

PREFERENCES FOR LEADER TRAITS AND LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION STYLES  
AMONG MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT GENERATIONAL COHORTS

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## Abstract

Many organizations today are comprised of a culturally diverse workforce. In addition to diversity related to gender, ethnicity, race or religious beliefs, there are also four different generations of workers side by side in these organizations. As with other co-cultures, each of these four generational cohorts has its own unique characteristics including values, attitudes, beliefs and worldviews. This study asks how these four generations differ with respect to their views on leadership. Specifically, a survey was distributed to members of all four generations, from multiple industries, to determine the degree of importance they attributed to twenty well documented leader traits, what trait they felt most important for a leader to possess, and what style of leadership communication they preferred. The results of the survey were reflected against Watzlawick's Pragmatic theory and Pearce and Cronen's Coordinated Management of Meaning theory of interpersonal communication. The results of this study provide insight into the differences between the four generations in regard to their views on leadership, and how they prefer their leaders to engage with them through communication. Also provided are suggestions for further studies to better understand and characterize these differences.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

We are now at a time in American history where we recognize and value the diversity of our workforce. Among the forms of diversity we recognize are: race, gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, gender preference and generation. Four distinct generations of workers, each with its own attitudes, values, ambitions, mind-sets, world views and ways of communicating are now working side by side (Derrick & Walker, 2006; Hatfield, 2002; Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2000). Although more than one generation has been present in the workforce in the past, the transition from manufacturing to an information-centered economy, combined with the flattening of organizational hierarchies, has brought members of the different generations in much closer contact in “cubicle space” than in the past (Zemke et al).

As with any dimension of diversity, this blending can lead to increased creativity and innovation by tapping into the strengths, expertise and viewpoints embodied within the different groups. But it can also lead to conflicts, tension, misunderstandings and decreased productivity (Derrick & Walker, 2006; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Reynolds, Bush & Geist, 2008; Zemke et al, 2000;). Derrick and Walker (2006) report that 60% of public employees surveyed reported tension between generations. To further complicate matters, DiRomualdo (2006) discovered that older and younger workers don’t perceive intergenerational tensions in the same way. He found that younger workers were much more sensitive to generational differences, whether positive or negative, than were their older counterparts.

Thus, the “generation gap” in the workplace has implications for organizational effectiveness. Each generation may be thought of as a unique co-culture, operating in the workplace with its own set of values, beliefs, jargon and worldviews among other unique characteristics. These unique characteristics can manifest themselves in different expectations

with respect to job performance, different understandings regarding implicit or explicit work contracts, orientation to job versus personal ambitions, and a host of opportunities for poor communication between managers and workers, and between peers.

The “gap” also has implications for leaders, who must build bridges rather than walls between these different generations, and develop leadership styles that will integrate rather than alienate their followers. For leaders in today’s organizations to be effective they must develop an extensive repertoire of leadership styles as well as communication skills. Leaders must recognize the individual and cultural differences present in their followers, and determine how best to engage them in ways to reach common goals.

#### Purpose of the Study

Many organizations have recognized the cultural diversity within their workforce, and have developed diversity training (Rynes & Rosen, 1995) or cross cultural training programs. However, few of these programs address “age” or more specifically “generation” as a dimension of diversity. Furthermore, very few studies have been done which address how each generation’s unique values, attitudes and worldviews translate into their preferences in leadership. This study focuses on the four generational cohorts in today’s workforce and how they differ in their choices of desirable leadership traits, and their preferences in leader communication styles. A survey was administered to a random, non-probability sample of people in order to elicit responses with respect to their preferred leader traits and leadership communication preferences. The results of the study provide additional insight into how each generational cohort differs along these dimensions.

### Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions are used:

*Co-culture*: a group of people who share certain cultural attributes, such as world views, beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors and language (jargon) that are distinct from the dominant culture in which they live (Samovar & Porter, 2001)

*Generational cohort (or cohort)*: a group of people born during the same general time span who are shaped by the events and conditions prevalent during their youth and adolescence, and who function as a co-culture. The four generational cohorts used in this study are identified by their birth years as follows:

Silent generation (Silents) – 1925 – 1945

Baby boomers (boomers) – 1946 – 1963

Generation X (Gen X) – 1964 – 1978

Generation Y (Gen Y) – 1979 – 1991

*Leadership communication style*: a particular manner in which a leader communicates and interacts with followers (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). The following leadership communication styles were included in the survey (ibid):

Laissez-faire – a style in which the leader is relatively hands-off and unengaged from the followers, allowing them a high degree of autonomy and a low level of guidance or support.

Democratic – a style in which the leader actively engages with followers, encouraging their inputs and participation, while providing support and facilitating interaction.

Authoritarian – a style in which the leader maintains control over followers, providing policies and procedures to communicate, while maintaining a distance between leader and followers.

#### Organization of Remaining Chapters

This chapter has introduced the notion that one's membership in a particular generational cohort may have an influence on one's preferences of leader characteristics and traits, as well as of leadership communication styles. Chapter 2 will further explore how each of the generational cohorts comprises a unique co-culture, giving a brief overview of the general characteristics of each cohort. Chapter 2 also provides an overview of various leadership theories that have evolved over the last several decades, and the role of communication in enacting effective leadership. Two communication theories that seem to have particular relevance to leader communication are reviewed, providing a theoretical basis for good leader communication. Current information regarding our understanding of how the four generational cohorts regard leadership is provided. Chapter 2 concludes with an articulation of the research questions that have been studied in this thesis. The research methodology and scope are presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides the results of the study, and provides an analysis of the detailed data. Finally, Chapter 5 reports on the relevance of the current findings, describes the limitations and applications of the current study, and suggests opportunities for further research.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Theoretical Basis

Today's organizations, whether for profit or non-profit, are challenged to succeed while competing in an increasingly global environment, with limited resources, and with employees and stakeholders who represent a diverse range of cultures and co-cultures. Effective leadership is a prerequisite to success. Organizations need leaders who can understand and appreciate all manner of diversity and who can communicate with those diverse populations effectively. Of particular interest in this study is diversity as it applies to the different generations represented in today's workforce.

This review of the literature will briefly explore the concept of generational cohorts and how they function as co-cultures within society. The four cohorts present in today's workforce, the Silent generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y will be described individually to provide a framework for understanding the attributes and preferences of each cohort. The review provides an overview of leadership theories, and a brief description of the most prevalent theories in practice today. Leaders cannot lead without communicating. A review of literature discussing the centrality of communication skills to effective leadership is presented. While any number of communication theories are pertinent to the specific communication skills and styles needed by leaders, two theories in particular resonate with the skills identified in the literature for effective leaders. These two theories are briefly reviewed, identifying how they may influence the communication between leaders and followers. Finally, the current state of research investigating how generational differences are manifested in terms of preferences for desired leadership characteristics or leadership styles is discussed.

## The Literature

### *Generational Cohorts*

Since the beginning of recorded history, elders have been perplexed by the behavior of the younger generation and how their behavior will engender social and political change (Achilles & Crump, 1978; Bengston, Furlong & Laufer, 1983). Davis (1940), (as cited in Bengston et al.) notes that conflict between generations is inevitable, although it has become more characteristic in modern societies. Sophocles exposed a “communication gap” between father and son in *Antigone* (Achilles & Crump). This communication gap, as Achilles and Crump explain, is really a manifestation of communication barriers present between members of two different cultures. As such, members of each generation represent a unique culture, or more properly, co-culture (Caputo, Hazel, McMahon, & Dannels, 2002). Samovar and Porter (2001) point out that co-cultures may exhibit “communication characteristics, perceptions, values, beliefs, and practices that are significantly different enough to distinguish them from other groups” (p. 47).

A generational cohort is defined as a group of people born in the same general time span, who share key life experiences (Bengston et al., 1983; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal &, 2007; Zemke et al., 2000). They are shaped by events that occur during their youth and adolescent years, which can leave powerful impressions regarding authority, institutions, and family roles (Arsenault, 2003; Buss, 1974; Kupperschmidt; Schewe & Meredith, 2004). The conditions prevalent in society during their adolescence, such as political, social, economic, and sociological forces also contribute to shaping the attitudes and outlooks of a cohort (Kupperschmidt; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al.).

Studies of cohorts have revealed that each cohort is likely to embody a characteristic set of values, attitudes, mind-sets, behaviors, preferences and ambitions (Arsenault, 2003; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al). The common attitudes, values and experiences shared by a cohort tend to bind them together, leading to and reinforcing group cohesion (Zemke et al.). These characteristics have been found to be relatively enduring. Furthermore, with the rapid expansion of technology, particularly the World Wide Web, some of these common characteristics within cohorts now cross international boundaries (ibid). Indeed, Marshall McLuhan noted that “youth instinctively understands the present environment ..... This is the reason for the great alienation between generations” (2001, pp. 9-10).

The four generational cohorts most prevalent in today’s workforce are the Silent generation, the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. However, the literature shows that some researchers have used different labels for these generations (e.g. Veterans for the Silent generation, Baby Busters for Generation X, GenNext or Millenials for Generation Y (Arsenault, 2003, p. 128)). Adding more confusion is the lack of agreement among social scientists for the birth years of the cohorts. Zemke et al. lists the birth years for the cohorts as follows: Silent generation (1922-1943); Baby Boomers (1944-1960); Gen X (1961-1980); Gen Y (1981-2000). Deal et al (2001) use the following birth years: Baby Boomers (1946-1963); Gen X (1964-1978); Gen Y (1979-?). Still other researchers identify up to six generational cohorts, by splitting the Baby Boomer or the Gen X into “early” or “late” cohorts (Schewe & Meredith, 2004). In spite of these differences in monikers, and the minor variations in birth years, the general characteristics and attributes used to describe each cohort are in very good agreement. The next section describes each of the generational cohorts in terms of their defining life events and environmental conditions as well as some of their characteristics.

### *General Characteristics of the Cohorts*

Over the last 40 years, numerous studies, books, and anecdotal articles have been written to describe cohorts and their preferences in everything from musical tastes, fashion or favorite movies to work ethic, political leanings and social communication patterns. More importantly for the workplace are differences in values, attitudes, preferences, expectations and communication styles, to name but a few dimensions.

#### *Silent Generation (1922 – 1945).*

Coined as the *Greatest Generation* by Tom Brokaw, the Silent Generation was generally raised during a time of war and harsh economic conditions (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Zemke et al., 2000). The oldest of this generation remember the Great Depression and the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This is the generation that filled the ranks of the military during World War II and the Korean conflict, built the Empire State Building and victory gardens, and put a man on the moon. This generation had many heroes, including Joe DiMaggio, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, George Patton and Dwight Eisenhower (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al.).

The Silent generation has the highest degree of respect for formal authority of all the cohorts (Bower & Fidler, 1994; Conger, 1997; Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007; Smola & Sutton, 2002). They are also known for their loyalty and patriotism (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000). Having experienced lean times, they are generally fiscally conservative (Bower & Fidler; Zemke et al.). The Silent generation is known for preferring consistency, uniformity, conformity, law and order, hard work and playing by the rules (Zemke et al.).

Through their military experience, the Silent generation learned the value of hierarchical organizations, led by no-nonsense command-and-control style leaders. As this generation entered the workforce, the organizations they worked for had clear lines of authority, strict division of labor, rank commensurate with seniority, (Zemke et al., 2000) and an implicit work contract. This generation expected to work for the same employer until retirement; they value the safety and security of such long term employment (Bowers & Fidler, 1994).

*Baby Boomers (1946 – 1963).*

At nearly 80 million strong, the Baby Boomers have dominated American culture since their arrival. The sheer numbers of Boomers forced the country's infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, to expand in order to accommodate them. The Boomers were born during a time of relative peace and economic expansion. As post-war prosperity and opportunities spread across the country, Boomers were generally raised in nuclear families, by parents who gave them the best of everything they possibly could. This generation was fascinated and motivated by the space race, witnessed the Civil Rights movement of the 60's, thrilled to the British invasion, and made "sex and drugs and rock and roll" a mantra. Their adolescent years were also marked by the assassination of a president and a cultural icon, the Vietnam war and the shootings at Kent State (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000). Their heroes include John Glenn, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Beatles, John and Jacqueline Kennedy, and Gandhi (Zemke et al.). As the first generation to grow up with television, they were the first to have broad access to news, issues, advertising and a variety of programming (Lancaster & Stillman).

In contrast to their predecessors, Boomers are likely to challenge formal authority and question its credibility (Conger, 1997; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Sessa et al., 2007; Smola & Sutton,

2002;). Boomers believe in growth and expansion, hard work, teamwork and personal gratification (Zemke et al). They tend to be idealistic and excessively optimistic – the world is full of opportunities, and anything is possible for a Boomer (ibid; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Because of their numbers, Boomers had to compete for everything, including their jobs (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Boomers are workaholics, driven to succeed, and are willing to go the extra mile. While they value their individual freedoms (Bowers & Fidler, 1994), they are also good team players, and good at building consensus and relationships (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Zemke et al., 2000). This generation promoted equality in the workplace, redefined roles and rules, and sought to overthrow the command-and-control management style with a more participative one (Zemke et al.).

#### *Gen X (1964 – 1978).*

Generation X is the smallest of the cohorts, and is thought of as the latch-key generation – a television was their babysitter. Many grew up in homes in which both parents worked; many of them grew up in broken homes, in blended families or in non-traditional family units (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Morton, 2003). By virtue of the corporate downsizings and massive layoffs their parents experienced, coupled with the high divorce rate and single parent families, it is estimated that up to 37% were raised in poverty (Morton, 2003).

Gen X grew up with 24-hour journalism and a variety of media to keep them informed and entertained (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). They have seen great progress in science, technology and medicine (Morton, 2003), as well as the annihilation of the implicit work contract (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Zemke et al., 2000). They also witnessed the fall of political, corporate and religious leaders (Morton, 2003), sweeping corporate layoffs, and great economic

upheavals that heralded “the opening round of industrial globalization” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 97). They are considered a generation with no heroes.

The result of all this turmoil is a generation that is inherently independent, self-reliant, resourceful, and comfortable with all manners of change and diversity (Hatfield, 2002; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Morton, 2003; Sessa et al., 2007; Zemke et al., 2000). Gen X has little trust in institutions and disdain for hierarchy (Kupperschmidt). Authority is not revered; for them, respect is “always earned, never inherited”, nor can it be demanded (Morton, 2003, p.45). Gen X is also technologically savvy and are likely to be impatient with managers and coworkers who are not technologically proficient (Bower & Fidler, 1994; Kupperschmidt).

Several studies indicate that Gen X has less “commitment” to a specific place of employment than the generations before them (Busch, Venkitachalam & Richards, 2008; Daboval, as cited in Arsenault, 2004; Jurkiewicz, 2000; O’Bannon, 2001;). This lower commitment, or lack of loyalty, is evidenced in their relative comfort and propensity to change jobs frequently. It is not uncommon for a Gen Xer to have changed jobs several times before they turn 30. Zemke et al (2000) consider frequent job changes a survival instinct, since Gen X witnessed their parents’ loyalty being rewarded with downsizing. But not all organizations experience a high turnover rate or a lack of loyalty from Gen X. Kunreuther’s (2003) research in social-change organizations showed equal commitment levels between Gen X and Boomers.

Gen X was found to be more team oriented than the Boomers in studies conducted by Karp and Sirias (2001), but the concept of a heroic team leader, such as would be valued by the older two generations, is foreign and unacceptable to Gen X. Gen X values having fun on the job (Bower and Fidler, 1994; Karp & Sirias), but want their work to be meaningful. They are

much more results (as opposed to process) oriented (Karp & Sirias). Perhaps the characteristic that most sets them apart from the older generations is their strong preference for a balanced work/personal lifestyle (Conger, 1997; Hatfield, 2002; Kunreuther, 2003; Kupperschmidt, 2000; O'Bannon, 2001; Zemke et al., 2000 ). They are willing to work hard, but do not live to work.

*Gen Y (1979 – 2000).*

Generation Y doesn't remember a time before personal computers, the Internet, microwave ovens and cell phones (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Many of them have parents who are Mappies (Middle Aged Professional Parents) – Boomers who delayed child-bearing and are now approaching parenting with the same zeal as they've approached everything else (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 130). The rest of them have Gen X parents, who are determined to provide their kids with all of the parental attention they themselves never got (ibid). In either case, this generation is growing up in child-centered families, although many of those family units are non-traditional types (Morton, 2002).

Although Gen Y is doted on and coddled by their parents, they are also keenly aware that the world is a dangerous place. They recall the shootings at Columbine High School (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Morton, 2002), the bombing in Oklahoma City (Zemke et al. , 2000) and the fall of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Violent crimes, including those whose victims are Gen Yers, have increased dramatically during their lifespan (ibid), resulting in a generation that ranks “personal safety” as their top concern, even at work (Lancaster & Stillman).

Generation Y is the most tech savvy of all the cohorts (Busch et al, 2008), as one might expect since they were born into a world that already had Internet, personal computers, and cell phones in many homes. This translates into more comfort with technologies in the workplace, as

well as a demand for the latest technology. Their constant access to multiple channels of information has exposed them not only to talk shows and the notion of instant celebrity, but also to a much wider variety of world views. They have a dislike for hype, and generally have a “prove it to me mentality” (Morton, 2002, p. 47). More than one third of Gen Y are considered minorities (ibid), which makes them much more comfortable with racial and ethnic diversity than any other cohort (Sessa et al., 2007; Smola et al., 2002). They take women’s equality for granted (Morton, 2002).

Busch et al. (2008) found that Gen X and Gen Y were less concerned with power and status than their Boomer counterparts, but were much more interested in formal recognition for themselves as well as co-workers. Gen Y values collaboration (Reynolds, Bush & Geist, 2008) and are more willing to fit into, rather than overturn, institutions (Zemke et al 2000). This generation is much more optimistic and confident than their predecessors; it is believed they will have more in common with the Silent generation than either the Boomers or Gen X (ibid).

### *Leadership Theories and Practice*

Leadership has played an important role in the history of humankind, and has been studied for thousands of years (Hackman & Johnson, 2008; Kotterman, 2006;). Yet leadership remains one of the most difficult constructs to define (Gregoire & Arendt, 2004; Kotterman, 2006; Skipper & Bell, 2006). Although management is a relatively new phenomenon, borne of the large modern organization (Kotterman), leadership and management are often used interchangeably, which further confounds the ability to achieve a clear definition of what leadership really means (ibid; Skipper & Bell).

In the early 1900’s, attempts to define leadership focused on specific traits or characteristics of leaders (Benson, n.d.; Gregoire & Arendt, 2004; Yukl, 2006). The question to

be answered was whether leaders were born or if they could be made. Stodgill's 1948 review of early leadership studies (as cited in Yukl, 2006), determined that there were no specific traits sufficient to guarantee leader success, but rather leader success had dependencies on situational variables. Behavioral theories of leadership, such as those conducted at Ohio State University and the University of Michigan, sought to identify specific actions or behaviors of leaders (Benson, n.d.; Gregoire & Arendt; Hackman & Johnson, 2008). The results of these studies suggested that good leaders must be both task oriented as well as show concern for interpersonal relationships (ibid).

Contingency theories of leadership take into account situational factors impacting a leader's effectiveness. Hersey and Blanchard (1984) introduced Situational Leadership, which prescribes a particular type of leader behavior to use with each follower, based on the follower's readiness (i.e. has necessary skills) and motivation to perform the task. Fiedler's Least Popular Co-worker (LPC) model identifies three variables that affect a leader's effectiveness: position power, task structure and leader-follower interpersonal relationship (Hackman & Johnson, 2008). Another of the contingency theories is House's Path-Goal theory (ibid). Path-Goal theory states that a leader's behavior, particularly communication style, can influence followers to perform a particular task as well as affect their job satisfaction. Variables such as the nature of the task and the characteristics of the followers determine the most effective leader behavior to use (Gregoire & Arendt, 2004; Hackman & Johnson).

Hackman and Johnson (2008) present two "relational" approaches to leadership, both of which focus specifically on the relationship between the leader and follower. The Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) model establishes two types of leader-follower relationships: In-group, which is characterized by high levels of trust, influence and support, and Out-group, which have lower

levels of trust and support. The second theory in this category is the Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory. This theory examines the quality of each leader-member relationship, noting that higher LMX relationships result in greater motivation, more job satisfaction and greater commitment to the leader and to the organization (Hackman & Johnson, 2008, pp. 90-94). Leaders are encouraged to form high LMX relationships with as many members as possible.

Some of the more current theories of leadership include transactional, transformational and the Full Range leadership models. Transactional leadership is described as more task-oriented, focusing on “clarifying roles and task requirements, providing rewards and punishment contingent on performance” (Benson, n.d.). Dimensions of transactional leadership are contingent reward (providing rewards or recognition in exchange for performance) and management by exception (providing corrective actions as needed) (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999; Barbuto, Fritz, Matkin & Marx, 2007; Bass, 1990; Hackman & Johnson, 2008). Bass (1990) further differentiates management by exception into active (proactively looking for poor adherence to rules or standards and providing corrective action) and passive (only intervening after a problem has occurred).

Transformational leadership elevates the interests of employees, engaging them to endorse organizational missions and goals, and pursue organizational goals above self-interest (Bass, 1990; Benson, n.d.). The dimensions of transformational leadership have been defined as: idealized influence or charisma (providing a vision, a sense of mission); individualized consideration (focusing on the needs and development of each individual); intellectual stimulation (encouraging new ways of thinking, questioning existing methods); and inspirational motivation (communicating high expectations, challenging and encouraging followers) (Avolio et al., 1999; Barbuto et al., 2007; Bass, 1990; Hackman & Johnson, 2008).

The dimensions of transactional and transformational leadership are sometimes placed on a continuum, ranging from the more passive to the more active leadership activities. Laissez faire leadership, which is conceptualized as non-leadership, is added to the most passive end of the spectrum. This inclusion leads to what is referred to as the Full Range Leadership model (Kirkbride, 2006). Avolio et al., (1999) state that “effective leaders display varying amounts of both transactional and transformational leadership” (p. 457). They have found a correlation between transformational dimensions and the contingent reward dimension of transactional leadership, and they theorize that contingent reward behavior may form the foundation for trust, by honoring agreements and demonstrating consistent treatment (ibid). A number of studies have shown a positive correlation between transformational leadership and follower satisfaction, motivation, extra effort, and perceived leader effectiveness (ibid). Skipper and Bell (2006) found that top performers among construction project managers were those who employed transformational leadership practices.

Today’s organizations, with their flatter hierarchies, need strong and effective leadership at all levels (Avolio et al., 1999). This new work environment requires leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, that are “more intellectually stimulating, inspirational and charismatic... such leadership will result in higher levels of cohesion, commitment, trust, motivation and performance” (ibid, p. 460). Bass (1990) states that transformational leadership is necessary in a turbulent work environment. Indeed, Kotter (2001) differentiates “leaders” from “managers” by stating that leaders cope with change (as opposed to promoting stability); change is a major factor in today’s volatile business world.

*Leadership and Communication*

“Leadership [sic] is a social process and involves a relationship between individuals. This social process and this relationship are enacted through communication” (Flauto, 1999, p. 96). It is through communication, both verbal and non-verbal, that leaders create meaning at the content (task) and affective (relational or interpersonal) levels (Barge & Hirokawa, 1989; Conrad & Pool, 2005; Hackman & Johnson, 2008; Madlock, 2008). Virtually all actions of a leader can be construed as communication behaviors (Penley & Hawkins, 1985; Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, & Henwood, 1991). Research has shown that effective leaders tend to be more skilled in communication (Flauto; Penley & Hawkins; Penley et al., ; Riggio, Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003). Leaders who demonstrate greater communication competence are rated as more effective leaders by subordinates, and their subordinates show higher job satisfaction (Madlock; Riggio et al.). And the higher one moves in the organizational stratum, the more time is spent in communication and the greater the skills that are required (Hackman & Johnson; Riggio et al.).

Each style of leadership lends itself to a need for communication skills. Early studies of leadership, which focused on leader traits and skills, identified three broad categories of leader skills: Technical, conceptual, and interpersonal. Interpersonal skills are rooted in communication (Yukl, 2006, p. 181):

- Articulate messages – communicate clearly and effectively
- Establish relationships – use of tact, diplomacy and listening
- Understanding of other’s feelings, attitudes and motivations from verbal and non-verbal cues.

Behavioral theories concluded that a good leader must be concerned with both the task and interpersonal relationship dimensions. Communication is the key process by which

relationships are forged and maintained (Caputo et al., 2002; Payne, 2005;). Task-oriented behaviors include assigning tasks and articulating standards, rules or procedures. Thus both dimensions of the behavioral theories require a leader to possess good communication skills.

Interpersonal relationships, and thus communication, also factor heavily into the contingency theories of leadership. Leaders who scored higher in Fiedler's LPC model were those who established good relationships, marked by trust, respect and affection, with their followers (Hackman & Johnson, 2008). Path-Goal theory, with its foundation in motivation and influence, requires a good leader to adapt his or her communication style to the nature of the task and the nature of the follower (ibid; Riggio et al, 2003). Barge and Hirokawa (1989) note that it is the leader's use of good communication skills which facilitates achievement of group goals, and this, in turn, leads to greater job satisfaction and motivation.

Relational theories of leadership are specifically geared towards the relationship between leaders and followers (Conrad & Poole, 2005; Hackman & Johnson, 2008). Both the Vertical Dyad linkage model and the LMX theory require a leader to develop high quality "partnerships" with followers. To build and maintain such partnerships requires different patterns of communication, or roles (Flauto, 1999; Hackman & Johnson, 2008).

As more organizations embrace transformational leadership, the importance of communication skills has become evident. Flauto (1999) found a clear correlation between three of the dimensions of transformational leadership (charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation) and communication competence. Transformational leaders must be able to engage followers on more emotional levels (Payne, 2005), developing and articulating messages that will inspire and energize followers to achieve shared goals (Conger, 1991; Kotter,

2001;). Conger (1991) emphasizes the importance of leaders being skilled communicators in this “era of managing by inspiration” (p. 31).

Although there have been a multitude of definitions of leadership, and several generations of leadership theory, there seems to be good agreement that effective leaders must be effective communicators (Barge & Hirokawa, 1989; Clutterbuck & Hirst, 2002; Riggio et al., 2003). Hackman and Johnson define leadership as “human communication, which modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared goals and needs” (2009, p. 11). Pincus and DeBonis (as cited in Kinnick and Parton, 2005) maintain that leadership is “at the heart a communication process because it seeks to strengthen human relationships by increasing trust and understanding” (p. 32).

#### *Leader Communication Theory.*

In reviewing the various leadership theories above, and the centrality of communication to effective leadership, several themes arise. One theme involves the use of communication to create meaning – to send messages which are interpreted and acted upon in a desired way. The other theme is the creation of a relationship between leader and follower, which relies heavily on interpersonal communication.

Intuitively, one looks to theories of organizational communication when thinking about concepts such as leadership. But Littlejohn (1978) points out that interpersonal communication lies at the base of the hierarchy of communication contexts, such that it is fully subsumed in organizational communication. In this way, interpersonal communication is at the foundation of leadership.

One interpersonal communication theory that encompasses both themes (create meaning and create relationship) is the Pragmatic (or Interactional) Theory of Watzlawick, Beavin and

Jackson (Griffin, 2006; Littlejohn, 1978; Miller, 2002). The foundation of this theory holds that communicants (such as leaders and followers) are in a continuous process of defining their relationship (Littlejohn). The theory has five axioms. One axiom states that communication consists of both a content and a relational component which are intricately interrelated, both of which are needed to create meaning. The content component contains the words of the message. The relational component may contain several unspoken or implied messages regarding the nature of the relationship of those involved in the communication. For instance, an identical “content” component could be spoken to different people; how it is received, interpreted and acted upon may be different depending on the relationship between the two people – for example leader to follower versus peer to peer. As the communication process between these individuals continues, the interpretation of messages is refined and defined by the relationship that is evolving. This perpetuates the process by which the relationship is constantly being defined (Littlejohn; Miller).

Another axiom of the Pragmatic Theory pertains to the relative equality of the persons communicating (Griffin, 2006; Littlejohn, 1978; Miller, 2002). Symmetrical communication is based on equality, in which neither person tries to dominate or control the communication. Complementary communication emphasizes dominance and inequality in the relationship (ibid). While some communication from leaders will be complementary (giving orders or directions, assigning tasks and resources), the more symmetrical communication will tend to build better relationships. Depending on the style of leadership expressed by a particular leader, the communication can either be more often symmetrical or more often complementary.

The social world, such as relationships and organizations, is “created, maintained and transformed in the process of communication” (Miller, 2002, p. 130). The Coordinated

Management of Meaning (CMM) theory of Pearce and Cronen states that as people are communicating they are simultaneously creating a social reality as well as being shaped by that mutually created world (Griffin, 2006). By using communication, the leader and follower are creating a relationship in which each has a stake in the development of the relationship as well as on the impact it has on self and other.

CMM has particular relevance to leadership. By “management” of meaning, Pearce and Cronen are referring to the rules of interaction. Constitutive rules define which behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal) can be considered as an interaction (Miller, 2002). Regulative rules specify what behaviors are appropriate for a given situation (ibid). As relationships develop and mature, unspoken rules may evolve such as those that define when it is appropriate for a follower to initiate a conversation with a leader and when it is not. Thus, rules help to provide structure for communication behavior, but they do not dictate it (ibid). The “coordination” aspect of CMM refers to the mutual understanding of the parties engaged in the communicative process of bringing into being a positive outcome of that communication (Griffin, 2006; Miller).

In CMM, the “meaning” aspect of communication is filtered through a hierarchy of contexts. Each person interprets and creates meaning for a specific message based on a hierarchical sequence, beginning from the content level through the speech act, episode, relationship, life script and cultural pattern (Miller, 2002). Each of these levels helps define the lower levels, and may at times completely subsume them (ibid). From a leadership perspective, the leader-to-follower relationship will have a very specific impact on the meaning of a particular message. In addition to that relationship, the leader and follower pair must also take into account the cultural perspectives of self and other to ensure the message received is the same as the message sent (meaning is the same for the sender and receiver).

### *Leadership Perceptions Across Generational Cohorts*

Since attitudes toward leadership and leadership styles or behaviors are firmly rooted in a person's values, attitudes and beliefs, and these attributes are influenced by one's generational cohort (Sessa et al., 2007), it stands to reason that there will be some differences in leader perceptions across the cohorts. Based on presumed differences between cohorts, Arsenault (2004) summarized the findings of Zemke et al. by proposing the following leadership styles for each generational cohort:

Silent	Directive style that is simple and clear.
Boomer	Collegial and consensus style. Share responsibility, much communication, hierarchy not preferred organizational structure.
Gen X	Fair, competent and straightforward. Thrive on change and challenge, little respect for authority.
Gen Y	Polite relationship with authority. Collective action and strong desire to get things done.

In a study performed by Kabacoff and Stoffey (2001), distinct differences were shown for older (generally, early Boomer) and younger (Gen X) persons on 14 out of 22 dimensions of leadership behaviors, based on self-ratings of unit and department managers. Of the 14 dimensions, the greatest differences showed that Boomers were much more conservative, technical, persuasive, likely to use delegation, and accommodating of others' needs (cooperative), whereas Gen X ranked higher in being outgoing, bringing excitement, more tactical (short range goals), more management focused, and more focused on production (strong orientation toward achievement). A similar study was performed by Sessa et al. (2007). They

found that the differences between the perceived leader behaviors formed a continuum that could be attributed to maturity, suggesting a progression from a more individualistic style when younger (Gen X) to a more conservative, consensual leadership style as one matures (Silents and early Boomers).

Kouzes and Posner (2002; 2003) have conducted research since the 1980's to determine what characteristics or traits people most admire in their leaders. While the results have not been presented with a demographic breakdown into generational cohorts, the rankings of traits has been, overall, stable with time. The 20 characteristics listed by Kouzes and Posner are (2002, p. 25): honest, forward-looking, competent, inspiring, intelligent, fair-minded, broad-minded, supportive, straightforward, dependable, cooperative, determined, imaginative, ambitious, courageous, caring, mature, loyal, self-controlled, and independent. Using these characteristics as a basis, Arsenault (2004) conducted a survey asking respondents to rank order the characteristics, as well as indicate their age. Results of this survey showed that all four cohorts ranked honesty as the number one characteristic; however, the Silent Generation and Boomers were much more likely to select this as their first choice than were the Gen X and Gen Y respondents. Silents had a very strong ranking for loyalty; Gen X and Gen Y ranked these lower. Another area of significant difference was in the rankings for determination and ambition. Gen X and Gen Y had strong preferences for these attributes, whereas Silents and Boomers ranked these lower. Powell (2005) also based his study on Kouzes and Posner's work and found statistically significant differences between the three generations (Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y) for the 20 characteristics studied. He found Boomers ranked dependability, honesty, fair-mindedness and broadmindedness significantly higher than other attributes. Gen X ranked

dependability, honesty and fair-mindedness most important. The Gen Y participants did not show much variation in their rankings of the 20 characteristics.

Sessa et al. (2007) also examined most desired leadership attributes, using a set of 40 “leadership components”. They found significant differences between generational cohorts in 6 out of the top 12 attributes determined to be important for leaders: credible; listens well; far-sighted; focused; dedicated; optimistic. Gen Y was the only generation that ranked dedicated higher than credible. “Credible” is very similar to honesty in the Kouzes and Posner set, indicating a difference in findings between the results of Sessa et al. and Arsenault.

The literature has also shown that there are both similarities and differences between the generational cohorts with respect to their preferences for leader characteristics and behaviors. All generations value leaders who are honest (credible), although this characteristic ranks lower with Gen Y than with the other cohorts. The older generations (Silents and Boomers) tend to be more conservative, while the younger generations tend to be more individualistic in their preferences for leadership behavior. However, there is uncertainty within the literature if this represents an actual difference between the generational cohorts or if it represents a continuum of maturity.

Several of the studies cited used data extracted from large databases that represented 360-degree feedback on supervisors. Sessa et al. (2007) did not include public sector employees in the study; Jurkeiwicz (2000) studied only public employees, although from a relatively small sample. Kunreuther (2003) focused only on social change organizations, which may attract a very distinctive type of employee, and therefore may not be representative of their generational cohorts as a whole. Powell (2005) used college students for his Gen Y sample. Many of the studies included only two or three of the cohorts in the workforce today (Conger, 1997;

Jurkeiwicz, 2000; Kabacoff & Stoffey, 2001; Kunreuther, 2003; O'Bannon, 2001; Powell, 2005; Sessa et al., 2007).

### *Summary of Literature Review*

Organizations today are confronted with a variety of challenges, such as global competition, world market conditions and a much more generationally diverse workforce. To meet these challenges, organizations need good leaders at every level. Although many theories of leadership have been explored in the last century, emphasis in the last several decades has been placed on transformational styles of leadership. Transformational leadership emphasizes the leader's need to motivate, inspire and energize followers, requiring a broad set of communication skills. All styles of leadership rely on communication between leaders and followers. Effective leaders must use interpersonal communication skills to develop relationships with their followers in order to create meaningful shared visions. In today's organization, that means forming connections with a multigenerational workforce. The literature has shown that membership in a particular generational cohort shapes one's attitudes, beliefs and values which has implications in the work environment. Among the dimensions affected in organizational life is leadership – one's most desired traits and behaviors in leaders, as well as one's own leadership behaviors. Thus, effective leaders should recognize these generational preferences and adapt to them accordingly.

### Research Questions

Although there is extensive literature on leadership traits, characteristics and methodologies, there has not been much research linking various aspects of leadership with the different generational cohorts. And while there is much anecdotal rhetoric about the different modes and methods of communication used by the younger generations, there is no research that

directly links generational cohorts with their preferred styles of communication with or from their leaders. Questions which remain to be answered include:

RQ1: What characteristics or traits of leaders are considered most important by a sample of each generational cohort?

RQ2: For each generational cohort, what communication styles are most preferred in their leaders?

This study will help further our understanding of the differences between the four generational cohorts with respect to these important dimensions of organizational life. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology to be used in addressing these questions.

## CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

### Scope

Prior research has shown that members of different generational cohorts can easily be considered separate co-cultures. Each co-culture, in general, shares specific attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors. But little research has been done to determine each cohort's preferences regarding desired leader characteristics, leadership styles and communications practices of their leaders. This study is designed to add to the current body of knowledge in these respects.

With all four generational cohorts working side by side in today's organizations, it is important for leaders and emerging leaders to recognize these differences in order to lead more effectively. The scope of this study focuses on adults (persons 18 and over) in organizational settings, working full time, part time or retired. The study is not limited, however, to any particular type of organization. It was desired to include respondents from both profit and non-profit organizations, both large and small, across a broad range of industries.

Because this study used a non-probability sampling technique (Hoyle, Harris & Judd, 2002) it was not possible to guarantee that each cohort is statistically represented in the data, nor that the respondents portray a truly representative viewpoint for each generation. Given these limitations, it is not advisable or prudent to generalize the results for any given cohort. However, it is believed that the results will be useful in providing a springboard for future research. At a minimum, it is believed that the results will provide leaders and aspiring leaders with sufficient reasons to recognize each cohort as a unique and valuable co-culture within their organization.

### Methodology

The study was conducted via an online survey using the commercially available Survey Monkey tool ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). This product was chosen because of its ease of use,

relatively low cost, and ease of distribution. An initial set of respondents received a link to the survey via an email. The sampling method to be employed is known as a snowball sampling technique (Hoyle et al., 2002, p. 188). This technique begins with a pre-identified set of respondents who meet a specific population criteria – in this case, they represent working adults from all four generational cohorts. The initial set of respondents is then asked to recruit more respondents who meet the same criteria. This pattern of “recruitment” will continue, geometrically increasing the total sample size although not guaranteeing a statistical distribution across all four generational cohorts.

An initial set of respondents received an email with the link to the survey and instructions directly from the author. This group of respondents represents past and present work colleagues, friends, and members of several volunteer organizations who are all personally known by the author. The initial group, which has members from all four cohorts, is a non-random, purposive sample (Rubin, Rubin and Piele, 2005). This group of respondents was asked to forward the email to their own colleagues, friends and associates. The original email contained a brief introduction from the author, indicating the purpose of the research and the desire to have the survey link forwarded to as many members of each cohort as possible within a specified period of time. The email also informed potential respondents of their anonymity, and thanked them for their honest and thoughtful participation. The use of the online survey tool, Survey Monkey, provides only raw data to the researcher, and does not provide information (such as IP addresses) that would allow individual responses to be correlated to the respondent. By using the snowball technique, the identity of respondents beyond the initial set is completely anonymous. The survey tool does not track who has received the link, and who has or has not completed the survey.

The survey consists of several sections, the first of which requests demographic information. Respondents were asked to select the year of their birth from a drop down list; gender; level of education; type of industry in which they work; and organizational role (e.g. supervisory, non-supervisory, executive, etc.).

The second section of the survey focused on determining most preferred leader characteristics/traits. Kouzes and Posner (2002, 2003) have identified 20 leader traits which have been rated in terms of importance by thousands of respondents over more than 20 years. Powell (2005, pp. 179-181) developed a 7-point Likert scale survey instrument based on these 20 traits and using definitions of the traits derived from the Oxford English Dictionary. Powell's scale has been modified to a 5-point Likert scale and is used in the second section of the online survey. One additional question has been added in which respondents are asked to choose (from a drop down list of the 20 leader characteristics) what they consider the most important characteristic.

The third section of the survey focuses on preferences in leadership communication style. This consists of twelve statements regarding leadership communication styles, which are ranked by strength of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. Each of these statements reflects an orientation to a particular leader communication style: authoritarian, democratic, or laissez-faire. The twelve statements were taken directly from the Leadership Communication Style Preference Inventory in Hackman and Johnson (2009, pp. 40-41).

The survey contains instructions for each section to ensure understanding of the scales. Only surveys in which all items have been completed are considered valid and included in the analysis. Responses are grouped by cohort, to determine central tendencies for each cohort's responses to the questions regarding the ranking of leader traits and preferred leader styles. The

aggregated responses from each cohort are then compared against the other cohorts to see how much variance there is between the generations. Chapter 4 further discusses how the valid data responses are analyzed and provides the results of the survey. A copy of the survey, and the text of the email sent to the initial set of respondents, may be found in the Appendix.

### Data Analysis

An internet-based survey link was distributed via email to 86 individuals comprising the full spectrum of generational cohorts. These individuals were asked to forward the email with the survey link to their colleagues; many people from the original group corresponded with the author indicating that they had done so. Since the survey was conducted anonymously, it cannot be determined what percentage of recipients filled out the survey, or how many times it was forwarded. After 9 days, data collection from the survey was terminated and the raw results downloaded from the survey tool. The results were filtered such that only surveys in which all of the questions were answered are included in the data set.

## CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

## Results of the Study

A total of 178 fully completed surveys were collected. The generational cohorts were represented as follows:

Silent generation	19 (10.67%)
Baby Boomers	97 (54.49%)
Generation X	44 (24.72%)
Generation Y	18 (10.11%)

Additional demographic information that was collected (but not used for further analysis) showed that more males than females responded; a large majority were working full time; nearly half had either a Master's degree or PhD; and about half of the respondents were in supervisory positions. The respondents represent a wide array of industries, including for profit, non-profit organizations, government and military.

*Aggregated Results*

The first set of questions asked respondents to indicate the level of importance they assigned to each of the 20 leader traits. These levels were assigned a numeric weight, with Extremely Important = 5 and Not important at all = 1. This allowed calculation of a weighted average for each trait. The weighted averages for all 20 traits for the entire survey population are shown in Table 1. The four traits with the highest weight were Dependable, Honest, Broad-minded, and Competent.

<b>Leader Trait</b>	<b>Weighted Average Importance</b>
Ambitious	3.49
Broad-minded	4.67
Caring	4.29
Competent	4.62

Co-operative	4.48
Courageous	4.05
Dependable	4.83
Determined	4.02
Fair-minded	4.58
Forward-looking	4.51
Honest	4.69
Imaginative	3.93
Independent	3.81
Inspiring.	3.88
Intelligent	4.40
Loyal	4.47
Mature	4.33
Self-controlled	4.29
Straightforward	4.33
Supportive	4.47

**Table 1: Importance for leader to possess a trait**

When asked to choose the single most important trait, the rankings appeared slightly different. The top five choices were Honest (19.7%), Competent (12.4%), Fair-minded (9.0%) and Broad-minded and Inspiring each with 8.4%. These results are somewhat consistent with Kouzes and Posner's (2002) findings for the top four characteristics admired in leaders. Their findings were (in order) Honest, Forward-looking, Competent, and Inspiring. Table 2 shows the results of the current survey in ranked order, followed by the rank order of each trait in the Kouzes and Posner (2002, p. 25) results.

<b>Current survey rank order</b>	<b>Current Survey</b>	<b>Current Survey % chosen</b>	<b>Kouzes &amp; Posner 2002 rank order</b>
1	Honest	19.7%	1
2	Competent	12.4%	3
3	Fair-minded	9.0%	6
4	Broad-minded	8.4%	7
5	Inspiring	8.4%	4
6	Forward-looking	7.9%	2
7	Dependable	6.2%	10
8	Intelligent	5.6%	5
9	Supportive	3.9%	8

10	Determined	3.4%	12
11	Co-operative	2.8%	11
12	Straightforward	2.8%	9
13	Self-controlled	2.2%	19
14	Ambitious	1.7%	14
15	Caring	1.7%	16
16	Imaginative	1.1%	13
17	Independent	1.1%	20
18	Loyal	1.1%	18
19	Mature	0.6%	17
20	Courageous	0.0%	15

**Table 2: Ranked order of most important leader characteristic**

The last portion of the survey focused on leadership communication styles. The twelve statements were taken directly from the Leadership Communication Style Preferences Inventory (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, pp. 40-41). Each statement corresponds to one of three styles, but the statements were listed somewhat randomly. Table 3 shows the mapping of statement number to leader communication style, with the four statements corresponding to each style grouped together. As with the prior section of the survey, the responses were tabulated using weighted averages – the higher the weighted average, the higher the level of agreement with a statement and the more an individual is aligned with that particular style of communication.

<b>Questionnaire Statement Number</b>	<b>Communication Style</b>	<b>Weighted Average</b>	<b>Average for Style</b>
<b>1</b>	Authoritarian	1.92	
<b>5</b>	Authoritarian	2.15	
<b>8</b>	Authoritarian	2.76	
<b>11</b>	Authoritarian	2.16	2.25
<b>2</b>	Democratic	4.31	
<b>4</b>	Democratic	3.04	
<b>9</b>	Democratic	4.58	
<b>10</b>	Democratic	4.13	4.02

<b>3</b>	Laissez-faire	2.31	
<b>6</b>	Laissez-faire	2.46	
<b>7</b>	Laissez-faire	3.39	
<b>12</b>	Laissez-faire	3.24	2.85

**Table 3: Leadership communication style weighted averages**

As can be seen from Table 3, the Democratic style of leader communication was the most preferred while the Authoritarian style was the least preferred for the entire population of the survey. This result is consistent with the trend towards more participative forms of management, such as transformational and servant leadership, and away from the command and control styles and the Theory X types of leadership.

*Results by Generational Cohort*

The raw data from the surveys was grouped into each generational cohort according to the birth year or the respondents: Silent generation (1925-1945); Baby Boomers (1946-1963); Gen X (1964-1978); and Gen Y (1979-1991). Data from each cohort was then analyzed separately by calculating weighted averages for the 20 leader traits and the 3 leadership communication style preferences, and by determining percentages of responses for the most important leader trait. The results were then combined into a set of tables showing the data for each cohort side-by-side. Table 4 shows the weighted averages for the degree of importance for each of the 20 leader traits, along with the aggregated value for the entire population.

<b>Trait/Characteristic</b>	<b>Weighted Average</b>				
	<b>Silent</b>	<b>Baby Boomer</b>	<b>Gen X</b>	<b>Gen Y</b>	<b>Aggregated Value</b>
<b>Ambitious</b>	3.63	3.38	3.43	4.11	3.49
<b>Broad-minded</b>	4.89	4.59	4.73	4.72	4.67
<b>Caring</b>	4.58	4.29	4.27	4.06	4.29
<b>Competent</b>	4.63	4.64	4.66	4.44	4.62
<b>Co-operative</b>	4.84	4.49	4.50	3.94	4.48
<b>Courageous</b>	3.95	4.07	4.09	3.94	4.05

<b>Dependable</b>	4.95	4.87	4.84	4.50	4.83
<b>Determined</b>	4.05	4.03	4.07	3.78	4.02
<b>Fair-minded</b>	4.63	4.58	4.55	4.61	4.58
<b>Forward-looking</b>	4.58	4.49	4.57	4.33	4.51
<b>Honest</b>	4.74	4.73	4.68	4.44	4.69
<b>Imaginative</b>	4.16	3.91	3.98	3.72	3.93
<b>Independent</b>	4.16	3.65	3.95	3.94	3.81
<b>Inspiring</b>	3.89	3.76	4.20	3.72	3.88
<b>Intelligent</b>	4.53	4.36	4.52	4.17	4.40
<b>Loyal</b>	4.79	4.55	4.36	3.94	4.47
<b>Mature</b>	4.58	4.38	4.30	3.89	4.33
<b>Self-controlled</b>	4.53	4.32	4.16	4.17	4.29
<b>Straightforward</b>	4.47	4.32	4.32	4.22	4.33
<b>Supportive</b>	4.63	4.46	4.48	4.28	4.47

**Table 4: Importance for leader to possess a trait, by generational cohort**

The Silent generation placed the greatest degree of importance on a leader who is Dependable, Broad-minded, Co-operative and Loyal. The least important traits were Courageous, Inspiring and Ambitious. Baby Boomers also placed the greatest degree of importance on Dependable, followed by Honest, Competent, Broad-minded and Fair-minded. Least important traits for the Boomers were Inspiring, Independent and Ambitious. Gen X's most important traits were Dependable, Broad-minded, Honest and Competent, whereas their least important traits were Imaginative, Independent and Ambitious. For Gen Y, the most important traits are Broad-minded, Fair-minded, Dependable, Competent and Honest. Least important traits to the Gen Y's are Mature, Determined, Imaginative and Inspiring. While there was some agreement in the top 4 or 5 and the bottom 3 or 4 traits, there were some definite variances between the generations with respect to how strongly they view each trait's importance in a leader.

When asked to choose the single most important trait for a leader, the results were somewhat different than what was reflected in the weighted averages, similar to what was seen in the aggregated data. Table 5 shows the percentage of respondents in each generational cohort

who chose a given trait as the most important. The Silent generation chose Competent, followed by Fair-minded as the most important traits although neither of these two traits were weighted ranked in the top four in terms of importance. As can be seen in Table 5, nine of the traits were not chosen by any of the members of the Silent generation. The Baby Boomers overwhelmingly chose Honest as the most important trait; Competent, Broad-minded and Dependable were chosen behind Honest, which makes these results (although not the order) consistent with those traits ranked as important for a leader to possess. Gen X chose Inspiring as the trait that is most important for a leader to possess, although it ranked 14<sup>th</sup> in terms of the weighted rankings. Gen X also chose Competent and Forward-looking, which is somewhat consistent with the traits given the highest weighted rankings. Finally, Gen Y chose Fair-minded as their most important trait, which compared well with the weighted rankings. The trait Courageous was not selected by any of the generations; Caring, Independent and Loyal were not chosen by any member of the Silent generation, Gen X or Gen Y, but were selected by a small percentage of Baby Boomers.

Trait/Characteristic	% of selection				Aggregated
	Silent	Baby Boomer	Gen X	Gen Y	
<b>Ambitious</b>	0.00	0.00	2.27	11.11	1.7%
<b>Broad-minded</b>	5.26	11.34	4.55	5.56	8.4%
<b>Caring</b>	0.00	3.09	0.00	0.00	1.7%
<b>Competent</b>	21.05	12.37	11.36	5.56	12.4%
<b>Co-operative</b>	5.26	1.03	4.55	5.56	2.8%
<b>Courageous</b>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.0%
<b>Dependable</b>	5.26	7.22	4.55	5.56	6.2%
<b>Determined</b>	0.00	2.06	9.09	0.00	3.4%
<b>Fair-minded</b>	15.79	5.15	9.09	22.22	9.0%
<b>Forward-looking</b>	5.26	7.22	11.36	5.56	7.9%
<b>Honest</b>	10.53	28.87	9.09	5.56	19.7%
<b>Imaginative</b>	0.00	1.03	2.27	0.00	1.1%
<b>Independent</b>	0.00	2.06	0.00	0.00	1.1%
<b>Inspiring</b>	10.53	6.19	13.64	5.56	8.4%
<b>Intelligent</b>	10.53	4.12	6.82	5.56	5.6%
<b>Loyal</b>	0.00	2.06	0.00	0.00	1.1%
<b>Mature</b>	0.00	1.03	0.00	0.00	0.6%

<b>Self-controlled</b>	5.26	2.06	0.00	5.56	2.2%
<b>Straightforward</b>	0.00	1.03	4.55	11.11	2.8%
<b>Supportive</b>	5.26	2.06	6.82	5.56	3.9%

**Table 5: Most Important Trait (as percentage of selections) for each generation**

The preferred leadership communication style for each generation was consistent with the aggregated weighted averages shown earlier in this chapter. All four of the generations chose the Democratic style of communication as their most preferred style, and Authoritarian as their least preferred style. All four generations had the highest level of agreement with the Democratic style statement #9 (A leader should keep followers up to date on issues affecting the work group.). All four generations also had the least level of agreement with the Authoritarian style statement #1 (A leader should set direction without input from followers.). The weighting for the Authoritarian style showed a very minor decreasing and linear trend in level of agreement in going from the Silent generation to Gen Y. There were no other weighted averages either for leadership communication style or for any individual statement which followed a similar trend. It is interesting to note that Gen Y had the highest ranking for the Democratic style of leader communication among the four generations, along with the lowest ranking for the Authoritarian style.

Statement #	Leadership Communication Style	Weighted Average							
		Silent		Baby Boomer		Gen X		Gen Y	
<b>S1</b>	Authoritarian	2.05		1.96		1.75		1.83	
<b>S5</b>	Authoritarian	2.32		2.19		1.95		2.17	
<b>S8</b>	Authoritarian	2.58		2.67		2.84		2.78	
<b>S11</b>	Authoritarian	2.21	2.29	2.16	2.25	2.23	2.19	1.83	2.15
<b>S2</b>	Democratic	4.21		4.32		4.30		4.39	
<b>S4</b>	Democratic	3.05		2.97		3.16		3.11	
<b>S9</b>	Democratic	4.47		4.61		4.45		4.56	
<b>S10</b>	Democratic	4.37	4.03	4.05	3.99	4.07	4.00	4.44	4.13
<b>S3</b>	Laissez-faire	2.32		2.24		2.32		2.44	
<b>S6</b>	Laissez-faire	3.00		2.35		2.45		2.44	

<b>S7</b>	Laissez-faire	3.37		3.31		3.59		3.33	
<b>S12</b>	Laissez-faire	3.11	2.95	3.10	2.75	3.52	2.97	3.11	2.83

**Table 5: Preferred Leadership Communication Style (Weighted averages)**

#### Discussion

The survey conducted in this study found that the traits chosen as most important for a leader to possess are in general agreement with the studies conducted by Kouzes and Posner (2002), as seen in Table 2. The largest percentage of respondents in this study, consistent with Kouzes and Posner (2002) and Arsenault (2004), chose Honest most frequently as the most important trait for a leader. Most other traits had a difference in ranking of only 2 or 3 places, which indicates that the population responding to this survey is relatively “representative”. Some variations in the rankings might be explained by the differences in how data was collected; the current survey asked respondents to choose only one trait, whereas the Kouzes and Posner study asked respondents to list the top seven traits (ibid, p. 25). Arsenault asked respondents to rank order the twenty traits.

When looking at the data presented for the generational cohorts, the results of the survey show that the four generations have some similarities with respect to how they perceive the importance of leader traits. While the rankings of the various traits, based on the weighted averages, are slightly different, all four of the cohorts included Dependable, Broad-minded and Honest within the top 5 traits.

However, the results also indicate that there are differences between the generations with respect to the relative strength of the importance they assign to each trait. For instance, the Silent generation gave a 4.95 weighted average to Dependable – nearly a perfect score for being considered Extremely Important. Gen Y gave Dependable a 4.5, which is mid-way between Important and Extremely Important. The Silents placed high importance on Loyal (4.79), which

is consistent with loyalty being among the attributes often recognized for this generation (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000). Baby Boomers scored Loyal with a 4.55, Gen X with a 4.36 and Gen Y with a very distant 3.94. These results are consistent with the study performed by Arsenault (2004). The decreasing trend in the importance of Loyal is not surprising, based on the general characteristics of each cohort as described in Chapter 2. Gen Y gave Ambitious a comparatively high weighting (4.11); the other 3 cohorts ranked this trait as their lowest, with rankings of 3.63, 3.38 and 3.43 for Silents, Boomers and Gen X respectively. This is in contrast to the findings of Arsenault, who observed that both Gen X and Gen Y had stronger preferences for Ambitious than Silents and Boomers. The definition of Ambitious provided in the survey (Thrusting after honor or advancement; aspiring to high positions; strongly desirous and eager to be or so something) apparently finds a resonance with Gen Y, who are interested in formal recognition (Busch et al. 2008), and have a strong desire to get things done (Arsenault, 2004). The data also showed a different level of “dispersion” in the degrees of importance. Between the highest and lowest weighted trait, the Baby Boomers had the largest difference, with a spread of 1.49 points. Silents had 1.32 points; Gen X had 1.41 and Gen Y had 1.0. This is consistent with Powell (2005) who found that there was not much variation in Gen Y’s rankings of the 20 characteristics.

The tabulated results for the most preferred leader trait (Table 5) showed even more variation between the generational cohorts. The Silent generation was twice as likely to prefer a leader who was Competent than one who is Honest. This preference was exactly reversed for Baby Boomers. Gen Y chose Competent with the same frequency as Honest, but this choice was four times less frequent than their top choice of Fair-minded. Only the Boomers chose Honest more frequently than Competent among all four cohorts. In fact, in contrast to the other studies

cited in which all populations chose Honest as their most important trait, only the Boomers chose Honest as their most preferred trait. Gen Y is primarily concerned with fairness, choosing Fair-minded twice as frequently as Ambitious and Straightforward, and four times more often than any other trait (7 traits were not selected at all). Gen X's top 3 preferred traits, Inspiring, Competent and Forward-looking, were more closely ranked than for other cohorts. These choices align Gen X most closely with the rank order of traits found by Kouzes and Posner (2002).

As pointed out earlier, all four generations showed a preference for the Democratic style of leadership communication, and the least preference for an Authoritarian style. The slight trend indicated in the decreasing preference for Authoritarian style with successive generational cohorts is consistent with what one would expect. Although the trend in recent years has been toward more participative (democratic) styles of leadership, the Silent generation started their careers with a command and control (more authoritarian) style. Clearly, this style is losing favor.

Within each of the leadership communication styles, all four generations had the highest ratings for the same statements as well as the lowest ratings for the same statements. Within the Authoritarian style, the highest level of agreement (least level of disagreement) was for statement #8 (A leader should closely monitor rules and regulations – punishing those who break rules.). Gen X and Gen Y both ranked this statement higher than either the Silent generation or Boomers. Statement #8 may be construed as a transactional leadership trait, specifically contingent reward. According to Avolio et al. (1999), this behavior may provide a foundation for building trust, by honoring agreements and treating people consistently. This statement may be interpreted as a degree of fairness, i.e. those who don't play by the rules should be punished, indicating the younger two generations align more closely with ensuring that all people follow

the rules or accept the consequences. Within the Laissez-faire style of communication, the highest level of agreement for all four generations was with statement #7 (A leader should encourage followers to initiate decision making without first seeking approval). All four generations had a higher level of agreement with this particular statement than with statement #4 within the Democratic style (A leader should use a task force or committee rather than making a decision alone). This indicates that all four cohorts perceive independent thinking at the follower level as more desirable than the overhead that could be involved in a task-force approach to decision making at the leader level. In fact, the Boomers had a slight disagreement with statement #4, the only generation who had a less than positive response to any factor within the Democratic style of leadership communication. The lowest level of agreement in the Laissez-faire style of communication for all four cohorts was statement #3 (A leader should set direction based on the wishes of the followers). This indicates that all four cohorts desire a leader who can set a course based on follower inputs, but not at the whim of individual followers.

The four generational cohorts had a nearly identical order in terms of their level of agreement with the twelve statements. The order of strength of agreement for Silents and Gen Y was statements #9, 10, 2, 7, 12, 4 (the first three are Democratic; the next two are Laissez-faire, and the last is Democratic). For Boomers and Gen X, the order was #9, 2, 10, 7, 12, and 4. Thus, all four generations value a more participative style of leadership communication, in which followers are involved in decision making, are kept informed of issues, decisions and rationale for those decisions, and are given latitude for making decisions on their own within a proscribed set of goals.

On the least preferred end of the scale, the order is not quite as consistent but still very similar between the four cohorts. In order from least agreement to more agreement with the

statements, Boomers and Gen Y ordered them #1, 11, 5, 3, 6 and 8. For Silents, the order of statements 8 and 6 was reversed; for Gen X, the order of statements 5 and 11 was reversed.

There is good agreement that all four cohorts prefer a leader who gets input from followers for decision making and evaluating progress, establishes a friendly relationship with followers, and engages in healthy day-to-day communication with them. Although the results of the study show that all four generational cohorts preferred the same style of leadership communication, there are some deviations in the levels of agreement with each statement from one generation to the next which indicates that one size does not fit all with respect to an approach to communicating with the different generations.

This study shows that there are differences between the four generational cohorts with respect to preferred leader traits. Although all four generations prefer the Democratic style of leadership communication, there are some differences in the strength of that preference and within the individual parameters that constitute that style. Chapter 5 provides a summary and conclusions that may be drawn from the results of this study.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Each generation in today's workforce functions as a unique co-culture by virtue of the events and conditions they experienced in their formative years. Members of each co-culture share a relatively enduring set of beliefs, values and attitudes, including perceptions about concepts such as leadership. The current study showed that each of the four generational cohorts studied places different values on specific leader traits. While the study showed that all four generations preferred the Democratic style of leadership communication, there were subtle differences in the strength of agreement or disagreement with specific statements from one generation to the next.

Using the leader traits identified by Kouzes and Posner (2002), the respondents all provided agreement as to the importance of these traits. The highest weighted average was 4.95 (5.00 represents Extremely Important) given to Dependable by the Silent generation. The lowest weighted average was 3.38 – only mildly above Neutral, given to Ambitious by the Baby Boomers. It is significant to note that none of the traits were deemed unimportant by any generation as an aggregate, although individual responses may have been Neutral or lower.

The Silent generation expects their leaders to embody most of the 20 traits. Using a criterion of weighted average greater than 4.5 (midway between Important and Extremely Important), the Silent generation ranked 13 of the 20 traits in this range: Dependable, Broad-minded, Co-operative, Loyal, Honest, Competent, Fair-minded, Supportive, Caring, Forward-looking, Mature, Intelligent and Self-controlled. This seems appropriate for the generation who values consistency, loyalty, rank commensurate with authority (Zemke et al., 2000) and who entered the workforce anticipating job security for life. The Silents chose Competent as the

single most important trait for a leader to possess, followed by Fair-minded. The Silents expect their leaders to be good at what they do, above all else.

Using the same criteria (weighted average > 4.5), the Baby Boomers selected only 6 of the 20 traits: Dependable, Honest, Competent, Broad-minded, Fair-minded and Loyal. Zemke et al. indicate that the Boomers tend to be team players who are likely to want to build consensus, mapping well to the desire for dependability, competence, fair-mindedness and loyalty. The Boomers also helped lead the charge for equality in the workplace, lending credence to their desire for broad-mindedness and fairness. This generation chose Honest as the single most important trait for a leader to have, with Competent being second by a 4:1 margin. Boomers clearly want leaders who walk the talk.

Gen X ranked 8 traits above 4.5: Dependable, Broad-minded, Honest, Competent, Forward-looking, Fair-minded, Intelligent and Co-operative. Dubbed as a hero-less, independent and self-reliant generation, Gen X does NOT include loyalty in their most important traits in contrast to the two older generations. However, Karp and Sirias (2001) found Gen X to also have a strong team orientation, perhaps more so than the Boomers, which explains the relative congruence between the traits selected by Gen X and the Boomers. Gen X selected Inspiring as their single most important leader trait, although the percentage of selection was much smaller than other generations' top choices. Gen X is perhaps looking to their leaders to be the heroes they otherwise do not have.

By sharp contrast to the older generations, Gen Y gave very high importance to only 3 traits: Broad-minded, Fair-minded and Dependable. Gen Y values fitting in (Zemke et al.), and wants to be valued for who they are and respected by their leaders (Broad-minded and Fair-minded). As noted in Chapter 4, Gen Y had the least amount of dispersion in their rankings of

the traits. They did not rank traits many very highly; they also ranked 8 traits between Neutral and Important – many more than any other generation (3 for Silents and Gen X, 4 for Boomers). The single most important trait for a leader to possess for Gen Y is Fair-minded, which is congruent with their rankings in terms of importance.

That all four generations have a strong preference for the democratic style of leadership communication is not surprising, given the trend in recent decades toward the more participative forms of management and the flattened hierarchies in many organizations. But there are still some factors that distinguish one generation from the next.

Of the four statements that characterize the democratic style, statement #4 had the least level of agreement for all four generations. Although the democratic style is preferred, the use of a task force for decision making by the leader is less preferable than the other democratic statements. By grouping the remaining 3 statements within the democratic style (statements 2, 9 and 10), this style of leadership communication focuses on consulting with followers for decision making, then keeping them informed of the rationale for any decisions, and how followers will be impacted. For all generations, it is important for the leader and follower to develop an interpersonal relationship such that these communication acts can be effective. The two communication theories described in Chapter 2, Watzlawick's Pragmatic theory and Pearce and Cronen's Coordinated Management of Meaning, both suggest a mutually created, constantly evolving relationship between the communicants. Both theories also propose that the creation of meaning relies on that relationship. The interpretation of messages from the leader, i.e. the creation of meaning, such as informing followers of issues and discussing rationale for decisions, will be rooted in the relationship that has been established between the leader and follower according to the Pragmatic theory. Calculating the aggregated weighted averages these 3 items

(statements 2, 9 and 10) for each generation shows a decreasing trend in importance from Silents (4.34) to Boomers (4.33) to Gen X (4.28). But Gen Y (4.46) has a much stronger desire to be kept in the information loop. This seems consistent for a generation that has had access to information 24/7 all of their lives.

All four generations had a moderate level of agreement with two of the statements from the Laissez-faire style of leader communication. Statements 7 and 12 describe a leader who encourages independent decision making from the followers, and allows broad latitude for how goals are to be achieved. This type of leadership assumes a high degree of trust between the leader and follower, and a high level of autonomy or independence for the follower. Pincus and DeBonis (cited in Kinnick & Parton, 2005) have already asserted that leadership is based on the use of communication processes to build relationships by increasing trust and understanding. For these two communication style statements, the Silents, Boomers and Gen Y were very similar in their degree of agreement (3.24, 3.21 and 3.22 respectively for the average of the two statements). However, Gen X (3.56) had a much stronger level of agreement, indicating a higher interest in autonomy. This is in line with the literature, which finds Gen X to be highly independent (Zemke et al., 2000) and results oriented, as opposed to process oriented (Karp & Sirias, 2001). Trust is certainly a feature that requires a strong mutual understanding to be developed between people in a relationship, which will evolve over time as suggested by the Pragmatic theory.

Statement 6, which is also in the Laissez-faire style of leader communication, received a neutral level of agreement from the Silent generation, and a mild disagreement from the other generations. Statement 6 states that the leader should let the follower initiate informal, day-to-day communication. The disagreement with this statement tends to indicate that most followers

want the leader to take more initiative, and for communication to be more of a two-way process. Baby Boomers felt more strongly about this than the other generations, indicating a desire for a more congenial relationship between leader and follower. This fits well with their propensity for building both consensus and relationships (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Zemke et al., 2000). The disagreement with statement 6 fits well within the “management” parameter of the CMM theory, which deals with establishing rules of engagement within a relationship. Leaders and followers will develop formal or informal rules for when communication is appropriate, who should initiate the communication and how the communication should occur.

The unilateral rejection of the Authoritarian style of leadership communication substantiates the idea that followers desire to build a relationship with their leader, rather than have one who is isolated from them and simply communicates decisions or information. Statements 1, 5 and 11 within this style describe a leader who does not develop two-way communication with followers, essentially distancing him/her self from the followers. The Pragmatic theory would describe this type of communication as complementary, which emphasizes dominance or power distance between leaders and followers. Clearly, all four generations prefer a more symmetrical form of communication, which emphasizes equality and allows for building better relationships. Averaging these three statements for each generation shows a linear trend towards greater disagreement when going from the Silent generation (2.19) to Gen Y (1.94).

#### Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted using a non-probability sampling technique, and therefore should not be used to generalize the results with respect to specific statistical differences between the four cohorts. The results are best interpreted as showing evidence that each generation feels

more strongly about certain leader traits and aligns more closely with specific elements of leader communication behavior.

The sampling technique used in the study yielded a reasonable number of responses; however, the number of respondents for both the Silent generation and Gen Y was very small (19 and 18 respectively). These small sub-populations could potentially provide an inaccurate representation of the preferred leader traits and leadership communication styles. Further studies would benefit by more judiciously targeting survey respondents within each cohort, and allowing more time for responses to be collected.

Differences in the strength of importance of each leader trait between the four generations were assessed using only a comparison of the weighted averages. The same technique was also used for analyzing the level of agreement with each of the twelve leadership communication style statements. Using this method, general statements can be made with respect to the relative ordering of preferences and the relative magnitude of agreement or importance. However, the use of more advanced statistical analysis, such as ANOVA or MANOVA, would be necessary to determine if the difference in the weighted averages is statistically significant between the four cohorts. These analyses would provide a more definitive understanding of how much of a “gap” there is between the generations. However, these analyses would not add more insight into showing the differences between the generations with respect to their top choice of leader trait, since that was reported as a percentage of the population that chose a given trait. This result is more affected by the small sample sizes of the Gen Y and Silent generation. Larger sample sizes for these two populations would enhance the relevance of the data.

### Recommendations for Further Study

The present study shows that there are differences in preferred leader traits between the four generations, but the use of a non-probability sampling technique and the small sample sizes for the Silent generation and Gen Y do not allow generalizations to be made about specific preferences for each generation. Future studies may be done in which a probability sampling technique is used, and a pre-determined number of respondents in each generation are sampled. It is recommended that the results of such a study be analyzed using ANOVA or MANOVA to ascertain the statistical significance of the differences between the generations on any given trait.

The survey instrument used to determine preferred leader communication styles did not result in showing a difference in preference across the four generations. The three styles of communication represented in this instrument did not allow for enough differentiation, nor probe for subtle differences in how members of each generation wish to engage in communication with their leaders. Other survey instruments found in the literature regarding leader communication focused on such things as skills in a particular aspect of communication (such as listening), but were intended to be used to rate an individual rather than to probe for the respondents preferences. Further research may benefit from obtaining or developing a survey tool that is more specific to which communication skills or techniques a respondent feels are most important for a leader to possess, and analyzing for any differences in such preferences across the generations.

### Conclusion

Although in some cases the differences between the generations are subtle, this study did find that each generation feels more strongly about certain leader traits than others. While the study did not find that there was a difference between the generations with respect preferred

leadership communication style, it did find that there were differences between the generations with respect to their alignment with specific elements of leader communication behavior. Such differences are indicative that each generation represents a unique co-culture. As with other dimensions of cultural diversity in the workplace, leaders should recognize that these differences exist, and be aware of how they might affect the leader-follower relationship. While further elucidation of generational differences regarding the importance of specific communication skills or techniques might be warranted, the present study provides evidence that leaders must be capable of developing relationships with their followers by using effective interpersonal communication.

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