

Why Your Old Leadership Playbook Is Failing

Generation Z (the first fully digital-native generation now entering and reshaping the workplace) are changing the rules and they're not waiting for you to catch up. Let's be honest: the old leadership playbook top down decision making, a focus on outputs over outcomes, and the occasional "team lunch" to boost morale simply isn't cutting it anymore.

Especially not for Gen Z.



And if you're still leading the way you were five years ago, it's not just out of date it may be actively repelling your youngest (and arguably most future-focused) talent.

At **The Work Psychologists**, we're seeing it first-hand: organisations are struggling to retain and engage Gen Z employees. And it's not because they don't want to work it's because they don't want to work *like this*.

So what do they want instead?

They want **purpose**, yes. But more than that, they want **people-first leadership** that aligns with their values not just your vision statement.

Let's break it down.

A Generation Raised in Crisis and Consciousness

To understand what Gen Z wants, you need to understand what they've lived through. This is a generation that:

- Came of age during a global pandemic
- Has never known a time without climate anxiety
- Grew up amidst political polarisation and rising inequality
- Has had 24/7 access to unfiltered information and misinformation
- Sees mental health not as a “perk” but as a baseline necessity

They're not asking for business as usual they're asking for business that's **ethical, transparent, human**, and (yes) **impactful**.

They're not driven by job titles or corner offices. They're asking: *Does this work matter? Are we doing the right thing? And do I have to leave myself at the door to be here?* This isn't entitlement. It's evolved expectation.

In Deloitte's 2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, 77% of Gen Zs said it's important to work for an organisation whose values align with their own.

Why the Old Leadership Model Isn't Working

Here's where traditional leadership is falling short and fast

It's not just about *what* you're doing as a leader. It's about *how* and *why*.

Gen Z doesn't care if your mission statement mentions “purpose” if your leadership style screams “control.”

What Gen Z Actually Wants from Leaders

Here's what this generation is *really* looking for in leadership, according to research and what we hear directly in our coaching and organisational consulting:

1. Authenticity Over Optics

They want leaders who are human. Who admit when they're wrong. Who don't pretend to have it all figured out.

Gallup found that only 31% of Gen Z employees feel comfortable being themselves at work but this rises dramatically under inclusive, emotionally intelligent leadership.

2. Purpose With Teeth

Not vague brand platitudes. Real-world impact. Show them how their work connects to a broader mission social, environmental, or systemic.

According to McKinsey, 70% of employees said their sense of purpose is defined by their work, yet only 15% of frontline managers say they feel they can live their purpose at work.

Inclusive Leadership That Goes Beyond Quotas

They expect representation, psychological safety, and anti-performative inclusion.

Think: shared power, not just shared policies.

A Pew Research study (2023) found that Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation yet, and values inclusion as a non-negotiable in the workplace.

Mental Health and Flexibility as Norms, Not Perks

They want to work hard but not at the expense of their wellbeing. That means real flexibility, trust, and systems that recognise individual differences (hello, neurodiversity and disability inclusion).

MindShare Partners' 2021 report found that 76% of Gen Z workers have left roles due to mental health reasons compared with 34% of Gen X.

3. Growth and Impact - Not Just Promotions

They care less about climbing the ladder and more about learning something meaningful. Development pathways need to offer more than job titles.

A LinkedIn Learning study showed that Gen Z ranks learning and development as the [#1](#) factor when considering a new job higher than salary.

4. Family-Friendly Cultures — Redefining Success

Another major shift and one that often gets overlooked is how Gen Z views *success*. For this generation, success is no longer synonymous with climbing the corporate ladder at any cost. It's about **balance**, **presence**, and the freedom to be a whole human not just a high performer.

And this shift is especially visible in **Gen Z men**, who are challenging outdated gender roles around caregiving.

Pew Research (2023) found that younger men are significantly more likely than previous generations to want equal parenting responsibilities and they expect organisations to support that with policies like paid paternity leave, remote work, and flexible schedules.

A CIPD UK study found that 69% of working fathers under 35 said work negatively impacts their ability to care for their children — and a significant portion said they'd consider changing jobs for better balance.

This isn't just about paternity leave. It's about reshaping the culture to respect time *outside* of work, equally for mothers, fathers, carers, and anyone navigating life beyond their job description.

What Is Purpose-Driven Leadership, Really?

We throw the term around, but let's be specific.

Purpose-driven leadership is when you lead with clarity of values, consistency of action, and a commitment to creating positive impact beyond the bottom line.

It means:

- Making decisions that align with long-term values, not just short-term profits
- Communicating the “why” behind every strategy
- Holding yourself accountable to the same ethical standards you set for your team
- Prioritising inclusion, transparency, and sustainability as business-critical

And it's not just a feel-good strategy. According to Harvard Business Review, purpose-driven organisations enjoy **higher employee engagement, better customer loyalty, and long-term financial success**.

One HBR study found that 58% of companies with a clearly articulated purpose experienced 10%+ growth, compared to just 42% without one.

How Leaders Can Shift — 5 Moves to Make Now

If you're a leader wondering how to adapt your leadership style, here are five practical shifts to embrace:

1. Be Loud About Your Values and Live Them

Don't just have values. Use them to make decisions. Let them be the filter, not just a footer on your website.

2. Create Space for Meaningful Dialogue

Regularly ask: "What matters to you in your work?" And really listen to the answers.

3. Redesign Recognition

Celebrate values-led behaviour, not just output. Reinforce the kind of culture you're trying to build.

4. Be Transparent, Especially When It's Hard

Gen Z respects honesty. If something's not working, say so. If you're still figuring it out, involve them.

5. Let Go of Control, Embrace Co-creation

Leadership today isn't about having all the answers. It's about building the conditions for collective intelligence.

Leading Forward: Not Just Leading Better

Here's the truth: Gen Z isn't asking you to be a hero. They're asking you to be human, values-led, and willing to grow.

They don't want performative leadership. They want **purposeful leadership** that's consistent, courageous, and inclusive.

And while this shift might feel uncomfortable, it's also a powerful opportunity.

Because when we create workplaces that work for Gen Z, we create workplaces that work better for *everyone*.

Let's Leave You With This:

Are you still leading from an old playbook or are you writing a new one?

We'd love to hear from you.

What have you learned from working with Gen Z? How are you evolving your leadership to meet this moment?

Drop a comment, share with a colleague, or get in touch if your team is ready for deeper transformation.

SOURCES

- [Deloitte Global Gen Z & Millennial Survey 2024](#)
- [McKinsey: Help Your Employees Find Purpose \(2021\)](#)
- [Gallup: Gen Z and the Future of Leadership](#)
- [Pew Research: Gen Z's Social Values \(2023\)](#)
- [Mind Share Partners: Mental Health at Work Report](#)
- [LinkedIn Learning: 2023 Workplace Learning Report](#)
- [Harvard Business Review: Creating a Purpose-Driven Organisation \(2020\)](#)