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What works for you may not work for (Gen)Me: Limitations of present leadership theories for the new generation

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ABSTRACT

Scholars and practitioners alike have recognized that younger workers, collectively known as Millennials or GenMe, are different from workers in prior generations. Employees of this generation hold different expectations regarding the centrality of work to their lives and bring different personalities and attitudes to the workforce. As the number of Millennials in the workforce grows each year, the divide between them and their older counterparts becomes more salient, posing unique challenges for organizational leaders. In this paper, we explore how these changes may force the need for reconsideration of five of the most frequently used leadership theories in an effort to understand important boundary conditions and how leadership research must evolve to keep pace with a changing workforce.

You know you are getting old when you use the oft repeated phrase, "The current generation is so much different than my generation." For those of us with an interest in leadership, the implications of newer generations are quite substantial. New generations bring new ideas, new behaviors, and new ways of looking at the issues with which we have been concerned for years. A Google search of the phrase "managing Millennials" brings up thousands of articles, books, and websites offering advice to managers, indicating the concern that practitioners have in regard to leading the next generation. In terms of sheer size, this concern seems warranted as Millennials have outpaced Generation X as the largest age group in the workforce as of early 2015 (Brownstone, 2014). The term Millennials refers to people born between 1982 and 1999 (Twenge and Campbell, 2008), and other common names for this age cohort include GenY, nGen, and GenMe (Twenge, 2010).

Anecdotes from the popular press indicate that managers frequently bemoan the increasing lack of work ethic, narcissism, and sense of entitlement of employees in generations following the Baby Boomers. For example, Millennials are painted as the "selfie" generation, a generation who cares more about sharing pictures of themselves than about the contributions they make at work. Other more positive articles often highlight the creativity, technical ability, concern for social values, and inclusive attitudes toward diversity associated with Millennials. Although these viewpoints conflict, they indicate that there is clearly a perception that Millennials are most assuredly different than their predecessors with respect to ideas, behaviors and viewpoints, and that organizational leaders will have to lead these employees, by necessity, differently.

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In support of the perception that Millennials are different, a recent review by Lyons and Kuron (2014) provides evidence that attitudes and values have changed across the generations. Their findings echo Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, and Lance's (2010) study which showed that changes in work values have been quite dramatic from the Baby Boomers to the Millennial generation. Examples of changes include increases in the desire for leisure and work-life balance, (Twenge, 2010; Twenge and Kasser, 2013), individualism (Twenge and Campbell, 2012), and desire for greater support from managers (Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons, 2010). Research also illustrates the self-involved and narcissistic tendencies of Millennials (Twenge and Campbell, 2009; Twenge and Foster, 2010). In addition, the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions is not the same across generations (Lu and Gursoy, 2013). On the whole, these findings demonstrate that Millennials are, in fact, different from their predecessors. Furthermore, these results suggest that these generational differences may call for adaptations to our current theories of leadership.

Interest in how our theories of management must evolve over time is not new. Harvey and Buckley (2002) argued over a decade ago that paradigm shifts necessitate continual reevaluation and adaptation of management practices and research. For example, the authors identified obsolete terms including span-of-control and line/staff. Just as these phrases are no longer meaningful for managers in 2015, theories of management and leadership can become outdated as well. Indeed, Cooper, Scandura, and Schriesheim (2005) remind us that we "must be cognizant of the history of the field and the lessons it teaches" (p. 476). However, outdated or misinformed beliefs continue to live on through management lore (Buckley et al., 2015; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006). Research continues to advance and researchers have suggested multiple ways of expressing various forms of leadership (e.g., Baur et al., 2016). Nomological networks that encompass variables related to dynamic work attitudes should be reexamined to ensure their continued relevance. Leadership is one important area of research in which changes in employee values urge us to engage in a reconsideration of our current theories.

Past research on the effectiveness of leaders has shown that leadership style can have an important impact on variables such as employee job satisfaction, motivation, and team performance (e.g., Judge and Piccolo, 2004). Studies have also linked employee-supervisor relationships with organizational commitment and decreased turnover intentions (e.g., Han and Jekel, 2011). These studies underscore the value of having able leaders in place in order to leverage human capital resources. And, leaders may need to play an even bigger role in attracting, motivating, and retaining today's employees for at least two reasons. First, Millennials are more likely to value working for supervisors they like than previous generations (Twenge et al., 2010). Second, post-Baby Boomer employees have very different work-related values and are more likely to quit than employees of yesteryear if their needs are not met (Lu and Gursoy, 2013). These changes in the personalities, needs, and work values of Millennial employees not only highlight the importance of high-quality leaders, they call into question the application of current leadership theories to 21st century employees. Therefore, we suggest that the time has come to revisit theories that were developed before most of today's employees entered the workforce or were even born.

Following a brief discussion of how Millennials differ from prior generations, we examine the utility of current leadership theories when applied to this younger generation of employees. In doing so, we limit the scope of our review to five theoretical perspectives which have been identified as amongst the most frequently used of the 21st century (Dinh et al., 2014) which include three established theories – Transformational Leadership, Information Processing, and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) – and two emerging theories – Authentic Leadership and Ethical Leadership.

By considering current leadership theories in the context of a changing work force, we seek to make three important contributions to the leadership literature. First, we identify generational changes that have important implications for leaders in today's organizations. Second, we answer the call to reevaluate our ideas about leadership in the context of these generational differences (Lyons and Kuron, 2014). Third and finally, we offer a framework to guide future research regarding leadership in the face of a changing workforce.

Generation gaps

It is not uncommon for people to hold unfavorable perceptions of employees from younger generations (Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg, 2010). While some perceived differences are overstated (Deal et al., 2010) due to varying life stages (Lyons and Kuron, 2014), a growing area of research sheds light on the true differences between Millennials and the two previous generations, which collectively represent the overwhelming majority of today's workforce. Indeed, several important generational shifts which include changes in employee personalities, work attitudes, and values are of particular interest to leadership scholars because of the importance of these variables in work-related outcomes.

One such shift is in individual differences or dispositions. Notably, the Millennial generation seems to be more individualistic than their forbearers (Twenge, 2010). Furthermore, in contradiction to the commonly held belief that Millennials are more altruistic than previous generations (Twenge et al., 2010), empirical research suggests that younger generations are, in fact, less altruistic at work than earlier generations of employees (Lyons, Duxbury, and Higgins, 2005) and have lower concern for others (Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman, 2012). As will be discussed in the next section, a rise in the proportion of individualists in the work force, especially in combination with fading levels of altruism, can have important implications for leaders in organizations.

Another important generational gap exists in employee attitudes toward work. Work centrality is becoming less and less important across the three generations, being least important to the Millennial generation (Twenge and Kasser, 2013). Employees in the younger generation value work-life balance and meaningful lives outside of work, including leisure activities, more than their