Leadership Traits in the Construction Industry and Alignment with Millennial and Generation Z

Jason Miller[1]
[1]California State University Sacramento

The construction industry faces a shortage of skilled labor due to challenges associated with attracting and retaining quality people. Millennials and the Z generation represent the largest group currently entering the job force and the industry's best means for resolving its labor shortage. This study seeks to discover Millennial and Generation Z construction workers' perceptions of the most common leadership traits among leaders in the construction industry based on their personal experiences and interactions, the traits these workers perceive to be desirable among site leaders, determine if they are in alignment and if the industry is positioned to successfully recruit, lead, and retain members of these cohorts, and provide implications and recommendations based on the results. To accomplish this goal the paper performs a literature review and qualitative study utilizing a phenomenological method of conducting semi-structured interviews and analyzing the results. An interpretation of the findings indicates that the general approach to leadership in construction does not align with what is suggested to be effective for the upcoming generations, is inconsistent, some of the leaders in the industry lack emotional control, and the industry lacks training to prepare its leaders. This implies that the current leadership is not in an optimal position to recruit, lead, or retain members of the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts. Based on these findings the paper concludes by recommending a comprehensive and extensive training program that includes communication and people management that would place them in a better position to do so.
Keywords: Construction, Leadership, Millennial, Generation Z

Introduction

With increasing demands for new infrastructure and a decreased availability of skilled construction workers, the need to recruit and retain workers is becoming critical (Welfare et al., 2021). According to the U.S. Department of Labor occupational employment projections, an estimated 646,100 additional workers will be hired by 2032 to fulfill the economic needs for construction work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). A combination of aging workers expected to leave the workforce and a decrease in young people pursuing construction will likely prevent the companies within the industry from filling those needed jobs to keep up with demand (Morello et al., 2018). If the industry cannot fill the projected hiring needs it may prevent the industry from meeting socioeconomic demands for housing and infrastructure. The Millennial and Z Generation cohorts represent the industry's best source for filling its hiring needs as suggested by the US Department of Labor occupational employment projections (2023). This study seeks to discover Millennial and Generation Z construction workers' perceptions of the most common leadership traits among leaders in the construction industry based on their personal experiences and interactions, the traits these workers

perceive to be desirable among site leaders, determine if they are alignment and if the industry is positioned to successfully recruit, lead, and retain members of these cohorts, and provide implications and recommendations based on the results. To accomplish this goal the paper performs a literature review and qualitative study utilizing a phenomenological method of conducting semi-structured interviews and analyzing the results.

The literature reviewed provides a foundational definition of leadership and a leader, explores the leadership desires of the Millennial and Z generations, and the leadership approaches in construction. It does not directly study Millennial and Generation Z cohorts' perceptions of the leadership approach within the construction industry or what they desire in construction leadership. This represents a gap in the literature and an area of study that could significantly advance the knowledge base of leadership in the construction industry by determining whether it is prepared to fill its job needs and effectively recruit, retain, and lead members of the incoming cohorts. An improved understanding of incoming generations may enhance the industry's ability to support its current employees and recruit additional employees (Simmons et al., 2018).

The semi-structured interviews are based on two research questions. The research questions for this study include: what are Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z construction professionals' perceptions, based on personal experiences and interactions, of common leadership traits among leaders (Project Superintendents and Project Managers) in the construction industry; and what traits are perceived by Generation X (Millennial) and Generation Z construction professionals to be effective for leaders? These results of the interviews are analyzed to determine if the perceived leadership approach is in alignment with the desired leadership approach, and the implications on the industry's ability to recruit, lead, and retain members of these generational cohorts.

Literature Review

This section reviews some of the prominent literature on leadership, the Millennial and Z generation cohorts, and leadership approaches in the construction industry. The literature is analyzed to discover common themes that are used to provide a foundational definition of leadership and a leader, explore the leadership desires of the Millennial and Z generations, and the leadership approaches in construction. The information ascertained between the aforementioned subject areas is used to draw inferences between the current leadership style in construction and its ability to recruit, lead, and retain Millennials and Generation Z. The literature is also analyzed to discover any gaps that are utilized to provide purpose for this study.

According to Northouse (2021), leadership contains the following components; leadership is a process, leadership involves influence, leadership occurs in groups, and leadership involves common goals. Process refers to the process of behavioral influence utilized by leaders, and is highlighted by transformational and transactional leadership. Transactional leadership focuses on the exchange between leaders and followers, and transformational leadership describes how leaders inspire followers to accomplish great things (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2021). Influence refers to the influential behaviors of leaders used to influence a group to take action towards achieving a goal, and is a focus on what they do and how they act (Hemphill & Coons, 1957; Northouse, 2021). Groups refers to the behavior of a leader when directing group activities, and suggests that leadership is a process in which activities of the many are organized in a specific direction by one (Bogardus, 1934; Hemphill, 1949). Goals refer to the acts of leaders to influence others towards shared goals, and goals are used to influence a group to achieve a goal (Northouse, 2021; Rost, 1993).

Kouzes and Posner (2006) suggest that leaders engage in five practices; model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. If leaders want to gain commitment and achieve the highest standards, they must model the behavior they expect from

others; leaders possess a recognizable and strong sense of character that acts as a moral imperative to their actions and drives them to meet outcomes personally and organizationally (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). The vision serves as a guide for where the organization is and where it wants to go, and arises from reflection on key causes and goals, placing them on personal values and perceived social needs, and abstracting the key causes contributing to the attainment of these goals (Nanus, 1995; Strange & Mumford, 2002). Leaders challenge the process by being critical of the ways an organization does business and continuously searching for opportunities and innovative ways to improve (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Kouzes & Posner, 2006). They enable others to act through trust which forms the basis for the effective functioning of the organization by building a culture in which people know that everyone will do their part well (Bennis, 1984; Kouzes & Posner, 2006). Encouraging the heart refers to the efforts of a leader to give pace and energy to the workforce by paying attention to follower's needs and the importance of the leader-follower relationship (Bennis, 1984; Northouse, 2021).

Karl Mannheim (1952) introduced the concept of generations in 1927 and defined generations as units that respond collectively to a set of social conditions that develop their consciousness and sense of belonging and identity (Mannheim, 1952). He suggests that all later experiences receive their meaning from this original view of the world (Mannheim, 1952). Millennials have a relationship with technology that influences the way they know the world, and their positive experience inside organizations and institutions during their school years has influenced the way they interact (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). They seem hesitant to commit fully to an organization, prefer teamwork and open communication, like to be rewarded regularly, and have become reliant on technology (Stewart et al., 2017). They believe that the supervisory relationship is a vital most important work value (Chen & Choi, 2008). They prefer leaders who choose interpersonal relationships, listen carefully, and give personalized attention and frequent communication, and expect employers to allow them to blend work with the rest of their lives, desire employment that provides an opportunity to make new friends, learn new skills, and connect to a larger purpose (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). The literature on Generation Z is in an emerging phase, but some of the initial studies indicate that they share many traits with the Millennial Generation, but also bring new patterns of behavior (Chillakuri, 2020; Schroth, 2019). This generation wants their ideas to be valued, are reliant on technology, want open communication and timely feedback, flexible working arrangements, and a relational approach to leadership (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018; Chillakuri, 2020; Scroth, 2019).

The literature reviewed suggests that the project-based nature of the construction industry makes it a special and unique industry, the industry has a significant need to recruit and retain workers, the industry's approach remains largely traditional, and this approach may be short-sighted. A construction project is composed of several organizations, individuals, and teams from different parent organizations and/or departments brought together, and after the project, project teams are disintegrated and members return to their parent organization and/or departments (Ali et al., 2020). Despite the importance of leadership and unique conditions in the industry, it appears that comprehensive and industry-specific research on leadership in the construction industry is limited (Toor and Ofori 2008). With increasing demands for new infrastructure and a decreased availability of skilled construction workers, the need to recruit and retain workers is becoming critical (Welfare et al., 2021). A combination of aging workers expected to leave the workforce and a decrease in young people pursuing construction will likely prevent the companies within the industry from filling those needed jobs to keep up with demand (Morello et al., 2018). Despite significant changes in business and management practices, the construction industry remains largely traditional (Toor & Ofori, 2008). To prevent the breakdown of stability and achieve meaningful goals, leaders seek to control tasks and activities by focusing on vertical forms of leadership (Graham et al., 2020). This approach may be short-sighted with leaders primarily focusing on day-to-day work, activities management, and achieving short-term goals (Graham et al., 2020). The evolution of project social dynamics involving

multiple teams adapting to diverse demands and on-site conditions requires a new approach (Graham et al., 2020).

Based on the literature reviewed in this study it appears that there may be a divergence between the predominant leadership style in construction. What is perceived to be by Millennials and Generation Z. This was accomplished by connecting individual and separate studies that focused on either the perceived leadership styles in construction or what is perceived to be effective in recruiting, retaining, and leading Millennials and Generation Z. Still, the studies used did not directly study leadership traits in construction as perceived by these generations. This study contributes to the body of literature by filling a portion of this gap within the literature by conducting semi-structured interviews with the Millennial and Z generations to determine the perceived leadership traits of construction leaders, and then compare the results directly with what the previous literature suggests is effective in leading these generations.

Methodology

This study conducts semi-structured interviews, which are recorded and transcribed, with members of the Millennial and Z Generations who are currently active in the construction industry to determine the perceived and desired leadership traits of construction leaders. The results are then analyzed to determine if there is a divergence between the construction leadership practices and those that are effective for leading these generations. The analysis process begins with reading the interview transcripts and observational notes, and then categories using coding. Coding is used in this study to categorize the themes of the participant's perceptions of the most common leadership traits among leaders in the construction industry and what traits they desire these leaders to have. The corresponding sections: present the purpose statement and research questions; describe the measures taken to protect human subjects; explain the type of research chosen; clarify the number of individuals included in the study and why that number was selected, where they are located, and the criteria used for selecting the sample; describe the instruments used to collect data from research participants and the process used to develop them; explain how the data is analyzed for themes; and the limitations associated with the study.

Research Design

This study utilizes a phenomenological method by conducting interviews to discover Millennial and Generation Z field-level workers' perceptions of common and desirable leadership traits for site leaders in the construction industry based on their experience with these leaders. A phenomenological method allows the study to discover how leadership traits and behaviors have affected the individuals being studied as perceived by those individuals (Knaack, 1984). In-depth individual interviews provide an opportunity to learn about individual experiences and perspectives on the issue in focus which can be used to create meaning by reconstructing perceptions of events and experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Responses are qualitatively analyzed utilizing coding to determine any prominent themes. Qualitative research allows the study to address the research questions by developing an understanding of the experience of the interviewees (Fossey et al., 2002). Coding enables the collected data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted, providing an organized platform for the construction of meaning (Williams & Moser, 2019). The interview was explicitly designed for this study, including questions to obtain information regarding the perceived common and desirable leadership traits based on experiences with construction leaders. The interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom in Sacramento, California, and collected by an administrator. This allowed the facilitator to listen to stories regarding the subjects' experiences with leaders provided the study with the ability to examine site leadership through the lens of the subjects,

and ensured that the interview responses were collected directly by the administrator and that the identity of the respondents was protected. The administrator analyzed the data for themes to determine if the interactions were perceived as positive or negative.

Population & Sample

The subjects are Millennial and Generation Z field-level personnel in the construction industry, and race, religion, sex, age, or other demographic characteristics were not considered. Subjects were randomly selected from a variety of Sacramento, California, local construction companies to ensure that the sample group is representative of the industry and not a particular company. The initial participant pool consisted of fifteen construction professionals which were selected with a snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling begins with a convenience sample to provide the initial subjects, and those initial subjects provide recommendations for additional subjects (Coleman, 1958; Goodman, 1961; Heckathorn, 2011). Snowball sampling is well suited when the study concerns a relatively secretive manner (Etikan et al., 2016). This method allows for the interviews to be done completely anonymously. The initial convenience sample is based on the access of the researcher. The researcher spent twenty-five-plus years in the industry and the initial sample was obtained by contacting past co-workers and connections. The remainder of the participants were referred by the initial participants, and subjects were contacted and added to the population until saturation occurred and it became clear that no new information would be obtained by interviewing additional subjects. The final number of respondents was nineteen at which point saturation was reached. This sample size accurately represents the industry and also allowed for detailed interviews to obtain important information about the managers' experiences.

Data Collection

The potential participants were sent an email with an informed consent letter informing them of the purpose of the study, that the interview is purely voluntary, participation in the study will not be compensated, and not participating will not be penalized in any way. Once they responded confirming their willingness to participate, we scheduled a time and date for the interview. Those who chose not to participate were thanked for their time, and their identities remained anonymous. Those who chose to continue were protected throughout the process, and participation in the study also remained anonymous. Respondents were not asked for any sensitive or personal information that could be used to identify, and responses were transcribed, stored, and secured on a password-protected laptop that the administrator could only access.

The first question in the interview asked the participants if they agreed to participate or disagreed to participate and that they may choose to stop the interview at any time. The remainder of the questions asked what traits are perceived as being utilized by construction Project Superintendents and Managers, to describe the experiences and interactions with these leaders, and to describe traits they perceive as desirable among these leaders. The interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom in Sacramento, California. During the interview, the facilitator asked questions and then listened to stories regarding the subjects' experiences with site leaders while taking detailed notes and recording the interviews. Based on the responses to the initial questions the interviewer asked follow-up questions that were unique to every interview and intended to enhance the understanding of the individuals' experiences. This provided an opportunity for the facilitator to examine site leadership through the lens of the subjects. Lengthy interviews ranging from forty-five minutes to two hours with subjects, in which the participants explained in detail their experiences with construction leadership.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with an in-depth review and transcribing of the interview notes and recordings. The transcriptions were then analyzed utilizing coding to discover and label the prominent themes. This began by listing recurring themes and statements, each statement was treated with equal worth, in the responses to each question. These themes provided the foundation for interpretation because they created clusters and removed repetition. This information was used to create a description of what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon and how the experience happened. The researcher then created a composite description of the phenomenon which represents the essence of the experience and culminates these experiences in the study. The themes and corresponding labels became the headings in the results sections which are utilized to organize this section. A second list was created of descriptive statements that represented an individual subject's unique experience as it related to the question asked. These statements were then grouped with the theme that they corresponded with, left in narrative form describing the subject's individual experiences in detail, and used to emphasize and enrich the subject matter captured in the corresponding theme.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover Millennial and Generation Z construction workers' perceptions of the most common leadership approach among Project Superintendents and Managers in the construction industry based on their personal experiences and interactions with these leaders and to discover what traits these workers perceive to be desirable among leaders. Interviewees were used to accomplish this purpose and provided some valuable insight into the leadership approach in the industry. The responses to each question were unique to the interviewees, and each interviewee provided a unique insight into the leadership approach in the industry. The results section of this paper analyzes the responses to interviews designed to discover the current Millennial and Generation Z construction workers' perceptions of the most common leadership approach among leaders in the construction industry and is broken into three sections. The first section analyzes the findings of the interviews regarding the perceived leadership approach in construction to define the utilized approach as perceived by the respondents. The second section analyzes the findings of the interviews regarding the desired leadership approach of the respondents. The third section concludes with a comparison of the current perceived leadership approach and style in construction to the desired leadership approach and style in construction, and the associated implications.

Leadership Approach In Construction

The overall approach is defined by the respondents as a mix of old-school and new-school approaches with a majority of leaders in construction utilizing an old-school approach. The old-school approach in construction was described by the interviewees as task-oriented where people are seen as resources to complete tasks the leaders attempt to impose their will on others with frequent displays of power, and the leaders are hard-nosed, stuck in their ways, and reluctant to listen to new ideas. Interviewees stated that the leaders displayed this approach by dictating tasks and deadlines immediately before starting them with very little explanation of how to perform them or why they are important, rarely soliciting or allowing feedback or input from the crew members, exchanging for monetary rewards for the completion of tasks, and treating crew members as easily replaceable. The new school people approach in construction was described by the interviewees as relationship-oriented where people are seen as valuable assets that should be managed and developed and the leader seeks to find what people are passionate about and assign roles and tasks accordingly. Interviewees stated that the leaders displayed this approach by discussing tasks and deadlines with team members days or weeks

in advance, providing detailed explanations of how to perform them and why they are important, soliciting and allowing feedback and input, developing and mentoring people, leading through collaboration, and taking time to develop and leverage relationships.

Desired Leadership Approach in Construction

The interviewees described the ideal construction leader as someone who takes an active role in completing tasks and provides guidance through extensive knowledge; takes personal responsibility for the outcome of a project, and makes quick decisions that keep the project on track; knows the team member's strengths and weaknesses, and delegates tasks according to those strengths and weaknesses; possesses a high level of communication skills; has strong emotional control; influences the group with charisma and treating them like human beings and with compassion; makes the group better by motivating them; and aligns them with the project goals. One interviewee stated that the industry is based on schedule and budget, there is a lot of pressure and challenges in the industry, and the industry needs strong leaders who can make tough decisions and keep team members focused on tasks during times of stress; but they need to balance their strength with a collaborative approach, a high level of communication, and mentoring. This suggests that members of the Millennial and Z generations in construction desire an approach that includes a mix of what the literature suggests task-oriented and relationship-oriented. The literature suggests that a relationship-oriented leader assigns meaningful tasks to provide people with a connection between themselves and what their work contributes to, is approachable and attends to the needs of followers, enables others to act by building trust and fostering a culture of collaboration, and inspiring the team by encouraging the heart of a workforce (Bennis, 1984; Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Northouse, 2021). The literature described a task-oriented leader as maximizing organizational gains through a series of exchanges of gratification and governing through contractual obligations that focus on reward and punishment to meet performance standards (Burns, 1978; Young et al., 2021).

Implications

The results indicate that the members of the Millennial and Z Generation cohorts perceive the general approach in the construction industry as old-school, transactional, task-oriented, and focuses on control and power; and that they desire a leadership approach that is new-school, transformational, relational, and focuses on collaboration. This indicates that there is a divergence between the predominant approach in the industry and what these generations desire which means that the industry will have an issue recruiting and retaining members of these generations. This represents a significant issue for the industry in obtaining the skilled labor that it requires because Millennials and the Z generation represent the largest group currently entering the job force. The literature also suggests that this may cause a greater socio-economic issue due to perceived increases in costs and reductions in quality. Construction is a labor-heavy industry and skilled labor is a critical resource that directly affects the performance of a construction project, and a shortage of skilled labor may cause surges in project costs and delays, a decline in project quality, and prevent the industry from meeting socioeconomic demands for housing and infrastructure (Morello et al., 2018; Toor & Ofori, 2008; Welfare et al., 2021). The industry should act with urgency to change its approach to leadership and put itself in a better position to recruit and retain members of the Millennial and Z generations.

Recommendations

The results indicated that the general approach to leadership in construction does not align with what is suggested to be effective for the upcoming generations, is inconsistent, some leaders in the industry lack emotional control, and the industry lacks training to prepare its leaders. It is suggested that the

industry and its educational partners provide training, by incorporating leadership courses into the curriculum of construction-related collegiate education programs, and an extensive continuing education training program that provides a path for people in the industry trades to become leaders and receive the needed training. Companies in construction or a third-party company that caters to the industry should develop a program that trains team members in the industry who are identified as having leadership potential early in their careers. For both team members in the trades and those who come from collegiate backgrounds, the training needs to continue periodically throughout their careers. The leadership program developed needs to be comprehensive by including the essential elements of leadership, considering the unique conditions in the industry, and starting early in the participants' careers and continuing throughout their careers. The essentials of the program should include communication and people management.

The results of the interviews and the literature reviewed indicate that communication should be a vital piece of a leadership training program. The literature reviewed on leadership suggests that communication is the leadership tool that empowers others to become their best (Caldwell et al., 2002; Cote, 2017). The literature reviewed on leadership in construction suggests that communication must be utilized if construction firms are to manage the complexity of environmental and social issues and address the expectations of a wide range of actors in the industry (Graham et al., 2020); and the results of the interviews reinforce this by stating that communication ensures the team is clear on priorities and direction which increases the likelihood of success. The literature reviewed on the Millennial and Z generations suggests that they seek a team-based workplace culture with close contact and communication with superiors as well as frequent feedback (Stewart et al., 2017); and the results of the interviews reinforce this by stating the younger generations desire a high level of communication and the best way to improve performance is through direct communication.

The results of the interviews and the literature reviewed indicate that people management should be a vital piece of a leadership training program. The literature reviewed on leadership suggests that leadership is defined as a process of leaders engaging and mobilizing the human needs and aspirations of followers (Burns, 2012; Northouse, 2021). The literature reviewed on leadership in construction suggests that ethical issues, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal skills are considered by recruiters to be key significant competencies. The literature reviewed on the Millennial and Z generations indicates that they perceive the supervisory relationship as important and prefer leaders who choose interpersonal relationships, give personalized attention to employees, display care for others, are people-oriented, and charismatic (Easton & Steyn, 2022); and the results of the interviews reinforce this by stating that they desire a leader that influences the group by treating them like human beings and with compassion, influences a group with charisma, motivates the group to make them better, and aligns them with the project goals.

Conclusion

This study adds to the body of knowledge by discovering Millennial and Generation Z construction workers' perceptions of the common leadership traits in the construction industry based on their personal experiences and discovering what traits these workers perceive to be desirable among site leaders. This goal is accomplished with a literature review of the prominent literature on leadership and the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts, and a qualitative study containing interviews of Millennial and Generation Z professionals in the construction industry. The literature review utilized themes in the prominent literature to define leadership as a process of behaviors used to influence and direct a group to take action towards shared goals; state that leaders model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart; indicate that Millennials and Generation Z want their ideas to be valued, are reliant on technology, want open communication

and timely feedback, flexible working arrangements, and a relational approach to leadership; and suggest that leaders in construction focus on driving productivity through power and intensity and neglect an overall strategy for leadership. The results of the semi-structured interviews indicate that leadership in construction has two overall approaches including an old-school approach described as hard-nosed and delegating with authority, and a new school described as being more collaborative; indicate that a majority of construction leaders utilize the old-school approach and lack emotional control; and members of the Millennial and Z generations in construction desire a leader that provides their team with guidance based on practical experience, take responsibility for the outcome of a project, make quick decisions, know team members' strengths and weaknesses, and place people in the right roles and delegate tasks according to those strengths and weaknesses, possess a high level of communication skills, and have strong emotional control. An interpretation of the findings indicates that the general approach to leadership in construction does not align with what is suggested to be effective for the upcoming generations. Based on the implications of these findings the author suggests a comprehensive and extensive training program that includes communication and people management.

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