



Navigating Conscious Unbossing: Understanding Gen Z's Reluctance Towards Traditional Leadership Roles

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Abstract. This research explores the phenomenon of "conscious unbossing" among Generation Z professionals, examining their reluctance toward traditional hierarchical leadership structures. Through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys (n=427) and in-depth interviews (n=32) with Gen Z professionals (born 1997-2012) across technology, education, healthcare, and finance sectors, this study identifies key factors influencing their leadership preferences. Findings reveal that Gen Z professionals prioritize collaborative decision-making (78.3%), purpose-driven work (82.6%), and work-life integration (76.5%) over traditional power structures. Their leadership philosophy emphasizes distributed authority, technological fluency, and authentic engagement. The research identifies four unbossing archetypes: Digital Facilitators, Purpose Champions, Autonomy Advocates, and Collective Decision-Makers. Organizational implications include restructuring leadership development programs, implementing reverse mentoring initiatives, and creating flatter organizational structures. This study contributes to understanding evolving workplace dynamics, offering practical recommendations for organizations seeking to engage Gen Z talent effectively while navigating the transformation toward more collaborative leadership paradigms. The findings suggest that organizations must reimagine leadership frameworks to align with Gen Z's values of inclusivity, authenticity, and shared responsibility.

Keywords: Generation Z, conscious unbossing, traditional leadership

1. Introduction

"The leaders of the future will not lead from the front or the back but from within." - Simon Sinek. The traditional conception of leadership, characterized by hierarchical structures, top-down decision-making, and clear power differentials, has dominated organizational frameworks for decades. However, as Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) enters the workforce in increasing numbers, conventional leadership paradigms face unprecedented scrutiny and resistance. This phenomenon, described as "conscious unbossing," represents a deliberate movement away from traditional boss-subordinate relationships toward more collaborative, distributed, and purpose-driven leadership models.

Generation Z, having grown up in an era defined by technological immersion, social consciousness, and global connectivity, brings distinct values and expectations to the workplace. Their reluctance toward traditional leadership roles stems not from a lack of ambition but from a fundamental redefinition of what leadership should entail in the modern era. This resistance represents a significant shift in organizational dynamics that warrants comprehensive investigation.

The present study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the underlying factors driving Gen Z's reluctance toward traditional leadership structures and exploring the alternative leadership models they envision. Understanding these preferences

is not merely an academic exercise but has profound implications for talent management, organizational design, and leadership development across industries.

Table 1. Characteristics Differentiating Traditional Leadership from Gen Z's "Unbossed" Leadership Paradigm

Dimension	Traditional Leadership Model	Gen Z's "Unbossed" Leadership Paradigm
Authority Structure	Hierarchical, centralized	Distributed, networked
Decision-Making	Top-down, executive-driven	Collaborative, inclusive
Communication Style	Formal, scheduled	Authentic, continuous
Performance Metrics	Output-focused, quantitative	Purpose-aligned, holistic
Work Environment	Office-centric, structured	Flexible, technology-enabled
Feedback Mechanisms	Annual reviews, managerial	Continuous, multidirectional
Knowledge Sharing	Need-to-know basis	Open access, transparency
Innovation Approach	Departmental, planned	Organic, cross-functional
Career Progression	Linear, tenure-based	Multi-dimensional, skill-based
Value Creation	Shareholder-centric	Stakeholder-balanced

As illustrated in Table 1, the divergence between traditional leadership models and Gen Z's preferred paradigm extends across multiple dimensions of organizational functioning. This research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of these preferences through the following objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the key factors influencing Gen Z's attitudes toward traditional leadership structures.
2. To examine the alternative leadership models that Gen Z professionals envision and aspire to implement.
3. To explore the organizational implications of this leadership paradigm shift and provide practical recommendations for adaptation.
4. To develop a theoretical framework for understanding "conscious unbossing" as an emerging phenomenon in contemporary workplace dynamics.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge the generational divide in organizational leadership, facilitating more effective talent engagement and development strategies. As Gen Z is projected to constitute 30% of the global workforce by 2030, understanding their leadership preferences becomes increasingly crucial for organizational sustainability and innovation in the evolving business landscape.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Evolution of Leadership Paradigms

Leadership theory has undergone significant transformation over the past century, evolving from trait-based approaches to more complex, contextual understandings of effective leadership (Northouse, 2021). The traditional command-and-control leadership paradigm, rooted in scientific management principles, dominated organizational structures

throughout much of the 20th century (Taylor, 2019). However, this paradigm has gradually given way to more participative models that recognize the limitations of hierarchical structures in addressing complex organizational challenges.

The emergence of transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2020) marked a significant shift toward recognizing the importance of inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration in leadership effectiveness. Subsequent developments, including servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019), authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2021), and distributed leadership (Spillane & Diamond, 2020), have further challenged the notion that leadership should be concentrated at the top of organizational hierarchies.

Recent scholarship on leadership has increasingly focused on how digital transformation influences leadership practices. Petry (2018) argues that digital leadership requires fundamentally different competencies, emphasizing network thinking, digital literacy, and agile management approaches. Similarly, Westerman et al. (2022) suggest that effective leadership in the digital age requires a fundamental reconsideration of traditional power structures, favoring more fluid arrangements that can rapidly adapt to technological change and marketplace disruption.

The concept of "unbossing," though relatively new in academic literature, builds upon these evolutionary trends in leadership theory. As described by Deng and Zhou (2023), unbossing represents a deliberate movement away from hierarchical control toward organizational structures that emphasize employee autonomy, distributed decision-making, and collective intelligence. This paradigm aligns closely with Gen Z's reported preferences for more collaborative workplace dynamics.

2.2. Generation Z: Characteristics and Workplace Values

Generation Z, comprising individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first truly digital generation, having grown up in an environment characterized by smartphones, social media, and ubiquitous internet access (Dimock, 2019). This technological immersion has profoundly shaped their worldview, communication preferences, and expectations regarding work and leadership.

Research by Francis and Hoefel (2018) identifies four core Gen Z characteristics: their search for truth, comfort with fluid identity expressions, belief in dialogue over confrontation, and pragmatic approach to problem-solving. In the workplace context, these characteristics manifest as preferences for transparency, inclusivity, collaborative problem-solving, and results-oriented approaches that prioritize efficiency over tradition.

Comparative studies examining generational differences in workplace values have consistently identified distinct patterns in Gen Z's preferences. Gaidhani et al. (2019) note that compared to millennials, Gen Z professionals place higher value on job security, entrepreneurial opportunities, and meaningful work. Similarly, Schroth (2019) finds that Gen Z exhibits stronger preferences for work-life balance, technological integration, and social responsibility than previous generations.

Regarding leadership specifically, Cho et al. (2023) document Gen Z's preference for leaders who demonstrate authenticity, technological fluency, and a commitment to social impact. Their study indicates that 72% of Gen Z professionals would rather work for an organization with shared decision-making structures than one with clear hierarchical authority. This preference aligns with what Deloitte (2023) describes as Gen Z's "collaborative ethos," which values collective intelligence over individual authority.

2.3. Conscious Unbossing: Conceptual Foundations

The concept of "conscious unbossing" represents an emerging paradigm at the intersection of organizational design, leadership theory, and generational studies. While the term "unbossing" gained prominence following the publication of Kolind and Bøtter's (2018) book "Unboss," the addition of "conscious" emphasizes the deliberate, values-driven nature of this shift in leadership philosophy.

At its core, conscious unbossing involves the intentional dismantling of traditional boss-subordinate relationships in favor of more collaborative, purpose-driven organizational structures. Morgan (2021) identifies three fundamental principles underlying this concept: (1) distributed authority based on expertise rather than position, (2) transparency in decision-making processes, and (3) alignment around shared purpose rather than compliance with directives.

The psychological foundations of conscious unbossing can be traced to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which posits that individuals thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied. Traditional hierarchical structures often constrain autonomy and relatedness, limiting intrinsic motivation and engagement. By contrast, unbossed environments seek to maximize these psychological needs, potentially enhancing well-being and performance.

From an organizational perspective, conscious unbossing aligns with the principles of socio-technical systems theory, which emphasizes the interdependence between human and technological elements in organizational functioning (Hughes et al., 2021). As digital technologies enable more distributed forms of coordination and collaboration, traditional managerial oversight becomes less necessary for ensuring alignment and productivity. Recent empirical work by Zhang and Colleagues (2022) demonstrates correlations between unbossed organizational structures and increased innovation, employee satisfaction, and adaptability to market changes. Their longitudinal study of 47 organizations across diverse industries suggests that companies implementing unbossed principles experienced 32% higher employee engagement and 28% greater innovation output compared to those maintaining traditional hierarchical structures.

2.4. Digital Transformation and Leadership Evolution

The digital transformation of business operations has fundamentally altered the context in which leadership occurs, creating both challenges and opportunities for traditional leadership models. As Vial (2019) notes, digital technologies have disrupted established business models, blurred organizational boundaries, and accelerated the pace of change, requiring new approaches to organizational coordination and decision-making.

Generation Z, as digital natives, approach leadership through a distinctly technological lens. Research by Mahmood et al. (2020) indicates that 83% of Gen Z professionals believe that technological fluency is an essential leadership quality, compared to only 47% of Baby Boomers. This generational difference reflects not merely familiarity with digital tools but a fundamentally different understanding of how coordination and influence operate in networked environments.

The concept of "digital leadership," as developed by Larjovuori et al. (2018), encompasses both the use of digital technologies in leadership practices and the adaptation of leadership approaches to increasingly digital contexts. Their framework identifies five core competencies of digital leaders: technological literacy, data-driven decision-making,

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virtual collaboration skills, agile mindset, and digital ethics awareness. These competencies align closely with what Gen Z respondents identify as essential leadership qualities (Deloitte, 2023).

Furthermore, digital transformation has accelerated the shift from "push" to "pull" models of knowledge work, as described by Hagel et al. (2022). In push models, characteristic of traditional organizations, knowledge flows from the top down through predetermined channels. In pull models, by contrast, individuals access information as needed from distributed networks. This shift fundamentally changes the nature of leadership, reducing the value of positional authority based on information control and increasing the importance of connection facilitation and barrier removal.

Emerging research by Zhu and Colleagues (2023) suggests that organizations with leadership models aligned with digital transformation priorities demonstrate 41% higher digital innovation rates and 37% greater agility in response to market disruptions. Their findings indicate that Gen Z professionals are particularly responsive to leadership approaches that leverage digital tools for collaboration, transparency, and distributed decision-making.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to investigate Gen Z's attitudes toward traditional leadership models and their preferences for alternative approaches. This design was selected to provide both breadth and depth in understanding the phenomenon of conscious unbossing among Generation Z professionals.

The research process consisted of two distinct phases. The first phase involved quantitative data collection through a comprehensive survey distributed to Gen Z professionals across multiple industries. The second phase involved qualitative data collection through semi-structured interviews with selected survey participants to gain deeper insights into their perceptions, experiences, and aspirations regarding leadership.

This mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation of findings, enhancing the validity and reliability of the research outcomes. The quantitative data provided a broad understanding of patterns and correlations, while the qualitative data offered contextual richness and explanatory power to interpret these patterns.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

Participants for this study were recruited using a stratified random sampling approach to ensure representation across diverse industries, organizational sizes, and job roles. The inclusion criteria specified that participants must:

1. Be born between 1997 and 2012 (Generation Z)
2. Have a minimum of one year of professional work experience
3. Be currently employed in a full-time or part-time capacity

For the quantitative phase, a total of 427 Gen Z professionals completed the online survey. Participants represented four primary sectors: technology (32%), education (24%), healthcare (21%), and finance (23%). The sample comprised 53% female, 44% male, and 3% non-binary participants. Regarding organizational size, 37% worked in large enterprises (>1000 employees), 42% in medium-sized companies (100-999 employees), and 21% in small organizations (<100 employees).

For the qualitative phase, 32 participants were purposively selected from the survey respondents based on their diverse perspectives and experiences. This selection aimed to capture a wide range of views on leadership and ensure representation across different industries, organizational contexts, and demographic characteristics.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Phase: Data was collected through an online survey instrument developed based on existing literature and pilot-tested with a sample of 15 Gen Z professionals. The final survey consisted of 47 items organized into six sections:

1. Demographic information (7 items)
2. Attitudes toward traditional leadership structures (10 items)
3. Preferred leadership characteristics (8 items)
4. Organizational design preferences (8 items)
5. Career aspirations and leadership intentions (8 items)
6. Open-ended questions about ideal leadership models (6 items)

Survey items primarily used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The instrument demonstrated good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.78 to 0.92 across the different sections.

Qualitative Phase: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 32 selected participants. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted virtually using video conferencing software. The interview protocol addressed the following key areas:

1. Personal experiences with different leadership styles
2. Detailed exploration of attitudes toward traditional hierarchy
3. Vision for ideal leadership structures
4. Barriers and enablers for leadership paradigm transformation
5. Specific examples of "unbossed" leadership practices
6. Career aspirations and leadership philosophy

All interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Survey data was analyzed using SPSS version 28.0. The analysis included:

1. Descriptive statistics to characterize the sample and summarize response patterns
2. Factor analysis to identify underlying dimensions in attitudes toward leadership
3. Multiple regression analysis to examine relationships between key variables
4. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) to explore differences based on demographic and organizational factors
5. Cluster analysis to identify distinct groups based on leadership preferences

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 14 software, following a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis process involved:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts
2. Initial coding of meaningful segments relevant to the research questions

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3. Development of themes by grouping related codes
 4. Review and refinement of themes to ensure coherence and distinctiveness
 5. Definition and naming of final themes
 6. Selection of illustrative quotes and development of thematic narrative

Integration of Findings: Following separate analyses of quantitative and qualitative data, an integrated analysis was conducted to identify convergence, complementarity, and divergence between the two data sets. This integration allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and strengthened the validity of the findings through methodological triangulation.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to strict ethical guidelines and received approval from the University Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #2023-0417). Key ethical considerations included:

1. Informed consent: All participants provided written informed consent before participation
2. Confidentiality: Personal identifiers were removed from all data, and pseudonyms were used in reporting
3. Data security: All data was stored securely in encrypted formats
4. Right to withdraw: Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence
5. Transparency: The purpose and procedures of the research were clearly communicated to all participants

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Factor Analysis: Dimensions of Leadership Reluctance

Factor analysis of the survey data revealed four primary dimensions underlying Gen Z's reluctance toward traditional leadership models. These dimensions, which collectively explained 72.3% of the variance in attitudes, provide insight into the specific aspects of traditional leadership that Generation Z professionals find most problematic.

The first factor, labeled "Hierarchical Rigidity" (explaining 24.5% of variance), encompasses concerns about strict top-down authority structures, limited autonomy, and rigid communication channels. Survey items loading heavily on this factor included "Traditional leadership creates unnecessary power distance between team members" (factor loading = 0.84) and "Hierarchical structures restrict creative problem-solving" (factor loading = 0.79).

The second factor, "Purpose Disconnection" (explaining 19.7% of variance), reflects perceptions that traditional leadership models often prioritize organizational metrics over meaningful impact and values alignment. Key items loading on this factor included "Traditional leadership focuses too much on profit at the expense of purpose" (factor loading = 0.82) and "Hierarchical organizations struggle to connect individual work to meaningful outcomes" (factor loading = 0.77).

The third factor, "Digital Incompatibility" (explaining 15.6% of variance), captures the perception that traditional leadership structures are ill-suited to the digitally-mediated, rapidly-changing contemporary work environment. Items loading on this factor included "Traditional leadership models can't keep pace with technological change" (factor loading =

0.75) and "Hierarchical approval processes are too slow for the digital economy" (factor loading = 0.73).

The fourth factor, "Collaborative Constraint" (explaining 12.5% of variance), reflects the view that traditional leadership inhibits the collective intelligence and diverse input that Gen Z professionals value. Key items included "Traditional leadership structures limit valuable input from team members" (factor loading = 0.81) and "Hierarchical organizations fail to leverage diverse perspectives" (factor loading = 0.76).

Qualitative interview data aligned with and enriched these findings. As one participant explained:

"The problem isn't leadership itself—we need direction and coordination. The problem is when leadership means 'I decide, you execute' instead of 'we figure this out together.' That hierarchical mindset feels completely outdated in a world where the best ideas can come from anywhere."

Another participant highlighted the purpose disconnection dimension:

"When leadership is just about climbing the ladder and managing people beneath you, it loses meaning for me. I'm interested in leadership that's about mobilizing people around shared purpose—not about who has the corner office or the most impressive title."

These findings suggest that Gen Z's reluctance toward traditional leadership is not a rejection of leadership per se, but rather a critique of specific aspects of conventional hierarchical models that they perceive as constraining, outdated, and misaligned with their values.

4.2. Gen Z Leadership Archetypes: A Typology

Cluster analysis of survey responses regarding preferred leadership characteristics and approaches revealed four distinct leadership archetypes that characterize Gen Z's vision for "unbossed" leadership. These archetypes represent different emphases within the broader shift toward more collaborative and purpose-driven leadership models.

Digital Facilitators (31.2% of respondents) prioritize technology-enabled collaboration, distributed decision-making, and rapid adaptation. This archetype views leadership primarily as facilitating connections and removing barriers rather than directing activities. Digital Facilitators scored significantly higher on items related to technological fluency ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.31$) and comfort with ambiguity ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.42$) compared to other archetypes.

As one interview participant in this cluster explained:

"Leadership in the digital age isn't about having all the answers—it's about creating the infrastructure and culture where the best answers can emerge naturally from the collective. Sometimes that means stepping back and trusting the network more than any individual judgment, including your own."

Purpose Champions (27.8% of respondents) emphasize mission-driven leadership, values alignment, and social impact. This archetype views organizational purpose as the primary coordination mechanism, with formal authority secondary to shared commitment to meaningful outcomes. Purpose Champions scored highest on items related to values-based decision-making ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.28$) and stakeholder orientation ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.37$).

An interview participant representative of this archetype stated:

"The organizations that will thrive are those where leadership means cultivating shared purpose, not enforcing compliance. When people deeply connect with why their work matters, traditional management becomes largely unnecessary—the purpose itself guides decisions at every level."

Autonomy Advocates (22.5% of respondents) focus on individual empowerment, skill development, and minimal intervention. This archetype views leadership as creating conditions for self-management and providing resources rather than oversight. Autonomy Advocates scored highest on items related to individual responsibility ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.34$) and preference for flat organizational structures ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.40$).

One interview participant explained this perspective:

"I don't need or want someone telling me what to do or how to do it. What I need is someone who ensures I have the information, resources, and clarity to make my own decisions effectively. Leadership should be about removing obstacles, not adding layers of approval."

Collective Decision-Makers (18.5% of respondents) prioritize inclusive processes, diverse input, and shared ownership. This archetype views leadership as orchestrating collective intelligence rather than individual direction. Collective Decision-Makers scored highest on items related to inclusive decision processes ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 0.30$) and comfort with shared accountability ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.38$).

An interview participant in this cluster observed:

"The traditional model assumes the person with authority has the best information or judgment, which is almost never true in complex situations. Real leadership is having the humility to recognize that collective wisdom almost always outperforms individual brilliance, and then designing processes that effectively harness that collective wisdom."

These archetypes are not mutually exclusive, and many respondents exhibited characteristics of multiple types. However, the dominant preference pattern for each individual allows for a nuanced understanding of the diverse ways in which Gen Z professionals envision leadership transformation. Notably, all four archetypes share a common rejection of top-down authority and embrace more distributed models of influence and decision-making.

4.3. Organizational Barriers to Leadership Transformation

Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed significant organizational barriers that impede the transition toward the more collaborative leadership models preferred by Gen Z professionals. These barriers help explain the gap between Gen Z's leadership aspirations and the persistent reality of hierarchical structures in many organizations.

Regression analysis identified four organizational factors significantly associated with perceptions of leadership transformation difficulty ($R^2 = 0.67$, $p < .001$): organizational size ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), industry traditionalism ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$), leadership demographics ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .01$), and technology integration level ($\beta = -0.34$, $p < .001$).

Specifically, larger organizations, those in traditionally hierarchical industries (e.g., finance, healthcare), those with leadership teams dominated by older generations, and those with lower levels of technological integration were perceived as presenting greater barriers to leadership transformation. These quantitative findings were richly elaborated in the interview data.

Structural inertia emerged as a prominent theme in participant narratives about organizational barriers. As one interviewee explained:

"The company has been organized hierarchically for decades—it's embedded in everything from the physical office layout to the compensation structure to the promotion criteria. Changing that requires not just new leadership philosophies but reimagining fundamental business processes and metrics."

Cultural resistance, particularly from established leaders, was another frequently cited barrier:

"Many senior leaders built their careers mastering the very hierarchical systems that we're now saying need to change. There's natural resistance when your expertise and status come from a system that's being questioned. It's not just philosophical disagreement—it's identity threat."

Misaligned reward systems that continue to incentivize traditional leadership behaviors were also identified as significant barriers:

"The organization talks about wanting collaborative leadership, but performance reviews and promotions still reward individual achievement and people who 'take charge' in very traditional ways. Until the incentives change, the behavior won't really change either."

Legal and regulatory constraints were noted as significant barriers in certain industries:

"In healthcare, there are legitimate questions about decision authority and liability that make completely flat structures challenging. When someone ultimately bears legal responsibility for decisions, it creates pressure for more traditional authority structures."

These findings suggest that while Gen Z's leadership preferences represent a significant shift in organizational thinking, the transformation of established systems requires addressing multiple interconnected barriers that extend beyond simple generational differences in philosophy.

4.4. Organizational Implications and Adaptation Strategies

The research findings indicate several critical implications for organizations seeking to adapt to Gen Z's leadership preferences and effectively engage this growing segment of the workforce. Both survey data and interview narratives point to specific strategies that organizations can implement to navigate the shift toward more collaborative leadership models.

Quantitative analysis of organizational preference items revealed that 78.3% of respondents would be more likely to join and remain with organizations that demonstrate commitment to collaborative decision-making models, while 82.6% prioritized organizations with clear purpose alignment, and 76.5% favored organizations offering substantial autonomy in work execution.

Four primary adaptation strategies emerged from the integrated analysis:

Leadership Development Reimagining: Traditional leadership development programs often focus on individual leadership skills and preparation for hierarchical advancement. Survey data indicated that 73.2% of respondents believed these programs needed fundamental reconceptualization. Organizations successfully adapting to Gen Z preferences are redesigning development initiatives to emphasize facilitation skills,

collaborative decision-making, purpose articulation, and distributed influence rather than traditional command-and-control capabilities.

An interview participant described an effective program:

"The leadership development program at my company doesn't assume everyone wants to manage people. Instead, it focuses on how to drive impact regardless of formal position—how to build consensus, facilitate effective collaboration, and align work with purpose. It's about leadership as a practice, not a position."

Reverse Mentoring Implementation: Organizations successfully engaging Gen Z are establishing formal reverse mentoring programs, where younger employees mentor senior leaders on digital technologies, emerging cultural trends, and evolving workplace expectations. Survey data showed that 68.4% of respondents believed such programs could accelerate organizational adaptation.

One participant described the benefits:

"Our reverse mentoring program pairs executives with Gen Z employees for monthly sessions. It's transformed how leadership thinks about hierarchy – they've seen firsthand the value of learning from all levels and are much more open to distributed decision-making now."

Organizational Structure Flattening: Companies effectively responding to Gen Z preferences are systematically reducing hierarchical layers and implementing more networked organizational models. This includes expanding decision rights at all levels, creating cross-functional teams with rotating leadership, and emphasizing role flexibility over rigid positional authority.

An interview participant from the technology sector explained:

"Our company moved from a traditional department structure to a model based on self-organizing teams that form around specific projects or challenges. Leadership rotates based on relevant expertise rather than title, and decision authority is pushed to the lowest possible level. It's dramatically increased both innovation and engagement."

Technology-Enabled Collaboration: Organizations successfully adapting are leveraging digital platforms to facilitate more inclusive decision-making, transparent information sharing, and distributed coordination. Survey data indicated that 81.2% of respondents believed technological tools were essential for enabling the collaborative leadership models they preferred.

A participant described effective implementation:

"Our organization uses a digital platform where anyone can propose ideas, provide input on decisions, or raise concerns regardless of their position. It's created a much more democratic culture where good ideas can come from anywhere and gain momentum based on merit rather than authority."

These adaptation strategies suggest that organizations can effectively respond to Gen Z's leadership preferences through deliberate redesign of structures, processes, and development approaches. However, interview data also emphasized that such transformation requires genuine commitment rather than superficial adjustments:

"You can't just remove a few management layers or call everyone a 'team lead' instead of a 'manager' and expect things to change. Real transformation requires rethinking fundamental assumptions about how decisions get made, how information flows, how performance is evaluated, and how coordination happens."

Organizations that approach these changes systematically and authentically appear better positioned to engage Gen Z talent effectively and capitalize on their distinctive strengths and perspectives.

4.5. Generational Integration: Challenges and Opportunities

A significant finding from this research concerns the interaction between Gen Z's leadership preferences and those of other generations in the workforce. Rather than simple generational replacement, most organizations face the complex challenge of integrating multiple generational cohorts with different leadership expectations and styles.

Quantitative analysis revealed interesting patterns in cross-generational perceptions. While 76.3% of Gen Z respondents believed their leadership preferences represented an improvement over traditional models, only 42.1% felt that older colleagues shared this view. This perception gap was confirmed in open-ended survey responses, with 63.2% of participants describing some form of generational tension regarding leadership approaches.

However, thematic analysis of interview data suggested more nuanced intergenerational dynamics than simple opposition. Four key themes emerged regarding generational integration:

Value Alignment Amidst Style Differences: Many participants described situations where fundamental values regarding effective leadership were shared across generations, despite differences in preferred implementation approaches:

"In conversations with more experienced colleagues, I often find we actually want similar things—meaningful work, voice in decisions, recognition of contribution. We just express those desires differently and have different expectations about how they should be fulfilled in the workplace."

Experiential Wisdom Complementing New Perspectives: Rather than rejecting the insights of experienced leaders, many Gen Z participants valued their knowledge while seeking to integrate it with fresh approaches:

"I have tremendous respect for what my senior colleagues know about our industry and organization. The ideal isn't replacing their leadership but transforming how their wisdom is integrated—moving from 'they decide based on experience' to 'their experience informs our collective decision-making.'"

Digital Fluency Bridging Generational Divides: Participants frequently mentioned how digital collaboration tools could help bridge generational differences by creating structured spaces for different voices:

"Our digital collaboration platforms have actually helped with generational integration. They provide a more level playing field where ideas can be evaluated on merit rather than source, and they create space for different communication preferences to coexist productively."

Complementary Strengths Creating Synergy: Many participants described the potential for different generational perspectives to create leadership synergies rather than conflicts:

"The most effective teams I've worked on pair Gen Z's digital fluency, purpose orientation, and fresh thinking with the institutional knowledge, stakeholder relationships, and implementation experience of more seasoned colleagues. Neither could be as effective alone."

These findings suggest that while genuine tensions exist between Gen Z's leadership preferences and more traditional approaches, there is significant potential for productive integration rather than simple replacement. Organizations that create intentional structures for cross-generational collaboration and mutual learning appear better positioned to navigate this transition effectively.

As one interview participant summarized:

"The question isn't whether hierarchical leadership will completely disappear or remain exactly the same. It's how we can evolve leadership to integrate the best of different perspectives—keeping what remains valuable from traditional approaches while embracing new models that are better suited to today's challenges and workforce."

This perspective suggests that conscious unbossing may be best understood not as a complete rejection of established leadership wisdom but as an evolution that integrates valuable elements of traditional approaches with new paradigms better aligned with changing technological, social, and organizational contexts.

Conclusion

This research has examined the phenomenon of "conscious unbossing" among Generation Z professionals, exploring their reluctance toward traditional leadership structures and their vision for alternative leadership models. Through a mixed-methods approach combining survey data from 427 participants and in-depth interviews with 32 Gen Z professionals, the study has revealed several key findings with significant implications for leadership theory and organizational practice.

First, Gen Z's reluctance toward traditional leadership is not a rejection of leadership per se, but rather a critique of specific aspects of hierarchical models that they perceive as constraining, outdated, and misaligned with contemporary values and technological capabilities. Four primary dimensions underlie this reluctance: hierarchical rigidity, purpose disconnection, digital incompatibility, and collaborative constraint. Understanding these specific concerns allows for more targeted organizational responses.

Second, Gen Z professionals envision leadership through four distinct but complementary archetypes: Digital Facilitators who leverage technology to enable distributed collaboration, Purpose Champions who mobilize action through shared meaning, Autonomy Advocates who create conditions for self-direction, and Collective Decision-Makers who orchestrate inclusive processes for leveraging diverse perspectives. These archetypes provide a nuanced framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of Gen Z's leadership preferences.

Third, significant organizational barriers impede the transition toward more collaborative leadership models, including structural inertia, cultural resistance from established leaders, misaligned reward systems, and regulatory constraints. Organizations seeking to adapt must address these interconnected barriers through systematic approaches rather than superficial adjustments to leadership language or structures.

Fourth, effective organizational adaptation strategies include reimagining leadership development to emphasize facilitation and collaboration skills, implementing reverse mentoring programs, flattening organizational structures, and leveraging technology to enable more inclusive decision-making processes. Organizations that implement these strategies systematically and authentically appear better positioned to engage Gen Z talent effectively.

Finally, while tensions exist between Gen Z's leadership preferences and more traditional approaches, there is significant potential for productive integration of different generational perspectives. Organizations that create intentional structures for cross-generational collaboration and mutual learning can leverage complementary strengths and navigate this transition more effectively.

These findings contribute to leadership theory by providing empirical support for the emerging concept of "conscious unbossing" and elucidating its specific dimensions and manifestations among Gen Z professionals. The research also contributes to generational studies by moving beyond broad characterizations of Gen Z to provide a nuanced understanding of their leadership philosophy and aspirations.

From a practical perspective, this research offers organizations a framework for understanding Gen Z's leadership preferences and specific strategies for adapting structures, processes, and development approaches to engage this growing segment of the workforce effectively. By recognizing the legitimate concerns underlying Gen Z's critique of traditional leadership and the potential value of more collaborative approaches, organizations can navigate this transition in ways that enhance both engagement and effectiveness.

Limitations of this study include its cross-sectional design, which captures attitudes at a specific point in time rather than tracking their evolution, and its focus on professionals in specific sectors, which may limit generalizability to all organizational contexts. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal studies tracking how Gen Z's leadership approaches evolve as they advance in their careers and through broader sectoral sampling.

Additional research directions include examining how organizational context moderates the expression and implementation of unbossed leadership principles, investigating specific technological tools and platforms that effectively enable collaborative leadership models, and exploring how leadership education and development programs can be redesigned to better prepare all generations for more distributed approaches to organizational influence and decision-making.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of conscious unbossing among Generation Z represents not merely a generational preference but a significant evolution in how leadership is conceptualized and practiced in contemporary organizations. By understanding and adapting to this shift, organizations can not only engage Gen Z talent more effectively but potentially discover leadership models better suited to the complexity, connectivity, and purpose-orientation of the modern business landscape.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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