et al., 2024).

1.2.BACKGROUND

Leadership is not permanent (Stone, 2023). As leadership transitions are inevitable, succession planning becomes essential for preserving institutional knowledge, organizational culture, and strategic direction(s) (Ahmad et al., 2023). However, succession planning must align with both cultural fit and performance requirements (Martin & O'Shea, 2021). People shape culture, and understanding the qualities that foster cultural compatibility and leadership effectiveness is crucial for sustainability (Lissitsa & Laor, 2021; Balon, 2024). Therefore, upskilling current employees and preparing them for future leadership roles is necessary to maintain continuity, especially as businesses evolve (Nguyen et al., 2023).

These efforts become increasingly important as businesses operate in a multigenerational workforce (Chiwisa & Mpundu, 2024). Today's organizations typically include Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y (also known as

Millennials), and Generation Z, each shaped by distinct societal experiences, communication styles, and work preferences (Ardueser & Garza, 2021). While Baby Boomers and Generation X currently dominate leadership positions, Millennials are rapidly advancing, and Generation Z is emerging as a crucial force for the future (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). The intersection of these generations within the workplace creates both opportunities and challenges, particularly in leadership transitions and cultural integration (Tabaku, 2024).

To ensure future corporate sustainability, it is imperative to examine the leadership attributes and cultural dynamics required to prepare Generation Z for leading the manufacturing corporations of tomorrow. This involves not only identifying what is necessary for successful succession but also aligning leadership development with the organization's culture to drive competitive performance. Therefore, this study arises from the need to understand how intergenerational interactions, leadership traits, and cultural fit converge to equip Generation Z with the skills, mindset, and institutional knowledge necessary for sustaining a profitable manufacturing corporation in an evolving economic landscape.

1.3.PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As manufacturing corporations face increasing complexity in both internal operations and external market demands, the sustainability of corporate performance greatly relies on leadership. While effective leadership and a strong organizational culture are key drivers of profitability and adaptability, many companies are unprepared for leadership transitions, especially in preparing the next generation, Generation Z, for future leadership roles. As Baby Boomers and Generation X near retirement, Millennials are stepping into leadership roles, and a gap remains in understanding how to develop and align Generation Z with the cultural and strategic needs of modern manufacturing businesses. Despite Generation Z's potential, their preparedness to assume leadership roles in manufacturing remains underexplored, especially in contexts that demand resilience, innovation, and cross-generational collaboration. Without intentional strategies for leadership development, succession planning, and cultural alignment, businesses risk losing institutional knowledge, disrupting culture, and compromising long-term sustainability. Therefore, it is

essential to examine the leadership attributes, cultural compatibility, and development strategies required to prepare Generation Z to lead sustainable, competitive manufacturing corporations in South Africa.

While leadership literature highlights adaptive, participative, and transformational styles, there is limited empirical evidence on how these traits manifest in industrial contexts that require both innovation and strict adherence to safety and operational procedures or protocols.

Gen Z shows a strong preference for transparency and inclusivity. The disconnect between company culture and generational expectations can pose risks to engagement, retention, and leadership development. Therefore, by investigating how organizational culture evolves to balance structure with adaptability, it is key. This exposes the organization to leadership gaps and cultural disruption.

Beyond technical (in)competence, younger leaders need opportunities to boost confidence, deepen their strategic understanding, and build soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. Some were moderately ready, while others lacked structural support and relied instead on ad hoc or recruitment-driven methods. Leadership mindset readiness proved to be crucial, with resistance to change among senior leaders identified as a significant obstacle. Actual readiness requires both established structural frameworks and flexible leadership.

It is on the above situation that the research objective were drafted below.

1.4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this study was to identify the key leadership traits necessary for sustaining profitability and adaptability in manufacturing corporations.

The specific objectives are;

1. To identify the key leadership attributes required for sustaining performance in manufacturing corporations.
2. To examine the alignment between existing organizational cultures in manufacturing and the values and expectations of Generation Z.

3. To evaluate the current strategies used to prepare Generation Z for leadership roles and assess their effectiveness.
4. To recommend practices or interventions that can enhance Generation Z's readiness for leadership within manufacturing firms.

1.5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What leadership attributes are most critical for sustaining performance in manufacturing corporations?
2. How do existing organizational cultures in manufacturing align with the values and expectations of Generation Z?
3. What are the current strategies used to prepare Generation Z for leadership, and how effective are they?
4. What practices or interventions can strengthen Generation Z's readiness for leadership in manufacturing firms?

1.6. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on leadership development, corporate culture, and succession planning within manufacturing corporations, with specific emphasis on preparing Generation Z for future leadership roles. The scope includes:

- Sector: Manufacturing industry

The study was focused on the manufacturing sector, which features complex operational processes, strict safety protocols, and a high demand for efficiency and innovation. These aspects highlight the unique leadership challenges of manufacturing firms, where succession planning must balance technical expertise with adaptable leadership styles. Other industries, such as healthcare, government, or finance, are excluded because their leadership dynamics differ significantly.

- Generational Focus: Generation Z (born approximately 1997–2012).

The study focused on Generation Z as the upcoming group of future leaders. Its scope covered their values and development needs concerning organizational culture and succession planning. Other generational groups (Baby Boomers,

Generation X, Millennials) were only considered for their transitional roles, with the main emphasis on Gen Z.

- Geographical Scope: South Africa.

The study focused on the manufacturing business within the South African context, which faces unique challenges such as economic volatility, skills shortages, and socio-cultural diversity. This scope captured the national context and acknowledged that findings may not be directly generalized to other countries or regions.

- Conceptual Boundaries: Leadership attributes, organizational culture, generational dynamics, succession planning, and sustainability.

The study was conceptually limited to these constructs, focusing on how they interact to influence leadership development and organizational readiness. It did not include other constructs, such as general employee engagement and unrelated HR practices, unless they directly impact leadership and culture.

1.7.LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations acknowledge constraints that may affect the breadth or generalisability of the findings:

- Time Boundaries: The study reflects leadership and cultural dynamics during the current generation transitions (2020s), and findings may evolve as Generation Z matures into leadership roles
- Construct Boundaries: The study is limited to leadership development, organizational culture, succession planning, and sustainability. Other constructs, such as employee motivation, consumer behaviour, and macroeconomic policy, are not examined in depth
- Scope Boundaries: The study is geographically limited to South Africa and sectorally limited to manufacturing. Findings may not be directly transferable to other industries or regions without contextual adaptation.
- Participant Engagement: The number of willing participants may not have been sufficient to represent all manufacturing firms in South Africa.

- **Subjectivity and Interpretation:** The analysis relies on the researcher's interpretation, which may introduce bias despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and transparency.
- **Participant Bias:** Participants may present socially desirable responses or avoid discussing negative aspects of their experiences. Building rapport and ensuring confidentiality aim to mitigate this.
- **Access and Representation:** Purposive sampling may unintentionally exclude some voices, and the diversity of viewpoints will depend on the willingness of organizations and individuals to participate.

Despite these limitations, the study aimed to provide a meaningful and in-depth understanding of the cultural and leadership factors influencing succession planning among Generation Z in manufacturing environments.

1.8.CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by a conceptual framework that combines leadership qualities, organizational culture, succession planning, and generational readiness to explain how Gen Z can be prepared for leadership roles in South Africa's manufacturing sector (Figure 1-1). The framework is based on adaptive leadership theory, organizational culture theory, and succession planning. It suggests that leadership traits, cultural fit, and structured succession planning collectively shape Generation Z's leadership readiness, which in turn influences the sustainability and competitiveness of manufacturing companies.

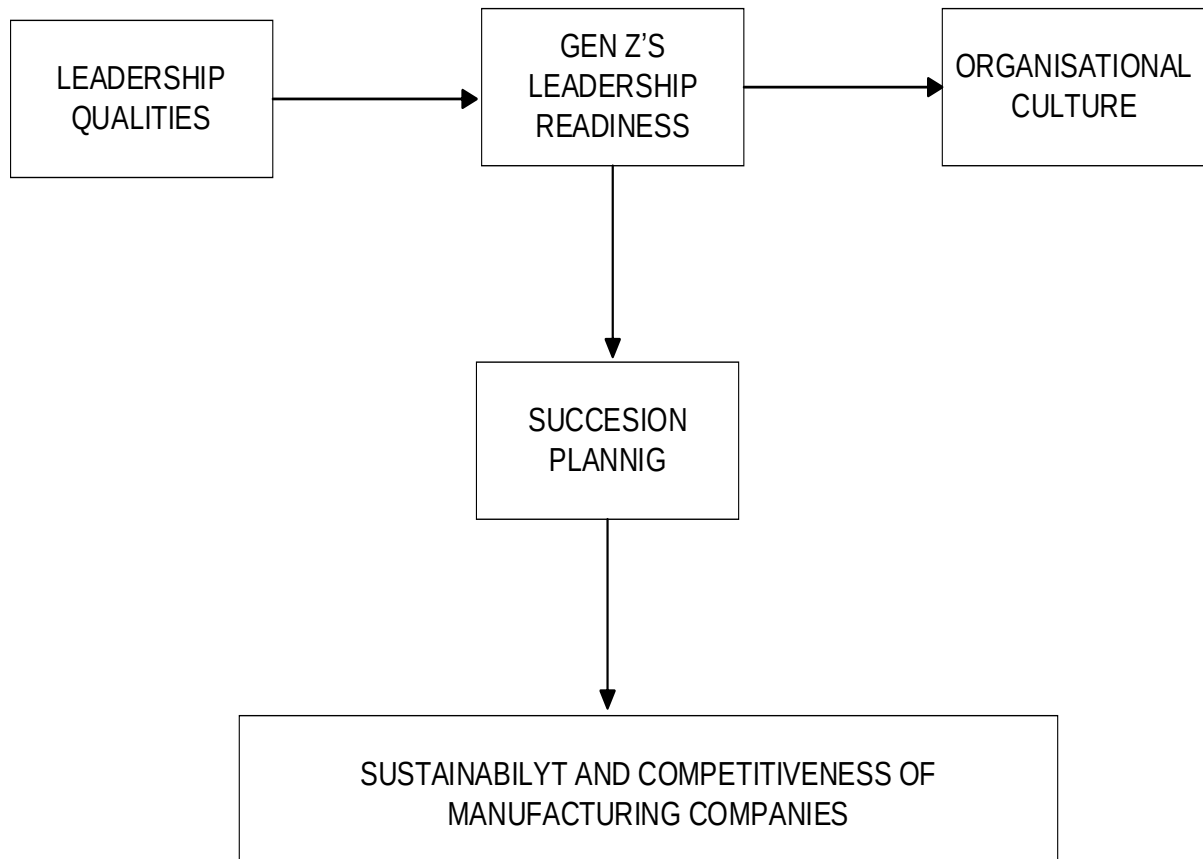


Figure 1-1. Conceptual Framework for Preparing Gen Z for Leadership Roles in South Africa's Manufacturing Sector

1.9.DEFINITION OF TERMS

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout the text, the following key terms are defined as they are used in this research.

- i. Leadership Attributes: Traits and behaviors such as adaptability, participative decision-making, coaching, and transformational influence that enable effective leadership in manufacturing contexts.
- ii. Organizational Culture: The shared values, norms, and practices within a firm, business, or organization that shape employee behaviour, engagement, and leadership development.

- iii. Succession Planning: A structured process for identifying, developing, and transitioning future leaders within an organization to ensure continuity and sustainability.
- iv. Generation Z: Individuals born approximately between 1997 and 2012, characterized by digital fluency, a preference for inclusion and transparency, and evolving expectations of leadership and work culture.
- v. Sustainability: The organization's ability to maintain long-term performance, resilience, and competitiveness through effective leadership and strategic alignment.
- vi. Employee retention: The ability of an organization to keep employees engaged and committed over time, often influenced by leadership style, culture, and succession planning practices.
- vii. Innovation and Adaptability: Organization's capacity to evolve processes, products, and leadership approaches in response to technological, generational, and market changes.
- viii. Transformational Leadership: A leadership style that inspires and motivates employees by creating vision, fostering innovation, and encouraging personal growth and organizational change.
- ix. Adaptive Leadership: A leadership approach that emphasizes flexibility, responsiveness, and the ability to mobilize people to tackle complex challenges in dynamic environments.
- x. Servant Leadership: A leadership philosophy that prioritizes serving others, focusing on empowerment, mentorship, and community-building to strengthen trust and engagement.

- xi. Mentorship: A developmental relationship where experienced leaders guide, support, and coach younger employees to prepare them for leadership roles.
- xii. Organizational Readiness: The degree to which an organization is structurally, culturally, and strategically prepared to implement succession planning and leadership development initiatives.
- xiii. Leadership styles: Distinct approaches to leading, including transformational, servant, coaching, participative, authoritarian, and adaptive styles, each shaping how leaders motivate, engage, and develop employees.

1.10. JUSTIFICATION FOR STUDY

This study is necessary and relevant for several strategic reasons:

1. Urgent Need for Leadership Succession

As Baby Boomers and Generation X approach retirement, a growing leadership vacuum is emerging in manufacturing firms. Identifying and nurturing leadership potential among Generation Z is imperative to sustain productivity and competitiveness.

2. Cultural Alignment and Talent Retention

Manufacturing organizations often operate with traditional hierarchies and rigid cultures. Aligning these with the values and expectations of Gen Z, such as flexibility, inclusivity, and innovation, is critical for retention and long-term sustainability.

3. Strategic Succession Planning

By examining how leadership traits, organizational culture, and generational dynamics intersect, the study will help firms redesign leadership pipelines to accommodate the rising Gen Z workforce.

4. Contribution to Literature and Practice

This research addresses a significant gap in South African industry-specific literature and offers empirical insights that are transferable to other developing economies. It also supports HR professionals, educators, and policymakers in developing effective leadership strategies and succession plans.

5. Sustainable Corporate Growth

The findings of this study will inform practices that ensure continuity of institutional knowledge, leadership competence, and cultural cohesion, key drivers of resilient and sustainable business performance.

2. CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to critically examine the literature on leadership styles, organizational culture, and succession planning in the context of Generation Z in South Africa's manufacturing sector. A literature review does not merely catalogue existing studies; it synthesizes, interrogates, and evaluates them to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps that justify the present study.

The review begins by examining the defining characteristics and workplace expectations of Generation Z, highlighting how their values and behaviors differ from those of previous cohorts. It then examines leadership styles commonly associated with effective succession planning, contrasting global perspectives with the realities of complex manufacturing environments.

2.1.CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

2.1.1. Generation Z and workplace expectations

Recent studies have increasingly focused on understanding Generation Z's entry into the workforce, shedding light on their unique behavioural characteristics, motivational drivers, and expectations (Dimokas, 2025; Rouser, 2024; Madden, 2024). Hutanu et al. (2020) provide a foundational exploration of this cohort, describing Generation Z as ambitious, resilient, and open to change, though often perceived as "stubborn." While inherently tech-savvy, these individuals surprisingly value face-to-face communication and express a desire to enhance their interpersonal skills. The study also highlighted their emotional vulnerabilities, including a reliance on external motivation, low self-confidence, and a pronounced fear of failure. These traits underline the significance of emotional support and feedback in sustaining their engagement and overall well-being. In the workplace, Generation Z favours participatory and inspirational leadership over authoritarian styles and places high value on appreciation, continuous learning, and a sense of belonging (Pantelides, 2024).

Building on these insights, Răcolta-Paina and Irini (2021) emphasize Generation Z's ambition, creativity, and resistance to rigid procedures, paired with a strong orientation toward innovation and social responsibility. Their desire for personal and

professional development is evident in their preference for both internal and external training opportunities (Răcolta-Paina & Irini, 2021). However, the study also notes a tendency toward high wage expectations, which may reflect a generational emphasis on rapid progression and recognition. In the South African context, the expectations of Generation Z are shaped by historical inequalities and a strong desire for upward social mobility. This generation is highly entrepreneurial, often seeking side hustles or freelance opportunities in addition to formal employment. Succession planning must therefore accommodate flexible career paths and non-linear growth trajectories.

From a human resource management perspective, the findings suggest that many organizations are actively adapting their practices to attract and retain Generation Z talent. The Initiatives include enhanced transparency, meaningful work, career development pathways, flexible working conditions, and performance recognition (Kulkarni & Rai, 2023). Despite these efforts, retention remains a challenge due to Generation Z's low tolerance for unmet expectations and strong preference for ongoing feedback, autonomy, and purpose-driven work (Decarvalho, 2025; Sahlstedt, 2024).

Gen Z's digital fluency also redefines communication norms. They prefer asynchronous, tech-enabled interactions and expect transparency from leadership. This has implications for how manufacturing firms structure mentorship and performance management systems.

Moreover, Gen Z tends to seek out organizations that demonstrate social responsibility and environmental awareness. Manufacturing firms that integrate sustainability into their operations and leadership ethos are more likely to attract and retain Gen Z talent.

2.1.2. Leadership style in succession planning

Leadership succession planning is increasingly recognized as a strategic imperative for organizational sustainability and talent continuity (Samuel & Isa, 2024; Saleem, 2023; Yarangga, 2023). Scholars converge on the critical role of leadership styles in shaping the efficacy of succession planning practices, particularly within contexts of

generational transitions, talent management, and leadership development (Jones, 2024; Siambi, 2022; Yarangga, 2023).

Figueiredo (2022) identifies an intriguing link between laissez-faire leadership and succession planning, suggesting that even passive leadership can, under certain conditions, facilitate succession planning by allowing subordinate initiative. The study also emphasizes key leadership development practices, such as 360° feedback and coaching, that are associated with succession planning. These tools help develop human capital and strengthen internal leadership pipelines (Figueiredo, 2022). The theoretical recommendation is for organizations to formalize leadership development as a structured pipeline for future leadership roles (Figueiredo, 2022).

From a broader strategic perspective, Siambi (2022) emphasizes the integrative role of strategic leadership succession planning in maintaining leadership continuity and facilitating organizational transition. This conceptual review situates succession planning within the frameworks of universalistic, contingency, and resource-based theories, proposing that leadership retention and talent development policies serve as vital mediators of succession planning. Despite these theoretical insights, the study demands empirical validation and cross-disciplinary perspectives to solidify the emerging framework.

Empirical evidence from Ahmad et al. (2017) in the Malaysian public sector shows a positive link between transformational leadership and the implementation of succession planning. The study highlights that transformational leaders, through qualities such as idealized influence and individualized consideration, can motivate employees and build the confidence essential for career advancement and leadership development. However, the authors warn that succession planning should not depend only on charisma; effective execution, feedback mechanisms, and systemic organizational backing are vital for success.

In the context of secondary education, an empirical study showed that transformational leadership, particularly through idealised influence, significantly contributes to effective succession planning (Avolio & Bass, 2002). School principals who model strong values, inspire trust, and foster a shared vision effectively guide their staff towards leadership readiness and organizational commitment.

Umesi (2023) reinforces this connection by examining how leadership styles, talent management, and succession planning collectively impact employee retention in the hospitality industry. Practical recommendations include empowering staff, promoting career growth, and implementing constructive feedback mechanisms. These strategies not only retain key talent but also align employees with long-term leadership trajectories (Umesi, 2023).

Adaptive leadership, as conceptualized by Heifetz et al. (2009), is gaining relevance in dynamic industrial environments. It encourages leaders to diagnose challenges, mobilize stakeholders, and experiment with new approaches and skills to navigate generational transitions and succession planning in volatile markets.

Distributed leadership, which decentralizes authority and promotes team-based decision-making, aligns well with Generation Z's collaborative nature. In manufacturing firms that adopt lean and agile methodologies, distributed leadership fosters innovation and accountability, creating a fertile ground for succession.

Globally, firms such as Siemens and Toyota have integrated leadership development into their operational strategies, utilizing rotational programs, mentorship, and digital platforms to identify and groom future leaders. These practices offer valuable benchmarks for South African firms seeking to modernize succession planning.

Despite the dominance of transformational leadership in the literature, emerging styles such as authentic, servant, and adaptive leadership offer nuanced pathways for succession planning. These styles, which resonate with Gen Z's values of transparency, inclusivity, and purpose, may prove more effective in retaining and developing young talent.

Collectively, the literature indicates that transformational leadership remains the most consistently supported style in succession-planning contexts, promoting employee motivation, trust, and long-term vision. However, the layered role of laissez-faire leadership and the limited empirical evidence surrounding some theoretical propositions suggest a need for further longitudinal and multi-contextual studies.

Future research should explore how leadership styles interact with generational traits, organizational culture, and sector-specific dynamics. In South Africa,

longitudinal studies across manufacturing hubs such as Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal could yield actionable insights into leadership development and succession outcomes.

2.1.3. Organizational Culture and Generational Engagement

Organizational culture is a fundamental element that shapes how employees behave, collaborate, and make decisions in the workplace. It comprises shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that define a company's internal social and operational environment (Wijethilake et al., 2023; Zahra et al., 2023). Leadership styles, company history, industry norms, and interpersonal dynamics all contribute to shaping a company's culture (Oriade et al., 2021). A strong organizational culture can foster innovation, increase employee engagement, and enhance performance, while a fragmented or toxic culture often leads to high turnover, ethical lapses, and operational inefficiencies (Zahra et al., 2023).

Given the increasing emphasis on intergenerational workforce dynamics, particularly the rise of Generation Z in the workplace, organizational culture has become even more critical (George et al., 2024). Gen Z employees often expect meaningful work, opportunities for development, and ethical corporate practices (Popaitoon, 2022). These expectations influence their engagement and retention, which are vital considerations for leadership succession in manufacturing industries. This section reviews the role of organizational culture across four interlinked dimensions: employee engagement and retention; innovation and adaptability; performance and productivity; and ethical behaviour and corporate reputation.

2.1.4. Employee Engagement and Retention

A positive and inclusive culture is a key driver of employee engagement and retention (Atiku et al., 2024). Employees who feel connected to their organization's mission are more likely to remain loyal and perform well (Oriade et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant for Gen Z, a generation distinguished by its desire for growth, recognition, and purposeful work (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Companies such as Microsoft exemplify how cultivating a culture rooted in inclusivity and purpose can enhance loyalty and reduce turnover (Javed, 2024).

Retaining Gen Z talent also requires individualized management strategies (Kulkari & Rai, 2023). One effective approach is project-based role structuring, which allows young professionals to rotate through various assignments that match their skills and goals (Lechler & Huemann, 2024). When supported by clearly established Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), these rotational roles not only keep employees engaged and fulfilled but also help maintain productivity and preserve institutional knowledge (Kazemi et al., 2024).

By fostering a culture that values inclusiveness, purpose, and continuous learning, organizations increase the likelihood of retaining their emerging leaders, thereby supporting long-term succession planning.

2.1.5. Innovation and Adaptability

Closely tied to employee engagement is the culture of innovation and adaptability (Radu, 2023). Organizations with cultures that encourage creativity, experimentation, and calculated risk-taking are more responsive to changing market demands (Apostol et al., 2022). Such cultures empower employees to contribute new ideas, thereby promoting shared ownership in problem-solving and innovation.

A lack of adaptability can significantly hinder organizational progress, as shown by Nokia's decline in the early 2000s (Sadia et al., 2023). Once a market leader, Nokia failed to pivot amid the smartphone revolution and the dominance of the Android platform, while competitors like Samsung successfully adapted (Joshi, 2003; Gokul & Monisha, 2023). This case illustrates how resistance to innovation and change can harm long-term competitiveness.

In the context of Gen Z, nurturing a culture of adaptability is especially important without losing engagement (Pandita, 2023). This generation excels in environments that embrace disruption and offer the freedom to innovate (George et al., 2024). A progressive organizational culture can thus unlock the full potential of young talent, which is crucial for revitalizing aging leadership pipelines within manufacturing firms (Shahriar, 2025).

2.1.6. Performance and Productivity

A performance-oriented culture is characterized by clearly defined goals, accountability, and a commitment to excellence (Botelho, 2024). When organizations set ambitious targets and create systems for performance feedback, they foster employee ownership and drive (Wijethilake et al., 2023). This type of culture not only elevates individual contributions but also enhances collaboration through shared goals (Nauman, 2022).

For Gen Z, performance cultures must strike a balance between results and personal development (Widodo & Maghfuriyah, 2024). High standards, when matched with developmental support, enable young employees to build competence and confidence (Jackson et al., 2022). This reinforces the leadership pipeline by preparing emerging talent to handle complex roles and responsibilities (Kazemi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, productivity gains from such cultures translate into higher profitability and customer satisfaction (Oesterreich et al., 2022). Efficient workflows, empowered employees, and results-driven mindsets make organizations more agile, scalable, and attractive to both internal and external stakeholders (Bengtsson & Wiklund, 2023).

2.1.7. Ethical Behaviour and Corporate Reputation

Finally, organizational culture greatly influences ethical behavior and a company's reputation (Smith & Drudy, 2022). An ethical culture encourages responsible decision-making and strengthens the organization's dedication to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Sheehy & Farneti, 2021). Employees are more likely to act with integrity when ethical behavior is modeled and rewarded from leadership downward (Oriade et al., 2021). This aspect is especially appealing to Gen Z, who prefer employers with a clear commitment to ethics, sustainability, and community impact (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). A transparent and value-driven workplace not only attracts young professionals but also builds trust among customers and investors (Al-Juboor et al., 2024; O'Brien).

Moreover, ethical cultures are correlated with higher employee morale and lower turnover rates (Kim & Lee, 2024; Hameed, 2024). In the long term, this enhances the organization's public image and creates a fertile environment for emerging leaders to rise without the reputational burdens that typically accompany unethical practices (Burrell et al., 2024).

2.1.8. Integrated Perspective

The interaction among these four dimensions, namely engagement, innovation, performance, and ethics, creates a comprehensive organizational culture framework essential to achieving long-term success and effective leadership transitions, especially in manufacturing, where change tends to be gradual, and leadership is often hierarchical. Aligning the culture with Gen Z values can accelerate the transformation.

A workplace that engages, challenges, empowers, and aligns with employee values is better positioned to attract and retain top talent from Generation Z. This makes organizational culture not just a platform but a strategic lever in building the next generation of leaders. Future sections will examine how leadership styles intersect with these cultural dynamics to shape succession planning outcomes in manufacturing settings.

2.2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.2.1. Generational traits and their Influence on contemporary organizational Dynamics

In today's fast-paced business environment, especially in the manufacturing sector, organizations are increasingly composed of a multigenerational workforce (Sulaeman et al., 2025). This diversity creates both challenges and opportunities across organizational culture, leadership succession, employee development, and overall strategic planning (Jones, 2024). Understanding the different values, motivations, and behaviors of each generation is essential for developing effective leadership strategies and maintaining long-term corporate success. This section explores the generational traits of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials (also

known as Generation Y), and Generation Z, with a particular emphasis on how these characteristics impact talent development and succession planning in manufacturing organizations.

Organizations typically hire individuals aged 18 to 65, although this range may vary by country-specific labor laws and retirement norms (Zahra et al., 2023; Ardueser & Garza, 2021). Usually, employees start thinking about retirement around age 50, with many leaving the workforce between 60 and 65 (Parker, 2022; Tur-Sinai et al., 2024). As a result, Baby Boomers and Generation X mainly occupy senior management roles (Lissitsa, 2021). Meanwhile, the future leadership pipeline is expected to come from Millennials and Generation Z (Foote, 2022).

Research indicates that employees under 50, especially those aged 18 to 35, are more adaptable to new technologies and more eager to seek development opportunities (Martin & Roberts, 2021; Zahra et al., 2023). Due to rapid technological advances and shifting market demands, particularly in manufacturing, organizations must recognize and develop the leadership potential of these younger generations (Behie et al., 2023). This provides the background for the current study, which explores how generational traits, especially those of Generation Z, align with the future leadership requirements of manufacturing firms.

2.2.2. Understanding Generational Characteristics

Generational theory indicates that people born during the same time period share key experiences, such as advances in technology, economic shifts, and cultural changes, that influence their worldviews, values, and work behaviors (Balon, 2024; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Recognizing these generational differences is crucial for managing workplace diversity, fostering intergenerational collaboration, and creating effective succession plans. The following subsections outline the traits of four major generational groups in the workforce.

2.2.2.1 Baby boomers (1946–1964)

Baby Boomers grew up during a period of post-war economic growth, social stability, and trust in institutions (Martin & Roberts, 2021). This generation is recognized for its strong work ethic, long-term loyalty to employers, and preference for face-to-face

communication (Martin & Roberts, 2021; Carrillo-Durán et al., 2022). In manufacturing, Baby Boomers often occupy strategic or executive positions, having advanced through the ranks over many years (Brown, 2021). Their institutional knowledge, operational discipline, and dedication to structure have been vital in developing and stabilizing numerous manufacturing companies (Brown, 2021). However, their hesitance to embrace new digital systems and slower adaptation to emerging technologies can cause a disconnect with younger employees (Georgescu & Bodislav, 2024; Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025).

2.2.2.2 Generation X (1965-1980)

Generation X, sometimes called the "bridge generation," experienced major technological changes, including the rise of personal computers and the early internet (Lissitsa & Laor, 2021). This generation tends to be independent, practical, and resourceful, having dealt with economic recessions and shifting corporate norms (Salomaa, 2024). In manufacturing, Generation X has played an essential role in moving businesses from traditional to semi-digital systems, often acting as a bridge between older and younger workers (Ardueser & Garza, 2021). They value work-life balance and are open to innovation, though they rely on technology less than later generations (Ardueser & Garza, 2021).

2.2.2.3 Millennials / Generation Y (1981–1996)

Millennials came of age during the rise of the internet, mobile technology, and global social change (Serbanescu, 2023). As digital natives, they favour purpose-driven careers, collaborative work environments, and flexibility in employment arrangements (Cansu & Güloğlu, 2023; Martin & Roberts, 2021). In manufacturing organizations, Millennials are leading innovations in automation, sustainability practices, and data analytics (Rehman et al., 2024). However, their high expectations for rapid advancement, coupled with economic challenges such as student debt, often drive them to take on multiple roles or freelance work (Michaud, 2021). Millennials are positioned to assume senior leadership roles, making it crucial to integrate their technological expertise with traditional manufacturing operations (Galdames & Guihen, 2022).

2.2.2.4 Generation Z (1997–2012)

Generation Z (Gen Z) is the first fully digital generation, raised on smartphones, artificial intelligence, and social media (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). This cohort is highly self-reliant, socially conscious, and entrepreneurial (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). They value authenticity, mental health, and inclusion, and often question hierarchical authority structures (Ardueser & Garza, 2021). Gen Z's natural affinity for digital platforms makes them ideal candidates to drive the next wave of digital transformation in manufacturing, particularly in areas like smart factories, robotics, and supply chain analytics (Shabib et al., 2021). However, their preference for flexible career paths, gig work, and minimal corporate loyalty presents challenges for traditional succession planning (Hidayat, 2024).

2.2.3. Linking Generational Traits to Leadership Development in Manufacturing

As Baby Boomers and Generation X retire, manufacturing companies face a leadership vacuum that younger generations must fill. Effective succession planning requires a deeper understanding of each generation's motivational drivers, communication styles, and learning preferences. For instance, while Baby Boomers may prioritize job stability and loyalty, Generation Z seeks meaningful work, rapid feedback, and skills-based advancement.

The strategic imperative, therefore, is to align leadership development programs with generational expectations without compromising on organizational goals. For manufacturing firms often rooted in operational efficiency and structured systems, this means redesigning leadership pipelines to be more agile, tech-forward, and inclusive. It also involves fostering intergenerational mentoring relationships to preserve institutional knowledge while enabling innovation (various characteristics summarized in Table 2-1).

This review highlights the importance of customizing leadership strategies to fit the strengths and challenges of various generations. The study then shifts to explore how these generational insights can guide future-focused succession planning in manufacturing firms, with a particular focus on supporting Generation Z as the upcoming wave of leadership.

Table 2-1. Summary of the Degeneration Characteristics

Generation	Birth years	Key traits	Technology and communication	Work Ethics & Career	Values priorities	References
Baby boomers	1946-1964	Hardworking, loyal, traditional	Face-to-face, print media	Value job stability and career progression	Stability, hard work, and corporate loyalty	(Lissitsa & Laor, 2021; Martin & Roberts, 2021; Carrillo-Durán et al., 2022)
Gen X	(1965 - 1980).	Independent, adaptable, skeptical	Early digital tech, emails	Prioritise financial security, work-life balance	Self-reliance, pragmatism, and skepticism toward authority	(Ahmad et al., 2023; Bratina & Faganel, 2024)
Millennials	1981-1996	Tech-savvy, socially conscious, experience-driven	Social media, the internet revolution	Prefer flexibility, purpose-driven work	Diversity, sustainability, and mental health	(Martin & Roberts, 2021)
Gen Z	(1997–2012).	Digital natives, inclusive, entrepreneurial	Instant visual communication (TikTok, Instagram)	Seek career flexibility, financial independence	Authenticity, innovation, and the gig economy (short-term employment)	(Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021)

2.2.4. Leadership Styles

Leadership style is a key organizational factor that shapes how employees engage with management, complete tasks, and reach objectives (Northouse, 2018). A substantial body of research has aimed to define and classify leadership styles, particularly regarding their effectiveness across different workplace generations and organizational settings (Alblooshi et al., 2021). Among these, transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership are the most frequently examined (Alblooshi et al., 2021).

Transformational leadership is characterized by inspirational motivation, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealised influence (Sutanto et al., 2021). Leaders adopting this style seek to engage followers at a deep level, align their goals with the organization's vision, and empower them to innovate (Ngozi, 2024). This leadership approach has been linked to improved performance, creativity, and commitment, particularly in dynamic environments such as manufacturing, where rapid adaptation is crucial (Yang et al., 2025; Madi Odeh et al., 2023). For

Generation Z, transformational leadership may resonate due to their desire for meaningful work, opportunities for development, and value-driven engagement (Schroth, 2019).

Transactional leadership, in contrast, is more task-focused and dependent on structured rewards and punishment to drive performance (Yang et al., 2025). While this style may be effective in achieving short-term goals and maintaining order in operationally intensive settings, such as manufacturing, it is often criticized for failing to foster long-term commitment or innovation. Generation Z employees may perceive this approach as rigid or demotivating, given their preference for autonomy and regular feedback (Dimokas, 2025).

A laissez-faire leadership style is characterized by minimal involvement in subordinates' tasks and has been found to correlate negatively with employee satisfaction and organisational performance (Hundie et al., 2024). Although Generation Z values independence, they also expect guidance, coaching, and active engagement from leaders (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Therefore, a laissez-faire approach may be misaligned with their expectations, especially in high-stakes environments such as manufacturing, where leadership visibility and support are crucial.

Situational Leadership theory, developed by Hersey and Blanchard, remains highly relevant in contemporary leadership studies. The theory proposes that effective leaders adapt their style, whether directing, coaching, supporting, or delegating, based on the competence and commitment of their followers (Bashir et al., 2022). A 2023 study by Thompson and Glasø highlights the importance of aligning leadership style with follower readiness, showing that such alignment leads to improved employee performance, satisfaction, and engagement. The research highlights that mismatched leadership, characterized by either excessive control or a lack of oversight, can negatively impact outcomes, underscoring the importance of flexibility in leadership approaches in today's dynamic organizational environments (Thompson & Glasø, 2023).

Ahsan and Khalid (2023) investigated the interrelated impacts of Decision Support Systems (DSS), situational leadership, work motivation, and employee performance within organizational environments. Their findings indicate that DSS has a significant

and positive influence on both situational leadership and work motivation. This suggests that implementing DSS enhances a leader's capacity to adopt flexible, context-sensitive leadership styles, thereby promoting higher levels of employee motivation. These results align with the existing literature, which emphasises the role of technological tools in strengthening leadership effectiveness and employee engagement (Gutu, 2022).

Despite these positive associations, the study revealed that situational leadership does not have a statistically significant effect on employee performance. Although adaptable leadership may contribute to a supportive environment, the results imply that it does not directly lead to performance improvements. Similarly, the relationship between work motivation and employee performance was found to be positive but insignificant, suggesting that motivation alone is insufficient to ensure high performance. Ahsan and Khalid (2023) conclude that additional factors, such as employee discipline and a strong sense of responsibility, are critical for achieving optimal performance. This conclusion is consistent with broader organizational behaviour theories that emphasise the importance of consistent behaviour and accountability in performance outcomes.

In examining leadership succession in manufacturing, understanding these styles becomes crucial. As Baby Boomers retire and Generation X and Millennials move into senior roles, the expectations and values of Generation Z, who are gradually entering the workforce, must be considered in leadership development strategies (Bento et al., 2020). Adopting leadership styles that foster engagement, offer growth opportunities, and align with Generation Z's values is crucial to ensuring a seamless transition of leadership across generations.

Furthermore, scholars argue for a situational or hybrid leadership approach, which tailors leadership style to employee maturity, task complexity, and contextual factors (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). This adaptive approach may be instrumental in navigating the intergenerational workforce, enabling leaders to strike a balance between structure and autonomy that accommodates generational differences.

In conclusion, leadership styles play a vital role in shaping organizational outcomes and employee experiences. In manufacturing contexts, where succession planning is a pressing concern, aligning leadership development with Generation Z's

preferences and expectations is crucial to ensuring sustainability and performance continuity.

2.3. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

2.3.1. Studies on Leadership Preferences of Gen Z

Molek et al. (2023) concluded that transformational leadership is the most preferred style among employees across generations, followed by transactional leadership, with laissez-faire leadership being the least favoured. At the same time, there was no significant difference in overall leadership style preferences among respondents; however, a statistically significant generational difference was found regarding transactional leadership. Specifically, Baby Boomers demonstrated the highest preference for transactional leadership, while Generation Z showed the lowest. In contrast, preferences for transformational and laissez-faire leadership did not significantly differ across generations.

The study found that although transformational leadership was most valued, the highest-scoring responses indicated a preference for a hybrid approach combining both transformational and transactional styles. This supports the view proposed by Senica (2009), who recommended that leaders should strive to develop strong transformational qualities, maintain transactional elements to a lesser extent, and minimize reliance on laissez-faire practices. Furthermore, the findings echo Baum's (2019) assertion that effective leadership involves recognising individual team members' traits and adapting leadership styles accordingly. In summary, Molek et al. (2023) emphasized that a flexible leadership profile rooted in transformational principles and supported by selective transactional behaviours aligns best with the expectations of a multigenerational workforce, particularly the emerging Generation Z cohort.

Pandita (2022) emphasized that to succeed in today's talent market, organizations must understand and align with Generation Z's values. A smooth hiring process and more than just competitive pay are vital, as Gen Z prioritizes work ethics, diversity, flexibility, and community impact. Retention requires shifting from traditional management to a mentoring approach that offers autonomy and support. Pandita's

model offers a strategic approach to attract, engage, and retain Gen Z employees, highlighting the need for HR to adapt or risk losing the talent war.

2.3.2. Research On Organizational Culture and Employee Retention

Ushakov and Shatila (2021) proposed several strategies for companies to enhance employee retention and overall performance. It was pointed out that many employees are unhappy with their pay and benefits, so companies should consider increasing wages and offering extras such as healthcare, transportation, and improved work tools. These improvements can help workers feel more satisfied and stay with the company longer. The authors also recommend supporting employees' learning and growth by encouraging them to take courses or study leave. Allowing employees to participate in important decisions is another way to make them feel valued and enhance the quality of their work.

Good communication between staff and management is essential. Ushakov and Shatila (2021) suggest establishing regular meetings or forums where employees can discuss issues, share ideas, and obtain prompt answers. They highlight that factors such as company culture, fair compensation, opportunities for advancement, and a sense of being supported by the organization all contribute to employee motivation. While money can motivate people in the short term, praise and helpful feedback are more effective in sustaining motivation over time. The study also notes that having fun at work can reduce turnover, particularly in industries such as hospitality.

However, too much focus on fun can sometimes be a problem. The best approach strikes a balance between work enjoyment and a sense of purpose and support. Overall, Ushakov and Shatila (2021) emphasized that companies should focus on fair pay, employee development, good communication, and meaningful motivation to create a positive workplace where employees want to stay.

2.3.3. Evidence From Manufacturing Sector Studies

Lhuglham and Pruetipibultham (2024) conducted a qualitative study to examine the leadership styles preferred by Generation Z employees and how these styles influence their performance and retention within an electronics manufacturing company in Thailand. The research employed semi-structured interviews with a

purposive sample of 10 Generation Z employees, yielding rich insights into generational expectations in a manufacturing context. The study found that transformational leadership was the most favored style among participants. Respondents expressed a strong preference for leaders who are inspirational, communicative, and supportive, especially those who encourage professional growth and foster a positive, motivating workplace environment. The findings reinforce the importance of individualized consideration and visionary leadership in engaging younger employees.

Moreover, the study highlighted effective communication as a critical leadership competency. Participants consistently indicated that open, transparent, and consistent communication enhances trust, workplace cohesion, and job satisfaction. This, in turn, contributes positively to both employee performance and retention. Overall, the research underscores the alignment between transformational leadership and the values of Generation Z. It suggests that organizations aiming to improve engagement and retention of younger employees in the manufacturing sector should prioritise leadership development programs that cultivate transformational behaviours and communication excellence (Lhuglham & Pruetipibultham, 2024).

2.4.KEY INSIGHTS SUMMARY

The reviewed literature provides a strong foundation for understanding Generation Z's workplace expectations, leadership preferences, and the critical role of organizational culture in shaping succession outcomes. Three dominant themes emerge:

A. Leadership Preferences of Generation Z

Multiple studies (e.g., Molek et al., 2023; Lhuglham & Pruetipibultham, 2024) consistently show that Generation Z prefers transformational leadership over transactional or laissez-faire styles. They are drawn to leaders who are inspirational, communicative, and empowering, and who offer opportunities for learning and independence. While transactional practices like goal setting and performance monitoring still have value, Gen Z favors a hybrid leadership approach that is flexible

and supportive. Traditional command-and-control leadership is becoming less compatible with their expectations.

B. Organizational Culture and Retention

As highlighted by Ushakov and Shatila (2021), organizational culture greatly influences employee retention, especially for younger workers who prioritize inclusion, ethics, communication, and developmental opportunities. Gen Z is highly receptive to workplaces that offer fair pay, opportunities for growth, and participative leadership. Positive feedback, skill development, and a strong sense of purpose are essential to maintaining motivation and engagement.

C. Manufacturing Sector Perspectives

In sector-specific studies (e.g., Lhuglham & Pruetipibultham, 2024), transformational leadership is reaffirmed as the preferred approach among Gen Z in manufacturing environments. Clear communication and supportive leadership enhance both performance and retention, showing that leadership development in this sector must adjust to the digital skills, ethical considerations, and independence of younger generations.

2.5. IDENTIFIED GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Despite the breadth of existing literature on leadership and generational dynamics, several notable gaps remain. First, there is an explicit geographical and sectoral limitation in the current body of work. Most empirical evidence originates from global or Western contexts, with a limited focus on the South African manufacturing sector. This omission is significant, as the sector presents unique socio-economic challenges and cultural dynamics that may shape leadership development in distinctive ways.

Secondly, the literature has not sufficiently engaged in intersectional analysis. Demographic variables, such as gender, educational background, and socioeconomic status, are often overlooked; yet these factors may significantly influence leadership readiness and career trajectories among Gen Z employees.

Without deeper considerations, existing studies risk presenting an incomplete view of generational leadership.

Thirdly, the technological context remains underexplored. While digital leadership, remote work, and the integration of artificial intelligence are increasingly central to organizational practice, their specific influence on Gen Z's engagement and leadership development has not been adequately examined. This gap is particularly pronounced in traditional industries such as manufacturing, where digital transformation intersects with established operational norms.

Lastly, there is a lack of longitudinal and outcome-based research. Few studies have tracked the long-term outcomes of leadership succession strategies or assessed their impact on organizational sustainability and competitiveness. As a result, evidence-based approaches remain fragmented, limiting organizations' ability to design leadership pipelines that are both resilient and future-oriented.

3. CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1.INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the research methodology used to examine the relationships between leadership styles and organizational culture in the context of Generation Z's readiness for succession planning in manufacturing environments. Following a qualitative research approach, this study used an interpretivist perspective to gain a deeper, context-rich understanding of how these concepts interact and influence leadership development paths for the younger workforce. The qualitative design allows for exploring individual and collective experiences, values, and meanings assigned by Generation Z employees, Human Resource (HR) professionals, and organizational leaders.

By focusing on depth rather than breadth, the study aims to develop nuanced insights into how leadership styles and organizational culture affect Generation Z's willingness and readiness to assume future leadership roles. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their perspectives while remaining aligned with the study's goals. Using thematic analysis, the study identified patterns in the narratives to uncover commonalities and contextual differences that guide leadership succession strategies in manufacturing environments.

3.2.RESEARCH DESIGN

3.2.1. Research Instrument: Semi-Structured Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which enabled exploration of emerging themes while maintaining alignment with the study's core focus. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, detailed responses from participants. Specifically, the interviews explored perceptions of leadership and preferred leadership behaviours, as well as how organizational cultures shape professional growth. Attention was also given to participants' views on succession planning and the extent to which members of Gen Z express interest

in assuming leadership roles. Finally, the interviews examined the challenges and opportunities of cultivating future leaders within the Gen Z cohort, thereby providing insights into both individual aspirations and organizational strategies for leadership development.

This method enabled the research to delve deeper into individual experiences and meanings, providing a rich, multifaceted understanding of leadership and organizational dynamics from participants' perspectives.

3.2.2. Population of Study

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience. This ensured that the data collected was both meaningful and contextually grounded. Two key groups were targeted:

- Generation Z employees (aged 18–31) currently working in manufacturing organizations, who reflected on their leadership aspirations and cultural fit.
- HR professionals and managers, particularly those involved in succession planning, talent development, and cultural management within their organizations.

The selection of participants across varying organizational sizes and roles aimed to provide a holistic understanding of how leadership and culture affect succession dynamics.

3.2.3. Sampling

The study employed a purposive sampling method, selecting participants who provided rich and relevant insights into the research focus. These included managers, HR practitioners, and manufacturing specialists. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to identify and reach key informants who met the inclusion criteria but were not accessible through the initial recruitment channels.

The sample size ranged from 15 to 30 participants, with the final number (20) determined by data saturation principles. This meant that interviews continued until

no themes or perspectives emerged, ensuring that the collected data were sufficiently comprehensive to address the study objectives.

3.3.DATA COLLECTION: TECHNIQUE TO COLLECT DATA

3.3.1. Primary Data

Semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility while covering key themes, were used. This captured important perspectives on leadership and culture. The research questionnaire was shared with the participants to give their reflections on the questions. This was necessary to allow the participants to reflect and respond on their own time for deeper insights.

3.3.2. Secondary Data

Academic literature on leadership, culture, and generational workforce trends was consulted.

3.4.DATA COLLECTION: TECHNIQUE TO COLLECT DATA

3.4.1. Validity

For face validity, it was ensured that the interview questions aligned with the research objectives, and for content validity, the interview questions were reviewed by supervisor(s) to confirm coverage of leadership, culture, and succession planning.

3.4.2. Reliability

To ensure reliability, consistent interview procedures were adopted and maintained consistent coding and analysis.

3.5.METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The study used thematic analysis, a popular qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within text data. The process starts with familiarization, where interview transcripts are read and re-read to develop a deep understanding of the content. This is followed by initial coding, where meaningful data segments are identified and systematically organized.

The following stage involved searching for them by grouping related codes, thereby highlighting broader patterns across the dataset. These themes were then reviewed to ensure data representation was coherent and accurate. Once refined, each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect the underlying concepts.

Finally, the analysis culminated in a report that links the identified themes to the research questions and the existing literature, thereby providing a comprehensive, theoretically grounded interpretation of the findings.

3.6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study has been reviewed and approved by the **North-West University Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)**. Ethical clearance was granted under the clearance number **NWU-00850-25-A4**, confirming that the research complied with institutional and national ethical standards. All procedures, including informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), were strictly observed throughout the study.

4. CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1.INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 focused on the research methodology and design used to qualitatively examine the factors influencing the development of Generation Z in leadership roles within manufacturing. The previous chapter described the data collection methods, the sampling technique, and the approach taken to analyze participants' responses to the questionnaires.

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative interviews conducted with professionals across various roles, industries, and generational cohorts. The study aimed to explore how leadership style and organizational culture influence succession planning for Generation Z (Gen Z) in manufacturing corporations. To understand how leadership behaviours, organizational culture, and succession planning practices affect the development and readiness of Gen Z for leadership roles in manufacturing and industrial sectors.

The study sample consisted of participants from a diverse mix of generational cohorts, with the majority being Millennials, alongside several participants from Gen Z and Gen X (Figure 4-1). Their industry experience ranged from 1 to 19 years (Figure 4-2), spanning the manufacturing, engineering, and industrial sectors (Figure 4-3). Participants held a variety of professional roles, including engineers, managers, technologists, administrators, and specialists, providing a well-rounded perspective across different levels of technical and managerial expertise (Figure 4-4).

Thematic analysis revealed six key themes: (1) leadership attributes, (2) leadership styles, (3) organizational culture, (4) succession planning practices, (5) Gen Z development needs, and (6) organizational readiness. Each theme is discussed below, accompanied by supporting quotations from participants.

Figure 4-5 illustrates a hierarchical tree diagram showing how six major themes were derived from the thematic analysis of interview data. The diagram begins with raw qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, which were coded into specific concepts such as “communication”, “mentorship”, and “Inclusive Culture”. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories, which formed the

basis for the final themes: leadership attributes, leadership styles, organizational culture, succession planning, Gen Z development needs, and organizational readiness. Each theme is visually represented with its associated sub-themes.

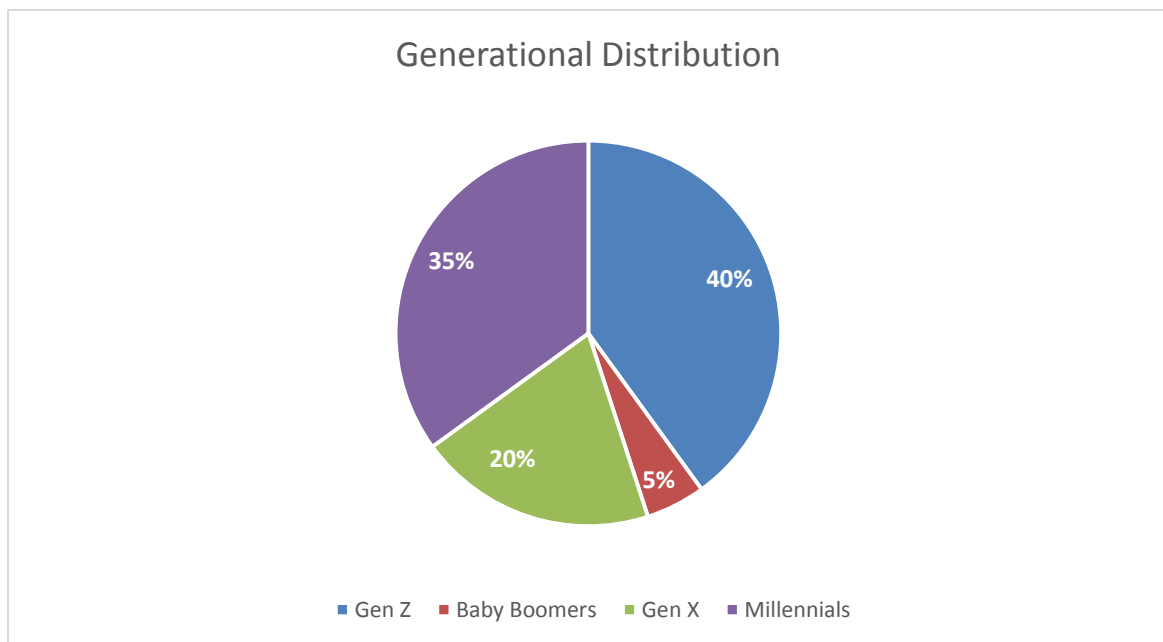


Figure 4-1. Generational Distribution of the Participants

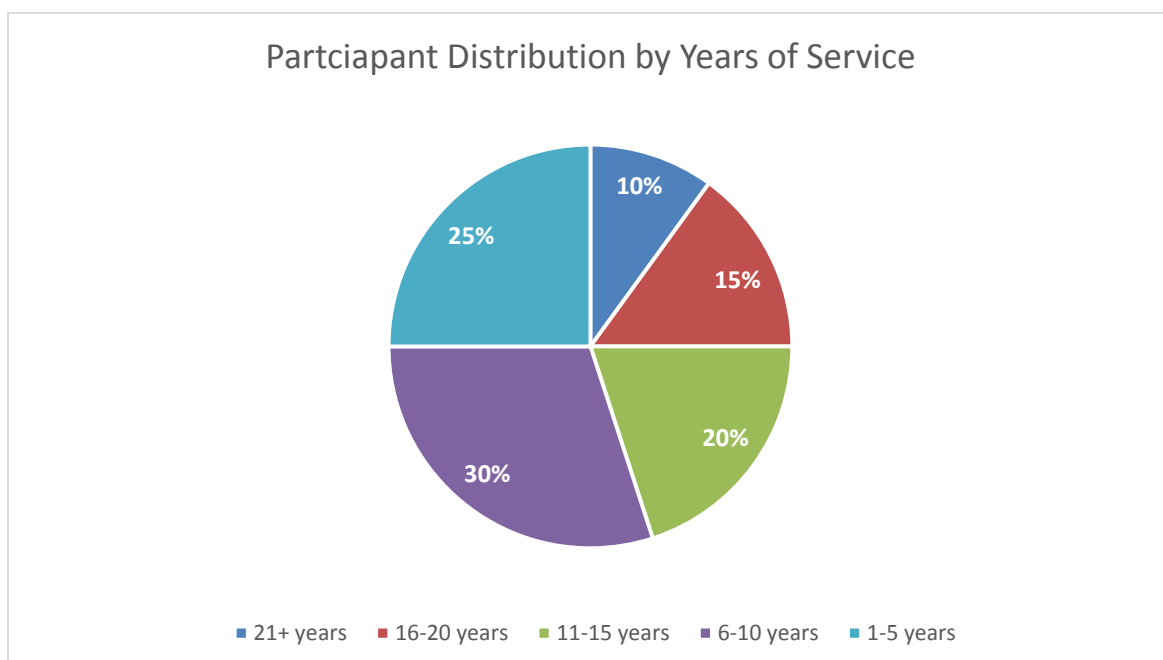


Figure 4-2. Participants' Distribution by Years of Service

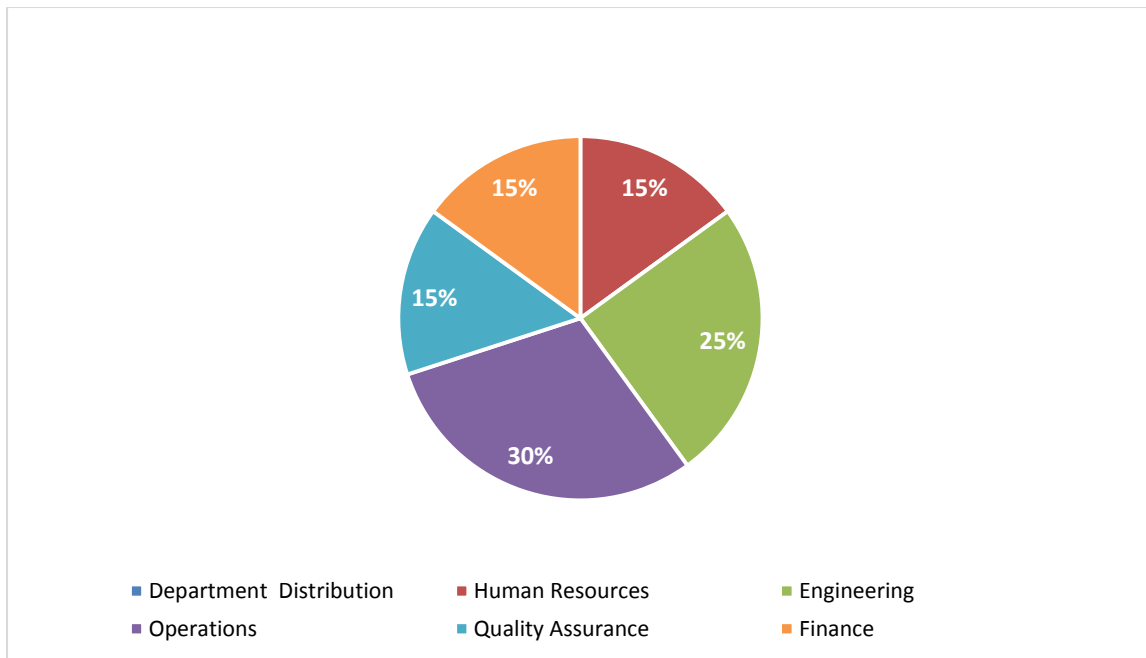


Figure 4-3. Participants Departmental Distribution

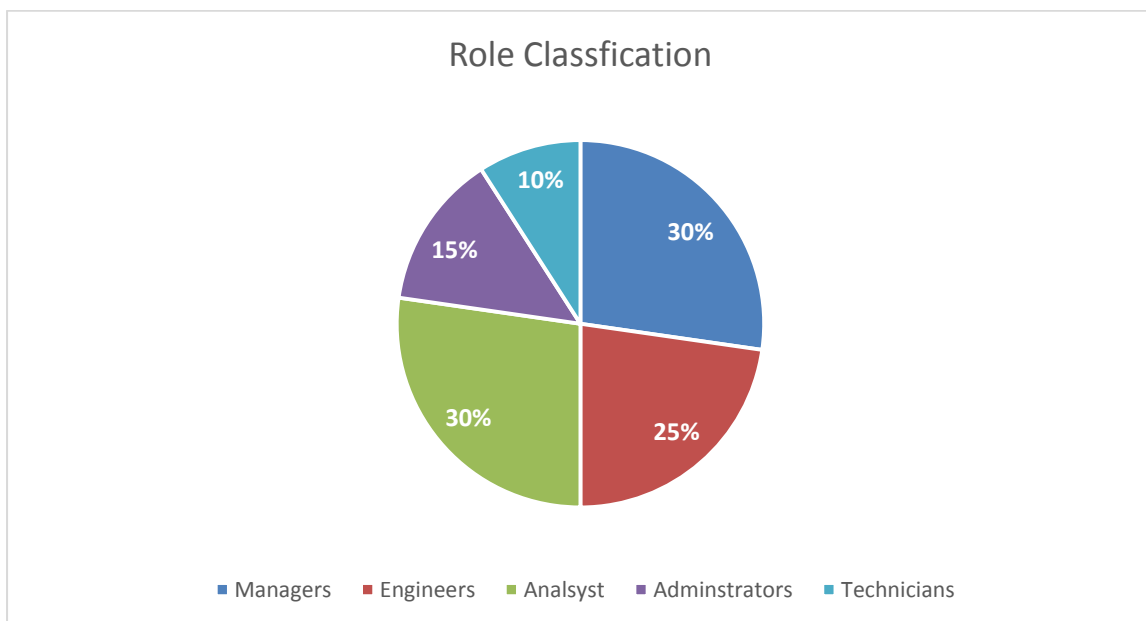


Figure 4-4. Role classification Distribution of the Participants

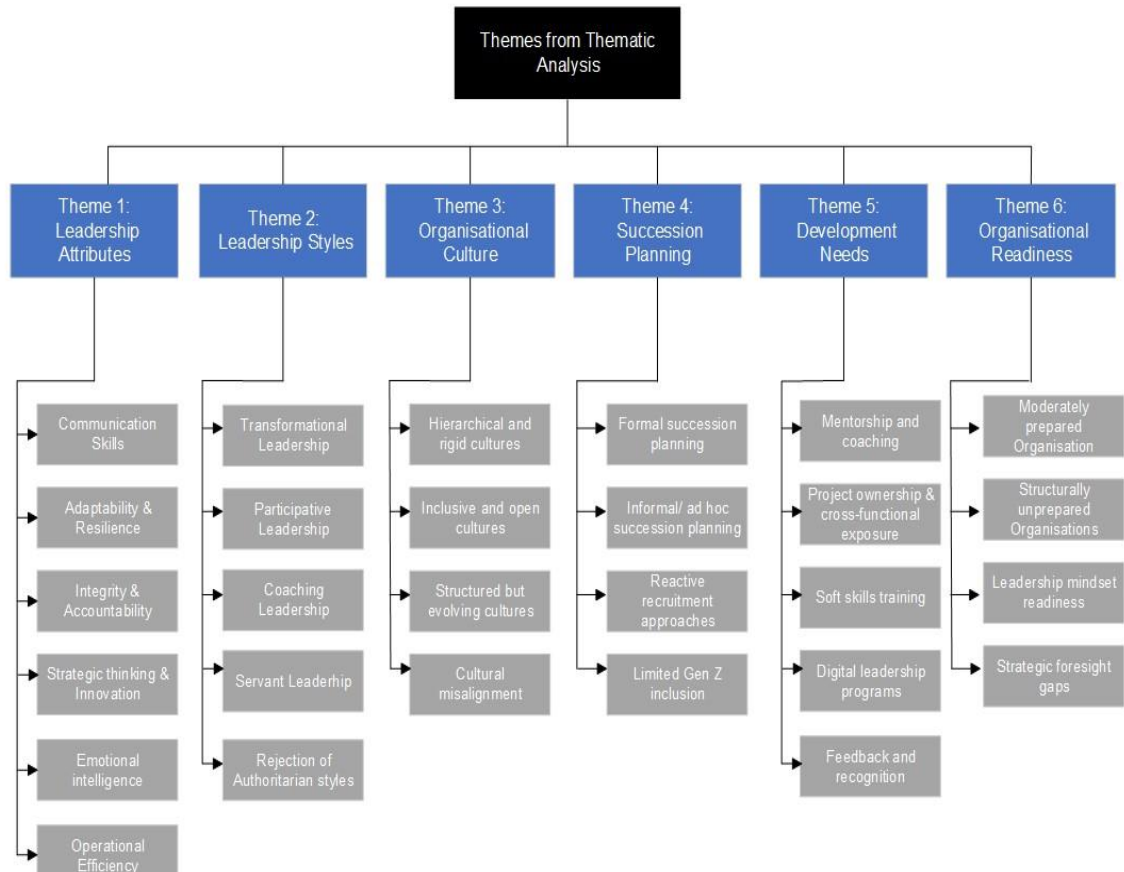


Figure 4-5: Hierarchical tree of Themes derived from Thematic Analysis

4.2. QUALITATIVE RESULTS

4.2.1. Theme Presentation

Six primary themes were identified related to the development of succession planning for Gen Z in leadership roles: leadership attributes, leadership styles, organizational culture, succession planning practices, the development needs of Gen Z, and organizational readiness. The themes include specific subthemes that highlight the key factors influencing Gen Z's success in assuming leadership positions. Presents the detailed themes that emerged, along with their corresponding subthemes, based on the number of quotations extracted during the coding of the responses.

Table 4-1. Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Descriptions from Interview Responses

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Theme 1: Leadership Attributes	1.1 Communication skills	Ability to convey ideas clearly, foster collaboration, and manage stakeholders effectively
	1.2 Adaptability and resilience	Capacity to respond to change, recover from setbacks, and remain solution-oriented in dynamic environments.
	1.3 Integrity and accountability	Commitment to ethical conduct, transparency, and taking responsibility for decisions and outcomes.
	1.4 Strategic thinking and innovation	Visionary leadership that anticipates trends, embraces technology, and drives continuous improvement.
	1.5 Emotional intelligence	Awareness of self and others, empathy, and the ability to manage interpersonal relationships constructively.
	1.6 Operational efficiency	Focus on detail, decisiveness, and time management to optimise processes and performance.
Theme 2: Leadership Styles	2.1 Transformational leadership	Inspires employees through vision, innovation, and personal growth; aligns with Gen Z's desire for purpose.
	2.2 Participative/democratic leadership	Encourages team input and shared decision-making, fostering ownership and inclusion
	2.3 Coaching leadership	Provides guidance, feedback, and development support tailored to individual growth.
	2.4 Servant leadership	Prioritises team needs, removes performance barriers, and empowers others to lead.
	2.5 Rejection of authoritarian styles	Gen Z resists rigid, top-down leadership; prefers autonomy and transparency.
Theme 3: Organizational Culture	3.1 Hierarchical and rigid cultures	Centralised control, slow decision-making, and resistance to change are misaligned with Gen Z expectations.
	3.2 Inclusive and open cultures	Promote psychological safety, collaboration, and innovation; support Gen Z engagement and retention.
	3.3 Structured but evolving cultures	Maintain formal structures while adapting through mentorship and flexibility.
	3.4 Cultural misalignment	Disconnect between organizational norms and Gen Z values, leading to

		disengagement and frustration.
Theme 4: Succession Planning	4.1 Formal succession planning	Structured processes, including performance reviews, mentorship, and leadership development plans.
	4.2 Informal/ad hoc succession planning	Unsystematic approaches based on the manager's discretion or subjective assessments.
	4.3 Reactive recruitment-driven approaches	Reliance on external hiring without internal leadership pipelines or continuity planning.
	4.4 Limited Gen Z inclusion	Gen Z is often excluded from succession discussions or is involved only indirectly.
Theme 5: Gen Z development Needs	5.1 Mentorship and coaching	Structured guidance from experienced leaders to build confidence and leadership capacity.
	5.2 Project ownership and cross-functional exposure	Opportunities to lead initiatives and rotate across departments to broaden strategic insight.
	5.3 Soft skills training	Development of communication, conflict resolution, and stakeholder management capabilities.
	5.4 Digital leadership programs	Integration of technology, innovation projects, and reverse mentorship to harness Gen Z's digital fluency.
	5.5 Feedback and recognition	Regular, constructive feedback to reinforce growth, motivation, and performance
Theme 6: Organizational Readiness	6.1 Moderately prepared organizations	Offer mentorship and training, but lack full leadership transition mechanisms.
	6.2 Structurally unprepared organizations	Retain rigid hierarchies and outdated systems that hinder Gen Z's advancement.
	6.3 Leadership mindset readiness	The degree to which senior leaders embrace generational transition and inclusive leadership.
	6.4 Strategic foresight gaps	Absence of long-term planning for leadership continuity and generational integration.

Table 4-2 shows the main theme ranking by recurrence level, and Figure 4-6. Frequency of Subthemes within each main theme illustrates the frequency of each subtheme within the central theme. The most recurring themes are leadership style preferences and organizational culture, suggesting they play a key role in the succession planning of Gen Z. This means organizations cannot only depend on technical training or ad hoc succession planning, but they must actively transform leadership behaviours and cultural norms to align with Gen Z expectations of

inclusivity, innovation, and autonomy. Other highly flagged themes include Gen Z development needs, succession planning gaps, leadership attributes, and, lastly, organizational readiness. The high demand for Gen Z development and succession planning indicates that while organizations recognise the need to prepare younger leaders, current practices are fragmented. Therefore, without intentional frameworks to address this, organizations risk leadership vacuums as older generations retire, particularly in industries such as manufacturing, where technical expertise is crucial.

Leadership attributes are moderately rated as high, indicating that they are essential enablers but not unique differentiators. Skills such as communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence are important; however, they are less frequently highlighted compared to style and culture. This suggests that these attributes are regarded as fundamental expectations rather than as distinguishing factors. Consequently, organizations must ensure these essentials are part of their leadership development, while also recognizing that style and culture significantly influence engagement.

Organizational Readiness ranks the lowest, indicating that many organizations might not yet be structurally or strategically prepared for a generational transition. This gap affects risk management, as organizations could face unexpected leadership gaps if readiness isn't improved through strategic planning.

In the subthemes, the most common ones are Mentorship and coaching (7), communication skills (8), transformational and coaching leadership (6), and inclusive culture (6). Additionally, the least common subthemes are Operational efficiency, servant leadership, structured cultures, and strategic foresight gaps (3). This indicates that soft skills, such as mentorship and inclusive leadership styles, are the main drivers of Gen Z readiness. On the other hand, traditional focus areas like efficiency, rigid structures, and servant leadership alone are not enough. Therefore, organizations must invest in succession planning that includes communication, coaching, inclusivity, and transformational leadership, while also addressing neglected areas like strategic foresight to support a sustainable generational transition.

Table 4-2. Theme Ranking According to the Recurrence Level

Rank	Theme	Recurrence level	Description
1	Leadership Style Preferences	Very high	Most participants highlighted transformational, participative, and coaching styles as critical for motivating Gen Z, while authoritarian styles were consistently rejected.
2	Organizational Culture Misalignment	Very high	Rigid, hierarchical cultures were frequently cited as barriers to Gen Z engagement. Inclusive cultures were praised but less common.
3	Gen Z Development Needs	High	Mentorship, project ownership, soft skills, and digital fluency were repeatedly identified as essential for Gen Z leadership readiness.
4	Succession Planning Gaps	High	Many participants noted fragmented or informal succession planning, with limited inclusion of Gen Z.
5	Leadership Attributes	Moderate-High	Communication, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and integrity were commonly cited, though less debated than leadership styles.
6	Organizational Readiness	Moderate	Mixed views were expressed; some organizations were moderately prepared, while others were structurally unprepared. Readiness was often tied to a leadership mindset.

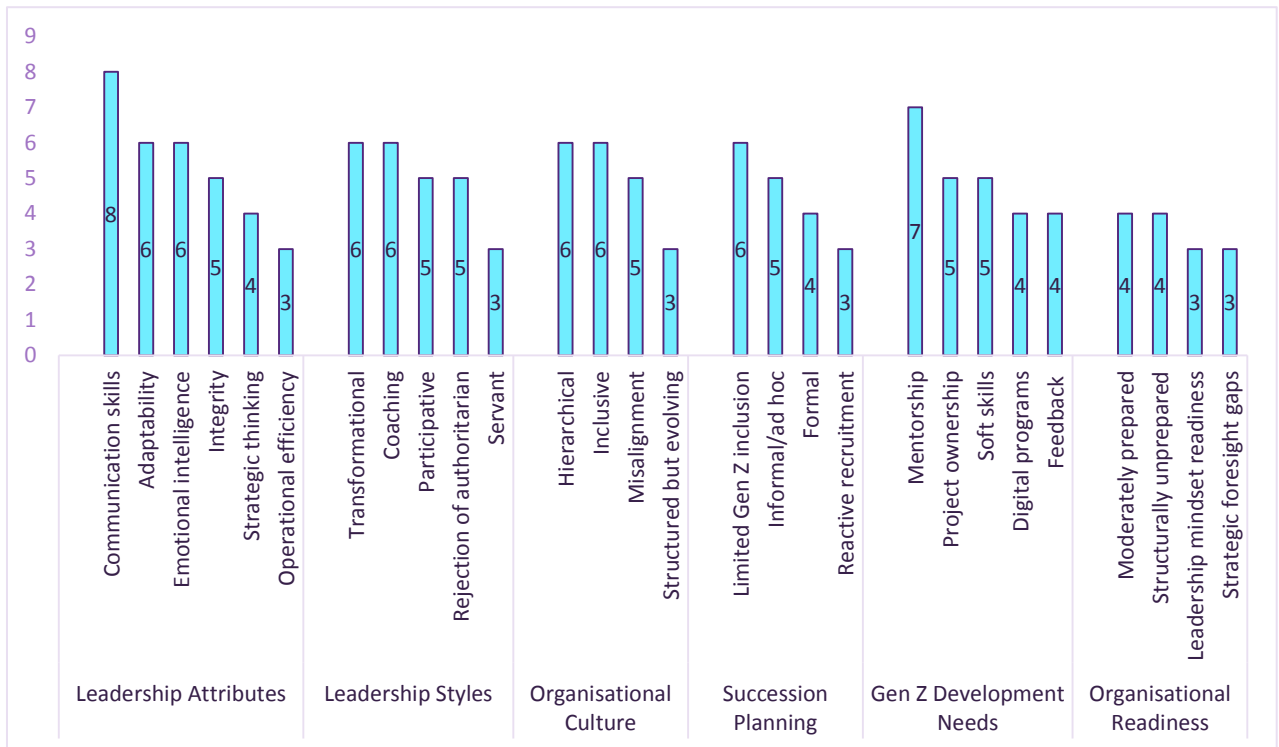


Figure 4-6. Frequency of Subthemes within each main theme

4.2.2. Theme 1: Leadership Attributes

They explore the qualities and skills that leaders need to boost performance and prepare organizations for generational change. It focuses on finding the specific traits that Gen Z employees and departmental managers see as vital for effective leadership in the South African manufacturing industry. The team looks at how qualities like communication skills, adaptability, integrity, emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, and operational efficiency influence leadership success. It emphasizes the balance between technical skills (problem-solving, innovation, efficiency) and interpersonal qualities (accountability, collaboration, empathy) that are essential to motivate and keep Gen Z talent.

Through analyzing these attributes, the theme offers insight into what Gen Z values in leaders, how these expectations align with or differ from current leadership practices, and the implications for succession planning and leadership development programs. Essentially, it examines the building fabric of leadership readiness, highlighting that with these attributes, leadership style and organizational culture improvements may not succeed in engaging the next generation.

4.2.2.1 Subtheme 1.1 Communication skills

Communication skills emerged as the most frequently cited leadership attribute, underscoring their importance for effective leadership and successful planning. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of clear, transparent, and consistent communication in building effective collaborations, managing stakeholders, and fostering team cohesion. This means that for Gen Z, communication is not only a tool for transferring information but also, importantly, for building trust, psychological safety, and inclusion in the workplace. This finding aligns with Revuru and Bandaru (2024) and Dimokas (2025), who argue that open dialogue and continuous feedback are crucial for motivating and retaining Gen Z.

However, the emphasis on communication also reveals a paradox: while participants highlighted its role in motivating younger employees and enabling knowledge transfer, as noted by one respondent, leaders must possess “*strong communication skills, stakeholder management, and negotiation skills*” (Participant 2). At the same time, another emphasized that “*communication skills and time management are essential for success in the manufacturing industry*” (Participant 6). Similarly, Participant 8 highlighted that “*collaboration and teamwork, effective communication, emotional intelligence, and adaptability*” are also key for leadership effectiveness. However, several noted that hierarchical structures actively inhibit open dialogue. Participants viewed hierarchical structures as limiting open dialogue, thereby “structurally” excluding young employees from leadership discussions. This was stated by one of the participants, “*The structure does not always encourage open communication or innovation from junior staff*” (Participant 13), while another participant stated, “*Gen Z employees are not yet fully included in leadership discussion*” (Participant 18), thus showing that the lack of transparency and feedback hinders succession planning.

Literature supports this tension. Assefa and Mujtaba (2025) and Almunthiri et al. (2024) link transformational leadership to psychological safety through shared vision and effective communication; however, such approaches assume organizational cultures that foster openness and transparency. In compliance-intensive manufacturing environments, rigid hierarchies may dilute these benefits, limiting the extent to which communication can foster inclusion, which is a key enabler of

psychological safety, thereby fostering innovation and inclusion. This then raises a critical question: can communication training alone prepare Gen Z for leadership, or must organizations simultaneously dismantle structural barriers to dialogue?

These findings imply that communication is a strategic enabler of succession planning. Therefore, organizations that intend to prepare Gen Z for leadership roles should strongly consider including communication training in their leadership development programmes, as well as developing structural frameworks that ensure all voices are heard. This dual approach will ensure that succession plans inhibited by hierarchies are eliminated, allowing for the retention of younger talent without compromising long-term leadership continuity.

4.2.2.2 Subtheme 1.2 Adaptivity and Resilience

Participants frequently emphasized that adaptability and resilience are essential leadership attributes in the manufacturing and industrial contexts. In the face of uncertainty, leaders are expected to remain flexible and respond effectively to change without losing their composure under pressure. Concerning Gen Z, this implies that adaptability highlights leaders' ability to navigate dynamic environments, while resilience demonstrates their capacity to recover from setbacks and maintain performance. These qualities are considered essential for succession planning, as they ensure continuity and stability during generational transitions.

Participants highlighted that leaders must be solution-oriented and able to adjust strategies when faced with challenges, as one participant stated, *"Leaders must be flexible and solution-oriented, not rigid in their approach."* (Participant 7). In contrast, one participant highlighted that resilience is described as the ability to withstand industry volatility and maintain morale: *"Adaptability and resilience are key, especially in industries where conditions change rapidly"* (Participant 3). Adaptability was linked to openness to innovation and a willingness to embrace new technologies, as highlighted by Participation 8: *"Collaboration, effective communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability."*

Issues raised by participants concerning this subtheme include the perception that rigid leadership methodologies act as barriers to innovation and succession

planning, as stated by participant 13: *“The structure does not always encourage open communication or innovation from junior staff.”* This also highlights that Gen Z could feel frustrated when leaders resist change or fail to adapt to new technology. A lack of resilience in leaders was linked to poor morale and dissatisfaction among young employees, as highlighted by participant 18, who noted, *“Gen Z employees are not yet fully included in leadership discussions.”* This highlights gaps in leadership resilience and inclusion. This suggests that adaptability and resilience cannot be developed in isolation, as they require organizational cultures that foster experimentation, dialogue, and inclusion.

Kaur et al. (2025) emphasize adaptability as crucial for navigating technological disruption, while Bisbey et al. (2021) show that resilient leaders sustain psychological safety during crises. However, these studies often assume environments where innovation is structurally enabled. Therefore, inflexible hierarchies may undermine the adaptability and resilience that Gen Z values.

These findings imply that adaptability and resilience are not optional traits but strategic necessities for succession planning. Organizations must cultivate leaders who can pivot strategies, embrace innovation, and sustain morale under pressure. For Gen Z, these attributes signal readiness to lead in volatile environments, making them central to leadership development programs and succession frameworks.

4.2.2.3 *Subtheme 1.3 Integrity and Accountability*

Participants emphasized that integrity and accountability are essential qualities for effective leadership, especially in industries where safety, compliance, and ethical choices are critical. Leaders who show honesty, fairness, and responsibility are more likely to gain the trust of employees and stakeholders, while those lacking accountability can damage organizational credibility and hinder succession plans. For Gen Z, integrity is closely linked to authenticity and transparency, supporting their preference for leaders who “walk the talk” and take responsibility for results.

Participants stressed that accountability is not only about taking responsibility for mistakes but also about ensuring that decisions are made in the best interest of the team and organization. One respondent explained, *“Leaders must be accountable*

for their actions and decisions, not just delegate responsibility” (Participant 5). At the same time, another noted that *“integrity builds trust, and without trust, leadership fails”* (Participant 9). These perspectives reveal that integrity and accountability are viewed as the ethical foundation upon which other leadership attributes, such as communication and adaptability, depend.

The literature strongly supports these findings. Research on ethical leadership demonstrates that integrity fosters trust, commitment, and long-term engagement (Aditama et al., 2025). Studies on Gen Z workplace expectations further reveal that younger employees are highly attuned to authenticity and are quick to disengage when leaders fail to align with their stated values (Born et al., 2025). Moreover, accountability is identified as a cornerstone of transformational leadership, ensuring that leaders model the behaviours they expect from others (Kuo et al., 2022).

The implication is that integrity and accountability are not peripheral traits but core enablers of sustainable succession planning. Organizations that fail to embed these values into leadership pipelines risk alienating Gen Z talent, eroding trust, and weakening their ability to manage generational transitions. Conversely, leaders who consistently demonstrate integrity and accountability foster a culture of trust and responsibility, thereby strengthening both performance and leadership continuity.

4.2.2.4 Subtheme 1.4 Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence was consistently highlighted by participants as a vital leadership attribute, particularly in contexts where generational diversity and organizational transformation intersect. Leaders with high emotional intelligence were described as being better able to understand themselves and others, manage interpersonal relationships constructively, and foster a psychologically safe environment. For Gen Z, emotional intelligence is closely tied to empathy, inclusion, and the ability to navigate complex team dynamics, making it a cornerstone of effective succession planning.

Participants noted that leaders who demonstrate emotional intelligence are more successful in motivating younger employees and building trust. One respondent emphasised that *“collaboration and teamwork, effective communication, emotional*

intelligence, adaptability” are indispensable for leadership effectiveness (participant 8). Another participant observed that *“leaders must show empathy and emotional awareness to connect with younger generations”* (participant 11). These insights reveal that emotional intelligence is not only about interpersonal sensitivity but also about creating environments where Gen Z feels valued and empowered.

The literature strongly supports these findings. Goleman’s framework on emotional intelligence identifies self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills as critical components of effective leadership (Goleman, 1998). More recent studies highlight that emotional intelligence enhances psychological safety, which is essential for innovation and inclusion (Shankar and Tewari, 2023). Research on Gen Z workplace expectations further indicates that younger employees are highly responsive to leaders who demonstrate empathy and authenticity, which reinforces the importance of emotional intelligence in succession planning (Saxena, 2025).

The implication is that emotional intelligence is not only a soft skill but a strategic enabler for generational transitions. Organizations must therefore embed emotional intelligence training into leadership development programs, ensuring that future leaders can manage diverse teams, foster inclusion, and sustain trust.

4.2.2.5 *Subtheme 1.5 Strategic Thinking and Innovation*

Participants identified strategic thinking and innovation as key leadership qualities for managing complex industrial environments and preparing the organization for generational change. Leaders who demonstrated foresight, creativity, and the ability to anticipate industry trends were perceived as better equipped to drive sustainable performance and engage Gen Z employees. Innovation was especially valued as a way to promote continuous improvements and create environments where younger leaders can bring new ideas.

According to participants, strategic leaders must balance operational demands with long-term vision. Several participants corroborated this, as one respondent explained, *“Leaders must anticipate change and embrace innovation to remain competitive”* (Participant 4). At the same time, another noted, *“Innovation and strategic exposure are critical for preparing Gen Z for leadership roles”* (Participant 10). These perspectives reveal that Gen Z expects leaders not only to manage

current challenges but also to create opportunities for future growth and transformation.

Madden (2024) stresses that strategic foresight is essential for maintaining continuity and preventing leadership gaps. On the other hand, several scholars indicate that organizations with an innovation-friendly culture tend to be more successful at engaging younger generations and fostering psychological safety (Pujia, 2025; Al Saaidi et al., 2025; Irfan & Rojak, 2022). Additionally, transformational leadership theory emphasizes the importance of shared vision and innovation in motivating Gen Z employees (Decarvalho, 2025).

This suggests that strategic thinking and innovation are the cornerstones of succession planning, enabling organizations to align leadership development with future industry needs. Without these attributes, succession planning risks becoming reactive and short-sighted, leaving Gen Z leaders underprepared for the challenges of volatile and competitive environments.

4.2.2.6 *Subtheme 1.6 Operational Efficiency*

Operational efficiency was mentioned less often than other leadership attributes, but participants still see it as a basic skill for effective leadership. Leaders who show efficiency can manage their time well, simplify processes, and make smart decisions that improve performance. In manufacturing and industrial settings, efficiency is strongly connected to safety, productivity, and cost management, making it an essential trait, though not a unique one, for succession planning.

Participants noted that operational efficiency is expected of leaders, but it does not inspire or motivate Gen Z as effectively as communication, mentorship, or inclusivity. Respondent explained that *“communication skills and time management are essential for success in the manufacturing industry.”* (Participant 6). This links effectively directly to leadership effectiveness. Another participant highlighted that leaders must *“balance technical competence with operational decision-making to ensure performance outcomes”* (Participant 12). These insights suggest that while efficiency is valued, it is often taken for granted rather than celebrated as a unique leadership strength.

The literature supports this interpretation. Studies on leadership in industrial sectors emphasize that operational efficiency is a prerequisite for credibility, but it rarely drives engagement or innovation on its own (Islam, 2024; Manafe et al., 2024). Research on Gen Z workplace expectations reveals that younger employees prioritize efficiency and expect leaders who demonstrate empathy, inclusivity, and vision (Huyler et al., 2025; Narayan et al., 2024). Thus, operational efficiency is necessary for maintaining organizational stability but not for motivating generational transition.

The implication is that operational efficiency should be treated as a foundational attribute rather than a strategic differentiator. Organization, it ensures that leaders are competent in managing operations, but succession planning must go beyond efficiency to emphasize communication, mentorship, and cultural transformation if Gen Z is to be effectively prepared for leadership roles.

4.2.3. Theme 2: Leadership Styles That Motivate Gen Z

This theme explores the leadership approaches that resonate most with Gen Z employees and how these styles influence their motivation, engagement, and readiness for succession. It emphasizes identifying which leadership styles promote inclusion, innovation, and trust, and which hinder generational transition within the South African manufacturing and industrial sectors.

The theme explores the difference between preferred leadership styles, such as transformational, coaching, participative, and servant leadership, and those that Gen Z rejects, especially authoritarian or rigid approaches. It emphasizes that Gen Z values leaders who inspire, mentor, and empower rather than those who command and control. This analysis offers insight into how leadership style directly influences success in planning outcomes, as motivating Gen Z requires alignment with their expectation of purpose-driven, feedback-rich, and inclusive leadership.

Essentially, theme 2 explores the “how” of leadership practice: not just the qualities leaders have but the styles they use in everyday interactions. It shows that leadership style is a key factor in where Gen Z feels engaged, inspired, and ready to take on future leadership roles.

4.2.3.1 Subtheme 2.1 Transformational leadership

Participants often highlighted transformational leadership as one of the most effective ways to motivate and engage Gen Z employees. This style is characterized by sharing a vision, inspiring others, and driving innovation and change. Participants emphasized that transformational leaders create environments where younger employees feel empowered, valued, and motivated to go beyond routine tasks. For Gen Z, transformational leadership strongly resonates because it aligns with their desire for purpose, inclusion, and opportunities to make meaningful contributions.

Participants highlighted that transformation leaders inspire rather than command, making them more appealing to Gen Z, as noted by participant 14: *“Gen Z responds better to leaders who inspire and coach rather than dictate.”* Transformational leaders have also been credited for fostering innovation and encouraging employees to think creatively. This view is highlighted by Participant 9, who states, *“Transformational leadership motivates us to go beyond our job description and think innovatively.”* Feedback from one of the Gen Z participants states, *“We want leaders who share vision and purpose, not just instructions.”* (Participant 17). Thus, this suggests that Gen Z values leaders who articulate a clear vision and align individual goals with the organization's purpose.

The authoritarian leadership style was rejected by participants who felt it stifled creativity and engagement, as noted by participant 12: *“The younger generation does not respond well to an authoritarian style... Transformational leadership inspires them.”* The lack of transformational qualities among current leaders was linked to disengagement and limited succession readiness. This is noted by Participant 13, *“The structure does not always encourage open communication or innovation from junior staff.”*

Transformational leadership theory emphasizes vision, inspiration, and intellectual stimulation as key drivers of motivation (Khan et al., 2022; Bashoru et al., 2022). Studies on Gen Z workplace expectations indicate that transformational leadership is the most effective style for engaging younger employees, as it aligns with their preference for purpose-driven work and continuous feedback (Ribeiro et al., 2024; Chandel et al., 2025). Ingala (2024) notes that succession planning highlights the

fact that transformation leaders are more successful in preparing future generations by fostering innovation and inclusivity.

Transformational leadership is a strategic enabler of succession planning, ensuring that Gen Z employees are motivated, engaged, and prepared for leadership roles. Organizations should prioritize developing transformational qualities in their leadership pipelines, shifting away from authoritarian approaches and towards vision-driven, coaching-oriented approaches that resonate with younger generations.

4.2.3.2 Subtheme 2.2 Participative/Democratic leadership

Participants highlighted participative or democratic leadership as a style that strongly resonates with Gen Z, who value inclusion, collaboration, and shared decision-making. This style is characterized by leaders who involve employees in discussions, encourage input, and cultivate a sense of ownership over outcomes. This signals respect and recognition for Gen Z, aligning with their preference for workplaces that are transparent and inclusive rather than hierarchical and rigid.

The participants highlighted that Gen Z employees want leaders who listen to and incorporate their ideas, as participant 8 stated: *“Collaboration and teamwork are essential, and leaders must encourage input from all levels.”* They also highlighted that shared decision-making fosters engagement and builds confidence in younger employees, as one Gen Z employee states, *“We want leaders who involve us in decisions, not just tell us what to do”* (Participant 15). Moreover, note by participant 19, *“Participative leadership makes us feel valued and part of the bigger picture.”*

On the other hand, hierarchical cultures were viewed as limiting participation, leaving Gen Z excluded from leadership conversations, as alluded to by participant 13: The structure does not always encourage open communication or innovation from junior staff”. Lack of democratic practices was linked to disengagement and reduced innovation, participant 18 notes *“Gen Z employees are not yet fully included in leadership discussions.”*

Research on generational leadership shows that democratic leadership promotes inclusion and psychological safety, both highly valued by Gen Z (Kwartawaty et al., 2024; Imran et al., 2025; Oydele, 2025). Studies on participative leadership highlight

its role in boosting engagement, innovation, and succession planning (Madden, 2024). The literature on Gen Z workplace expectations emphasizes that younger employees prefer leaders who empower and involve them in decision-making rather than those who impose top-down directives (Pantelides, 2024).

Therefore, this suggests that participative leadership plays a vital role in succession planning by fostering trust, confidence, and engagement among Gen Z employees. Organizations must incorporate participative practices into leadership development programs to ensure that younger employees are actively involved in decision-making.

4.2.3.3 *Subtheme 2.3 Coaching leadership*

Participants highlighted coaching leadership as a style that strongly motivates Gen Z, who value guidance, feedback, and opportunities for growth. Leaders who adopt a coaching approach are described as mentors who invest in employee development, provide constructive feedback, and encourage younger staff to take ownership of projects. This style was seen as particularly effective in succession planning as it equips Gen Z with the skills and confidence needed to transition into leadership roles.

Participants emphasized that coaching leadership builds trust and accelerates learning. One respondent explained that *“mentorship and coaching are critical for preparing Gen Z for leadership roles”* (Participant 10). At the same time, another noted that *“leaders must guide and support rather than manage tasks”* (Participant 16). These insights reveal that Gen Z expects leaders to act as facilitators of growth rather than distant authority figures.

The literature supports this view. Studies on generational leadership show that coaching boosts engagement and retention by encouraging ongoing learning and development (Nurjanah and Octafian, 2025; Ahsan, 2025). Research on succession planning also suggests that coaching leadership effectively builds leadership pipelines by combining skill transfer with empowerment (Ingale, 2024; Tsarkos, 2024). Studies on Gen Z employees also highlight that younger workers prefer

leaders who offer regular feedback and mentorship, which aligns with coaching practices (Toni et al., 2025; Christina and Nathan, 2024).

The implication is that coaching leadership is a strategic driver of success and planning, ensuring that Gen Z employees are not only technically competent but also confident and prepared to assume leadership roles.

4.2.3.4 Subtheme 2.4 Servant leadership

Participants highlighted servant leadership as a style that appeals to Gen Z. It is characterized by humility, support, and a focus on serving others rather than exercising authority. Participants noted that servant leaders build trust and foster inclusion by placing employee needs at the center of decision-making, thereby strengthening succession planning.

Respondent emphasized that servant leadership creates environments where younger employees feel recognised and supported. One of the participants explained that “leaders *must put people first and support their development*” (participant 10), while another noted that “*servant leaders build trust by showing humility and care*” (participant 12). These views highlight that Gen Z expects leaders to demonstrate empathy and prioritize collective success over personal gain.

Studies on servant leadership emphasize its crucial role in fostering employee engagement, trust, and retention, particularly among younger generations (Morrison, 2024; Saxena & Srivastava, 2025). Research on succession planning further reveals that servant leadership enhances leadership pipelines by fostering loyalty and empowering employees to transition into future roles (Sohail, 2025; Jean Claude & Bilankulu, 2025). Gen Z workplace studies also emphasize that servant leadership aligns with their preferences for authenticity, inclusivity, and purpose-driven work (Decarvalho, 2025; Mitchell, 2025).

The implication is that servant leadership is a strategic enabler of generational transition, ensuring that Gen Z employees feel valued, supported, and prepared to take on leadership responsibilities. Organizations must embed servant leadership principles into their leadership development frameworks to cultivate trust and inclusion, thereby strengthening the outcomes of succession planning.

4.2.3.5 *Subtheme 2.5 Rejection of authoritarian styles*

Participants consistently rejected the authoritarian leadership style, describing it as outdated, rigid, and demotivating for young employees. Gen Z respondents emphasized that leaders who depend on command-and-control approaches hinder creativity, limit participation, and discourage innovation. Several participants noted that authoritarian practices reinforce hierarchical barriers, leaving junior staff out of decision-making and succession discussions. For example, one participant explained that “Gen Z responds better to leaders who inspire and coach rather than dictate” (Participant 14). Another observation was that “structure does not always encourage open communication or innovation from junior staff” (participant 13).

These findings align with the existing literature, which suggests that authoritarian leadership is becoming increasingly ineffective in the modern workplace, particularly for Gen Z, who value inclusivity, feedback, and empowerment (Kwartawaty et al., 2024; Yasar, 2024; Nugraha et al., 2025).

The implication is that authoritarian styles can be a barrier to succession planning, as they alienate younger employees and undermine the trust and engagement necessary for a successful generational transition.

4.2.4. Theme 3: Organizational Culture

This theme examines how organizational culture influences leadership and succession planning for Gen Z. It focuses on the cultural environment within which younger employees operate/work, and how this environment either enables or constrains their motivation, inclusion, and readiness for leadership roles. The theme explores the tension between traditional hierarchical structures and emerging inclusive practices, emphasizing that culture is a decisive factor in determining the success or failure of succession planning.

4.2.4.1 *Subtheme 3.1 Hierarchical and Rigid Cultures*

Participants described hierarchical and rigid cultures as barriers to Gen Z engagement and readiness for succession. These environments were seen as

discouraging innovation, limiting participation, and reinforcing generational divides. One respondent noted that “*Gen Z employees are not yet fully included in leadership discussions*” (Participant 18). Another participant stated, “The structure does not always encourage open communication or innovation from junior staff.” (participant 13).

The literature supports this, showing that rigid cultures undermine and hinder generational transition (Aru & Sushil, 2024; Kelta, 2024; Ozolina et al., 2024; Bhattarai, 2024). The implication is that hierarchical cultures are obstacles to succession planning and alienate younger employees, including those in leadership pipelines.

4.2.4.2 *Subtheme 3.2 Inclusive and open cultures*

Inclusive and open cultures were highlighted as environments where Gen Z feels valued, engaged, and motivated to contribute. Participants underscored that openness to communication, collaboration, and innovation builds trust and prepares younger employees for leadership roles. For instance, one respondent explained that “*collaboration and teamwork, effective communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability*” are essential for leadership effectiveness (participant 8).

This suggests that inclusive cultures foster engagement, innovation, and succession readiness by promoting psychological safety (Singha, 2024; Rasario, 2024; Almunthiri et al., 2024). This implies that inclusive cultures are strategic enablers of generational transition, ensuring that succession aligns with Gen Z expectations of transparency and participation.

4.2.4.3 *Subtheme 3.3 Structured but evolving cultures*

Participants also recognized the value of structured yet evolving cultures, which strike a balance between stability and adaptability. These cultures were described as providing clear frameworks and accountability while remaining open to change and innovation. Respondents noted that structure is necessary for operational efficiency, but flexibility is crucial for engaging with younger employees.

Literature also suggests that evolving cultures foster resilience and adaptability, both of which are essential for effective succession planning (Yarangga et al., 2023; Hasan, 2024). The implication is that structured yet evolving cultures are fundamental to sustainable succession planning, combining stability with innovation to prepare Gen Z for leadership in dynamic environments.

4.2.4.4 Subtheme 3.4 Cultural Misalignment

Cultural misalignment was identified as a significant challenge, arising when organizational values and practices fail to align with Gen Z's expectations. Participants expressed frustration when leaders resisted change or was unable to embrace inclusivity, resulting in disengagement and weak succession pipelines. One respondent explained that *“leaders must be flexible and solution-oriented, not rigid in their approach”* (Participant 7), highlighting the disconnect between rigid practices and Gen Z's preference for adaptability.

This is supported by studies that confirm that cultural misalignment undermines trust and retention, particularly among younger employees (Lukaszewski & Heath, 2025; Singh, 2025). The implication is that cultural misalignment is a risk factor for succession planning, as it alienates Gen Z talent and weakens an organization's capacity for generational transition.

4.2.5. Theme 4: Succession Planning and Leadership Development For Gen Z

This theme explores how organizations prepare Gen Z employees for future leadership roles, focusing on the structures, practices, and cultural factors that enable or hinder generational transition. It examines whether current succession planning frameworks are inclusive of younger employees and how leadership development initiatives are adapted to meet Gen Z's expectations for mentorship, feedback, and innovation.

The theme examines both the formal mechanisms of succession planning, such as structured training, mentorship programs, and leadership pipelines, as well as the informal cultural practices that shape Gen Z's readiness for leadership. Participants

highlighted gaps in current approaches, noting that younger employees are often excluded from leadership discussions and that succession planning usually prioritizes operational continuity over generational inclusion. At the same time, respondents emphasised the importance of mentorship, coaching, and exposure to strategic decision-making as critical enablers of Gen Z leadership development.

In essence, Theme 4 investigates the alignment (or misalignment) between organizational succession planning practices and Gen Z's leadership expectations. It shows that while technical competence and operational efficiency remain essential, the success of generational transition depends on embedding inclusive, participative, and development practices into leadership pipelines.

4.2.5.1 *Subtheme 4.1 Formal succession planning*

Participants emphasized that formal succession planning, characterized by structured frameworks and deliberate alignment with organizational strategy, is critical for ensuring leadership continuity. Respondents highlighted that organizations with clear leadership pipelines, training programs, and defined processes are better positioned to prepare Gen Z for future roles.

One participant (participant 7) explained that *"succession planning ensures continuity and prepares younger employees for leadership responsibilities."* However, issues were raised around the limited visibility of these frameworks, with younger employees often unaware of how succession planning operates in practice. This is explained by one of the participants stating that *"we know there are plans, but they are not communicated to us."* (participant 11).

Literature supports these findings, showing that formal succession planning strengthens leadership vacuums and improves retention when communicated effectively (Chapple, 2022; Balogun, 2024).

4.2.5.2 *Subtheme 4.2 Informal succession planning*

In contrast, informal succession planning was described as a standard but problematic practice. Participants noted that leadership transitions often occur

without structured frameworks, relying instead on immediate needs or personal networks. One participant noted that *“succession planning is often reactive and based on who is available rather than who is prepared”* (participant 12).

This ad-hoc approach was viewed as creating uncertainty and disengagement, with younger employees feeling left out of meaningful preparations. Another participant expressed frustration, saying, *“It feels like succession is left to chance, not strategy”* (P16).

Literature confirms that informal succession planning undermines leadership development, weakens organizational resilience, and creates instability in leadership pipelines (Yarangga et al., 2023; Stanonik, 2024).

4.2.5.3 Subtheme 4.3 Reactive recruitment

Participants also highlighted that reactive, recruitment-driven approaches are a substitute for success planning, in which organizations fill leadership gaps through external hiring rather than internal development. This practice was described as short-sighted, costly, and demotivating for younger employees who aspire to leadership roles. One respondent stated that *“instead of preparing us, organizations often recruit externally when gaps appear”* (participant 15). Issues raised included the perception that internal talent is undervalued, with one participant stating, *“It sends a message that internal talent is not trusted”* (Participant 9).

Literature supports these concerns, showing that reliance on external recruitment can disengage younger employees, increase costs, undermine succession planning, and weaken strategic pipelines.

4.2.5.4 Subtheme 4.4 Limited Gen Z inclusion

Finally, limited Gen Z inclusion was consistently identified as a critical weakness in current succession planning practices. Participants expressed frustration at being excluded from leadership discussions and development opportunities, noting that this exclusion limits their readiness and motivation to participate in these areas. One Gen Z respondent stated, *“Gen Z employees are not yet fully included in leadership*

discussions” (participant 18). At the same time, another added, *“We want to be part of the conversation, not just observers”* (participant 14).

These issues highlight the disconnect between organizational succession planning and younger employees' expectations.

Studies reinforce that exclusion undermines engagement, retention, and leadership sustainability, particularly among younger generations who value inclusion and transparency (Atiku et al., 2024; Saraiwa and Nogueiro, 2025).

4.2.6. Theme 5: Gen Z Development Needs

This theme explores the specific developmental needs identified by participants as essential for preparing Gen Z employees for future leadership roles. Respondents consistently emphasised that younger employees require structured support, opportunities for growth, and recognition to thrive in succession pipelines. The subthemes highlight mentorship and coaching, project ownership and cross-functional exposure, soft skills training, digital leadership training, and feedback and recognition. These represent the development priorities that organizations embed into their leadership frameworks to ensure a smooth generational transition and sustainable succession planning.

4.2.6.1 Subtheme 5.1 Mentorship and coaching

Participants highlighted mentorship and coaching as critical enablers of Gen Z development. Respondents emphasised that younger employees value guidance, constructive feedback, and opportunities to learn directly from experienced leaders. Mentorship was seen as a means of transferring tacit knowledge, while coaching was deemed essential for building confidence and leadership readiness. One participant stated, *“Mentorship and coaching are critical for preparing Gen Z for leadership roles”* (Participant 10). In contrast, others noted that *“leaders must guide and support rather than just manage tasks”* (Participant 16).

Several issues were raised regarding the lack of structured mentorship programs, with some participants feeling excluded from development opportunities. The

findings align with the literature, which shows that mentorship and coaching enhance engagement, retention, and succession readiness by fostering continuous learning and empowerment (Toni et al., 2025; Susanto and Sawitri, 2022).

4.2.6.2 *Subtheme 5.2 Project ownership and cross-functional exposure*

Respondents emphasized the importance of project ownership and cross-functional exposure in developing Gen Z employees. Participants noted that being entrusted with responsibilities builds confidence and prepares younger staff for leadership roles, while exposure to different functions broadens their understanding of organization dynamics. One of the respondents stated, “*We want opportunities to take ownership of projects and pave the way for ourselves*” (participant 15). In contrast, another participant said, “*Cross-functional exposure helps us to understand the bigger picture*” (participant 9). Participants raised concerns about limited opportunities for Gen Z to lead projects or gain cross-functional exposure, which restricts their development.

4.2.6.3 *Subtheme 5.3 Soft skill training*

Participants consistently identified soft skills training as a developmental priority for Gen Z. Respondents highlighted that while technical competence is essential, younger employees require training in communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and teamwork to succeed in leadership roles. “*Collaboration and teamwork, effective communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability*” are essential for leadership effectiveness (participants 8). However, the lack of structured soft skills training in *organizations* is one issue raised by participants, as *organizations* often focus narrowly on technical development.

4.2.6.4 *Subtheme 5.4 Digital leadership training*

Digital leadership training was identified as a crucial development need, mirroring Gen Z’s expectation of workplaces that are technologically driven. Participants observed that younger employees prioritize leaders who are digitally skilled and able to leverage technology to foster innovation and teamwork. This is exemplified by one

respondent who said, “Digital skills are essential for future leaders, especially for Gen Z” (Participant 13).

Similar to the previous subtheme, the lack of structured digital leadership programs was a significant issue, as organizations struggled to prepare employees for technology-driven leadership. The literature confirms that digital leadership training is essential for succession planning, as it equips younger employees with the skills to lead in dynamic, technology-intensive environments (Zeng *et al.*, 2025).

4.2.6.5 Subtheme 5.5 Feedback and recognition

Ultimately, participants emphasized the importance of feedback and recognition for Gen Z development. Respondents highlighted that younger employees value regular, constructive feedback and recognition for their contributions, which fosters motivation and engagement. One participant explained that “ *we want leaders who are involved in decisions, not just tell us what to do*” (participant 15), while another stated that “*participative leadership makes us feel valued and part of the bigger picture*” (participant 19)

However, the participants also raised concerns that inconsistent feedback practices and limited recognitions were demotivating. According to Jones (2024), feedback and recognition are critical to engagement, retention, and succession-readiness, particularly among younger generations.

4.2.7. Theme 6 Organizational readiness

This theme explores the extent to which organizations are prepared to integrate Gen Z into leadership pipelines and succession planning frameworks. Participants revealed varying levels of readiness, ranging from moderately prepared organizations with partial structures in place to those that were structurally unprepared for generational transitions. The theme also highlights the importance of leadership mindsets, readiness, and identifies strategic foresight gaps that hinder long-term succession planning. Collectively, these sub-themes show that organizational readiness is uneven, with significant implications for the sustainability of leadership development and generational transitions.

4.2.7.1 Subtheme 6.1 Moderately prepared organizations

Participants highlighted that some organizations are moderately prepared for succession planning, with partial frameworks and development initiatives in place. Respondents noted that while these organizations have begun to integrate mentorship, training, and leadership pipelines, their efforts remain inconsistent and lack complete alignment with the expectations of Gen Z. This is highlighted by one of the respondents stating that “*structured succession planning ensures continuity and prepares younger employees for leadership responsibilities*” (Participant 7). However, other respondents observed that communication and implementation are uneven. Again, issues related to the limited visibility of succession frameworks and inconsistent application across departments were flagged.

According to Altamimi et al. (2023), moderately prepared organizations often have the right structures but fail to embed them, thereby reducing their effectiveness.

4.2.7.2 Subtheme 6.2 Structurally unprepared organizations

Other participants described organizations as structurally unprepared for succession planning, with little to no frameworks in place. Respondents emphasized that leadership transitions are often handled informally or reactively, leaving younger employees excluded from development opportunities. This is highlighted by one of the participants (Participant 12), who states, “*Succession planning is often reactive and based on who is available rather than who is prepared.*” The issues raised were reliance on ad hoc practices, a lack of formal leadership pipelines, and a weak integration of Gen Z into succession discussions.

This is concerning, as structurally unprepared organizations tend to undermine leadership development and create instability, often leaving succession planning to chance rather than adopting a strategic approach (Williams, 2021; Mphaluwa et al., 2025).

4.7.2.3 Subtheme 6.3 Leadership mindset readiness

Participants emphasised that organizational readiness is not only structural but also dependent on leadership mindset. Respondents emphasized that leaders who embody inclusivity, mentorship, and adaptability are better equipped to prepare Gen

Z for leadership roles. This is pointed out by one participant (7), who states, “*Leaders must be flexible and solution-oriented, not rigid in their approach.*”

Resistance to change among senior leaders, with some preferring the traditional hierarchical model that aligns with younger employees, was flagged as a fundamental issue. Leadership mindset readiness is crucial for effective succession planning, as leaders must transition from a command-and-control approach to coaching and participative styles to effectively engage Gen Z (Corrington, 2025; Sharma, 2023).

4.7.2.4 Subtheme 6.4 Strategic foresight gaps

Finally, participants identified gaps in strategic foresight as a major weakness in organizational readiness. Respondents noted that many organizations fail to anticipate future leadership needs or to align succession planning with long-term strategy. This is emphasized by participant 18: “Gen Z employees are not yet fully included in leadership discussions,” underscoring the lack of forward-looking planning.

The respondents expressed concerns about short-term reservations, dependence on external recruitment, and limited investment in leadership development for young people. As Siambi (2022) alluded, strategic foresight is crucial for succession planning, as organizations need to anticipate generational transitions and integrate long-term leadership development into their strategies.

5. CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

5.1.INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the study, integrating the findings with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the analysis in Chapter 4.

5.2.SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The study showed that succession planning and leadership development for Gen Z are influenced by interconnected factors such as leadership styles, organizational culture, succession practices, development needs, and organizational readiness.

Theme 1: Operational efficiency showed that participants valued structured processes and clear accountability, but emphasised that efficiency alone is insufficient without inclusion and innovation. The literature confirms that operational efficiency must be balanced with adaptability to sustain leadership pipelines.

Theme 2: Leadership styles that motivate Gen Z highlighted that participative, coaching, servant, and transformational leadership are strongly preferred by younger employees, who value mentorship, empowerment, and inspiration. Authoritarian styles were consistently rejected as they hindered creativity and excluded Gen Z, while adaptive styles were preferred. Developmental leadership styles were identified as crucial for engaging the younger generation and ensuring succession readiness.

Theme 3: Organizational Culture revealed that hierarchical and rigid cultures act as barriers, while inclusive and open cultures foster trust, innovation, and succession readiness. Structured but evolving cultures strike a balance between stability and adaptability, whereas cultural misalignment undermines engagement and retention. The findings confirmed that culture is central to the success of succession planning, as it reveals whether younger employees feel included and prepared for leadership roles.

Theme 4: Succession Planning demonstrated that practices remain uneven and often inadequate. Formal succession planning enhances continuity, but it is inconsistently applied and poorly communicated. Informal and ad-hoc approaches, along with reactive recruitment, have undermined leadership development and alienated Gen Z. The limited inclusion of younger employees in succession decisions

has been identified as a critical gap, weakening organizational pipelines. This was supported by the literature, which showed that reactive and exclusionary practices leave organizations vulnerable to leadership vacuums.

Theme 5: Gen Z Development Needs identified mentorship and coaching, project ownership and cross-functional exposure, soft skills training, digital leadership training, and feedback and recognition as essential developmental priorities. Participants stressed that without this support, Gen Z leaders will be technically competent but strategically unprepared. These are reinforced in literature, which suggests that these needs align with generational expectations of growth, inclusion, and technological fluency.

Theme 6: Organizational readiness revealed uneven preparedness across organizations. Some models were prepared with partial frameworks in place, while others were structurally unprepared, relying on ad hoc or recruitment-driven approaches. Leadership mindset readiness emerged as critical, with resistance to change among senior leaders identified as a barrier. Strategic foresight gaps further undermined long-term succession planning, leaving the organization reactive rather than proactive. The literature confirms that readiness requires no structural framework and that leadership adaptability is needed to anticipate the transitions of future generations.

5.3.CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that Gen Z rejects authoritarian leadership in favor of participative, servant, coaching, and transformative approaches; however, adopting these preferences must take into account that manufacturing environments demand operational discipline and compliance. Consequently, this may create a paradox between generational expectations and industrial realities. Therefore, effective succession planning requires adaptive frameworks that reconcile participative ideals with situational demands.

This may depend on whether the organizational culture is flexible or rigid, which has become a key factor. While inclusive and evolving cultures build trust, encourage innovation, and improve retention, not having a formal succession framework can

undermine these benefits. This indicates that culture alone isn't enough without institutionalized or formalized succession practices. Therefore, it may be necessary to consider hybrid cultural models that are designed to ensure compliance while remaining flexible enough to meet generational expectations for the organization's long-term sustainability.

Gen Z's preferences for mentorship, project ownership, cross-functional exposure, and digital leadership training are in line with global standards. However, they may encounter limitations in South African contexts due to resource constraints or rigid hierarchies. This shows that readiness also depends on structural reforms, not just training.

The overall conclusion is that succession planning for Generation Z cannot focus solely on technical skills or isolated leadership styles. Success depends on integrating adaptive leadership, promoting hybrid cultures, establishing formal succession frameworks, and aligning development priorities with strategic foresight. By exploring the tensions between generational expectations and industrial realities, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of succession planning in South Africa's manufacturing sector. Therefore, future studies should build on these insights through long-term and sector-specific analyses to ensure that leadership pipelines are not only technically skilled but also strategically resilient.

6. CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, a series of recommendations is proposed for manufacturers, human resource practitioners, and policymakers. These recommendations are based on the need to prepare Generation Z for leadership roles within the South African manufacturing sector, a context marked by operational complexity, generational transition, and strategic uncertainty.

6.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study makes significant contributions to the theoretical advancement of leadership and organizational studies in several key areas. Firstly, it emphasizes the relevance of adaptive leadership theory, promoting a blended approach that combines participative, coaching, servant, and transformational styles, while also maintaining directive elements for crises. This hybrid approach broadens existing leadership theories by positioning adaptability within high-risk, system-intensive environments such as manufacturing.

Secondly, the findings support and expand on organizational culture theory, especially regarding generational dynamics. The focus on psychological safety, transparency, and inclusion fits with Generation Z's expectations and challenges traditional hierarchical models. This adds to the literature on cultural evolution in industrial settings, where balancing structure and flexibility is essential.

Thirdly, the study enhances succession planning theory by emphasizing the Limitations of informal and recruitment-driven methods. It suggests a structured, inclusive model that integrates generational readiness into long-term strategy, thus advancing models of sustainable leadership development.

Lastly, the research blends human capital development theory, highlighting the importance of mentorship, tacit knowledge transfer, and soft skills training in developing younger leaders. The inclusion of digital leadership skills further broadens the theoretical understanding of leadership in technology-driven workplaces.

6.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings offer actionable insights for industry stakeholders:

- **Manufacturing firms/businesses:** should embed adaptive leadership styles into succession frameworks, balancing operational needs (realities) with generational expectations. Training programs should emphasise mentorship and empowerment while phasing out authoritarian practices that alienate younger employees. Structured succession planning should replace ad-hoc recruitment, and Gen Z should be actively included in leadership development initiatives.
- **Human Resource Practitioners:** are advised to cultivate inclusive organizational cultures that foster openness, collaboration, and psychological safety. Cultural misalignment should be addressed by aligning organizational values with Gen Z's preference for transparency and inclusion, without compromising the fundamental organizational values of a long-term perspective. Development programs should include project ownership, cross-functional exposure, and soft skills training to build strategic and interpersonal competencies.
- **Policymakers:** can play a critical role in promoting industry-wide adoption of structured succession planning and leadership development frameworks. National initiatives should support digital readiness, intergenerational mentorship, and inclusive leadership practices to ensure the long-term competitiveness of South Africa's manufacturing sector.

6.3 SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDY

While the study provides a comprehensive foundation, several areas warrant further investigation:

- **Comparative Sectoral Studies:** Could explore how adaptive leadership and succession planning models function in other industries such as energy, healthcare, investment, or finance, offering cross-sectoral insights.
- **Longitudinal Research:** Is needed to assess the long-term impact of structured succession frameworks and mentorship programs on leadership pipeline sustainability and organizational resilience.

- Technological and leadership: Studies should examine the intersection of digital leadership training and soft skills development, particularly in the context of Industry 4.0 and hybrid work environments.
- Policy-Oriented research: can evaluate the effectiveness of government-led initiatives in promoting inclusive organizational cultures and leadership readiness, and explore how national labour and educational policies can better support generational transitions in industrial sectors.

6.4 SHORTCOMINGS OF THE STUDY

Despite the study providing valuable insights into succession planning and leadership development for Generation Z, it faced limitations in sample size and representation, contextual boundaries, reliance on self-reported data, a limited longitudinal perspective, organizational sensitivities, and constraints in the literature.

6.4.1 Sample Size and Representation

The sample size was relatively small and may not represent the full diversity of Gen Z employees or organizational practices. Specific perspectives from organizations with advanced succession frameworks or highly innovative cultures may not have been adequately represented or captured.

6.4.2 Contextual boundaries

The study was conducted within a specific organizational and sectoral context, with a focus on operational industries. As a consequence, the findings may not fully capture the dynamics of succession planning in more dynamic or creative sectors, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results across diverse industries.

6.4.3 Reliance on self-reported data

The study relied on participant interviews and self-reported experience or views, which may be subject to bias or personal interpretation. The thematic analysis may have mitigated this to some extent, but the findings reflect perceptions rather than objective measures of succession planning effectiveness.

6.4.4 Limited longitudinal perspective

This research captured only a snapshot of current practices and perceptions and did not monitor changes over time. Succession planning and organizational readiness are dynamic processes, and the absence of longitudinal data limits the ability to

assess how practices evolve or how the development needs of Gen Z change as they progress into leadership roles.

6.4.5 Literature constraints

The body of research on Gen Z succession planning is still emerging. Therefore, the ability to narrow down findings within a broad theoretical framework is limited; thus, the insights are more exploratory than conclusive.

6.4.6 Organization sensitivities

Some participants may have withheld critical views due to organizational sensitivity around the leadership shortcomings or cultural misalignment. This could have constrained the depth of criticism and limited the exposure of systemic issues.

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ANNEXURE A: DATA COLLECTION TOOL

Exploring the Influence of Leadership Style and Organizational Culture on Succession Planning for Generation Z

Introductory/Demographic Questions:

- What is your current role and level of experience in the organization?
- What is your generational cohort? (e.g., Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, Gen Z)
- How long have you worked in the manufacturing sector?

Interview Questions:

1. What leadership behaviours or qualities do you think are essential for success in the manufacturing industry?
2. In your experience, what leadership traits help organizations remain competitive and adaptable to change?
3. In your opinion, what leadership style best motivates younger employees (especially Gen Z)?
4. How would you describe the organizational culture at your workplace (e.g., open, hierarchical, innovative, rigid)?
5. Do you feel the current culture supports younger employees, particularly Generation Z? Why or why not?
6. Can you give an example of how the company's culture aligns (or clashes) with your personal values?
7. How are potential future leaders identified and nurtured within your organization?
8. Are there any formal succession planning practices in place? If so, how do they involve Generation Z?
9. From your perspective, how prepared is your organization to pass leadership responsibilities to Gen Z?

10. What do you think organizations should do differently to better prepare Gen Z for leadership roles?
11. What types of support, mentorship, or training would help younger employees grow into leadership positions?
12. If you had the opportunity to design a leadership development program for Gen Z, what would it include?

ANNEXURE B: INFORMED CONSENT

06 June 2025

DEAR PARTICIPANT

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

You are invited to take part in a research study that forms part of a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this study. Please ask the researcher or person explaining the research to you any questions about any part of this study that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you might be involved. Also, your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to say no to participating. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part now.

This study has been approved by the NWU Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) and will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and principles of the North-West University and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study.

Title of the project: Exploring the Influence of Leadership Style and Organizational Culture on Succession Planning for Generation Z

Institution: NWU Business School

Ethics Reference Number: NWU-00850-25-A4

Names and contact details of project staff

	Supervisor	Researcher
Title, name & surname	Dr. Adebajji Ayeni	MJ Phasha
Full Names		
Function in Project	Principle Investigator	Researcher
Telephone		

What is this research study all about?

To investigate the leadership qualities and corporate cultural dynamics essential for facilitating the successful transition of Generation Z into leadership roles within sustainable manufacturing corporations.

Specific Objectives:

1. To identify the key leadership traits required for sustaining profitability and adaptability in manufacturing corporations.
2. To examine the cultural values and practices prevalent in manufacturing firms and assess their alignment with Generation Z characteristics.
3. To evaluate the succession planning and leadership development strategies targeting Generation Z.
4. To recommend strategic interventions for equipping Generation Z to lead future manufacturing businesses successfully.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate in this research study because you fall into at least one of the following categories:

- GenZ employee working in manufacturing, HR practitioner, or Manager

What will be expected of you?

You will be expected to:

- Participate in a 45 – 60 minute semi-structured interview with the researcher at a suitable time and private area without interruptions that is convenient for both parties via an online platform. This will be scheduled by the researcher once approved by the NWU ethics committee.
- Respond to the questions openly and honestly.
- Inform the supervisor should you feel or experience any form of discomfort or distress during the research process, and inform the supervisor if you, at times, feel the need to terminate your involvement in the research process.

Will you gain anything from taking part in this research?

This research study intends to give you a voice to reveal, explain, and reflect on organizational culture and leadership style. No monetary reward will be offered for participation in the study. You will, however, be furnished with a two-page communique on the outcomes of the study that you can use to gain insights into the study.

Are there risks involved in your taking part in this research, and what will be done to prevent them?

Participation in this study does not create any physical risk to you, as the study does not involve any physical activities or experiments. We, however, have identified certain ethical principles that shall always be maintained to prevent any damage to you. The focus of these principles will be to protect your dignity and keep all records provided private and confidential.

How will we protect your confidentiality, and who will see your findings?

You will be assigned a unique participant ID. Our interview will be recorded and saved under the ID, but the collected data shall be regarded as confidential and will not be shared with any 3rd party not directly involved in the research process. Personal details of participants and their direct input to the research study shall not be made public. All research records shall be retained for a specified period and destroyed by an appropriate means. The study's findings will be made public; however, they will not include any raw data that might incriminate specific individuals.

What will happen with the findings or samples?

The study's findings will be for academic purposes and will be used solely to add to the current body of knowledge.

How will you know about the results of this research?

Participants in the study will be made aware of the research results, if required, through a two-page communique by email. The electronic final version of the dissertation will also be made available if requested.

Will you be paid to take part in this study, and are there any costs for you?

Participation in this study will not yield monetary value to you. There is no cost to you, except for the time you spend participating in this study. The researcher will fund this study himself.

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

You may contact the supervisor, Dr. Adebajji Ayeni at 55963552@mynwu.ac.za / Jacob Phasha at 55201490@mynwu.ac.za

if you have any further questions or problems. You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own purposes.

POPIA Declaration:

We hereby confirm that all personal information collected and processed in relation to this work will be handled in strict compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). The information will be used solely for its intended purpose, kept confidential, and protected through appropriate safeguards. Data subjects may request access to, correction of, or deletion of their information at any time.

DECLARATION

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I (PARTICIPANT ID) agree to take part in the research study titled:
Exploring the Influence of Leadership Style and Organizational Culture on Succession Planning for Generation Z.

I declare that:

I have read this information/which was explained to me by a trusted person, in a language I am fluent in and comfortable with. The research was clearly explained to me. I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person obtaining my consent and the researcher, and all my questions have been answered. I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary, and I have not been pressured to take part. I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be treated negatively if I do so. I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished if the researcher feels it is in the best interest of the study, or if I do not follow the agreed study plan.

Signed at: _____

On: _____

Signature of participant

Signature of witness

Declaration by the researcher

I _____ declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to (PARTICIPANT ID)
- I did/did not use an interpreter
- I encouraged them to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them, or I was available should they want to ask any further questions.
- I am satisfied that they adequately understand all aspects of the research, as described above.
- I am satisfied that they had time to discuss it with others if they wished to do so.

Signed at: _____

On: _____

Signature of researcher

Signature of supervisor
