

Intergenerational Diversity and Management Styles: How the Presence of Multiple Generations in the Workplace Shapes Contemporary Leadership

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Abstract

Contemporary organizations operate under conditions of increasing generational diversity, encompassing Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Although the literature frequently emphasizes differences in work expectations, communication styles, and attitudes toward leadership, more recent analyses suggest that such variation is co-shaped by age, career stage, and socioeconomic context. The aim of this article is to examine how generational diversity affects leadership expectations and what interpretive limitations arise from attributing behavior exclusively to generational membership. The article is conceptual in nature and draws on a structured review of the management and organizational psychology literature (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar; 2010-2025). Of 180 records retrieved, 48 publications meeting the qualitative and thematic criteria were included in the synthesis. Findings indicate that no universal leadership style is effective in multigenerational teams; rather, leader adaptability, contextual sensitivity, and the capacity to interpret diverse employee needs prove critical. In response, an integrative model of multigenerational leadership is proposed, comprising four competencies: generational intelligence, communicative flexibility, work environment design, and conflict management. This model integrates situational, transformational, and inclusive leadership perspectives, treating generational differences as a contextual variable rather than a deterministic predictor of behavior. The article highlights the need for further empirical validation, particularly through multilevel and longitudinal research designs.

Keywords

Generational Diversity, Leadership Styles, Multigenerational Management, Generation Z, Millennials, Baby Boomers, Leadership Flexibility, Leader Competencies

1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by the co-presence of multiple generational cohorts. The workplace brings together employees representing Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, a constellation often associated with observable differences in communication preferences, leadership expectations, work organization, and professional development (Rudolph et al., 2018; Huyler et al., 2025). At the same time, contemporary literature increasingly underscores that the observed variation cannot be unambiguously attributed solely to generational membership, as it is overlaid by other critical variables such as age, career stage, and the socioeconomic conditions in which individuals operate (Costanza et al., 2012; Rudolph et al., 2018). In this framework, generational membership should be treated primarily as an analytical category and a socially constructed interpretive filter, rather than as a stable trait that determines individual behavior. This implies that differences attributed to cohorts may reflect both the effects of historical socialization and situational factors related to career trajectory or changes in organizational roles over time.

Empirical research suggests that perceived differences between cohorts may be associated with distinct preferences regarding work and collaboration. For instance, some analyses indicate that older employees more frequently emphasize the importance of organizational stability, predictability, and formally defined decision-making structures, whereas younger cohorts tend to prefer flexibility, regular feedback, and more participatory forms of communication (Cogin, 2012; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Schroth, 2019). It must be emphasized, however, that findings in this area remain inconsistent, and observed inter-cohort effects are typically small, which limits the scope for strong generalizations. Consequently, generational differences should not be interpreted as unequivocal or deterministic explanations of organizational behavior, but rather as one of several possible dimensions of workplace diversity. In particular, it is necessary to distinguish cohort effects from age effects and career-stage effects, which may more substantially account for observed differences in employee attitudes and expectations. It may be argued that the significance of this approach increases in the context of contemporary demographic changes, the extension of working life, and the proliferation of hybrid work arrangements, which further amplify the diversity of employee experiences and expectations.

These observations carry important implications for leadership theory and practice. Traditional leadership models, developed in conditions of greater organ-

izational homogeneity, may prove insufficient in environments characterized by high levels of variation in preferences, communication styles, and attitudes toward authority. For leaders, this implies the necessity of developing adaptive competencies that enable flexible adjustment of managerial style to the individual needs of employees, rather than relying on simplified assumptions about generational membership.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Generational Cohort Theory and the Organizational Context

The concept of generation derives from Mannheim's (1952) foundational sociological framework, which defined generations as groups of individuals shaped by shared historical and social experiences at various stages of life development. Building on this, Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) posits that shared sociohistorical experiences may give rise to relatively coherent patterns of values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations, which subsequently influence individuals' functioning in the work environment (Mannheim, 1952; Rudolph et al., 2018). The organizational literature most commonly identifies four cohorts: Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials/Generation Y (1981-1996), and Generation Z (1997-2012). These cohorts are assumed to have developed under distinct socioeconomic, technological, and institutional conditions, which may partially account for observable differences in work expectations, communication styles, and attitudes toward authority and career development.

At the same time, contemporary literature increasingly highlights the limitations of cohort-based approaches. Attention has been drawn to the problem of overlapping cohort, age, and career-stage effects (the so-called Age-Period-Cohort problem), which complicates the unambiguous attribution of observed differences solely to generational membership. In this context, a growing body of research—including meta-analyses and systematic reviews published between 2023 and 2025—indicates that generational effects are frequently small, unstable, or highly contingent upon the organizational context and research methodology, thereby undermining their status as durable and universal explanatory categories. The literature also notes the risk of excessive homogenization of generational categories, which may lead to their essentialization and the perpetuation of oversimplified representations of workers (Costanza et al., 2012; Rudolph et al., 2018). In reality, many of the differences attributed to generations may be more adequately explained by variables such as age, career stage, professional experience, and changes in working conditions and technology over time. For example, preferences regarding work flexibility, work-life balance, or communication styles may reflect the individual's phase of professional life rather than membership in a particular cohort.

In light of these findings, this article adopts a contextual and non-standardizing approach to generational diversity. Generational membership is treated not as a deterministic predictor of organizational behavior, but as one of many contextual variables that may co-shape expectations with regard to leadership, communica-

tion, and management practices. This conceptualization preserves the heuristic utility of generational categories while avoiding their excessive simplification, and supports a more balanced interpretation of organizational phenomena. The significance of this approach becomes particularly evident given contemporary demographic shifts, the extension of working life, multigenerational team structures, and the proliferation of hybrid work models, all of which further amplify the diversity of employee experiences and expectations. From the perspective of HR practice and leadership, this implies the necessity of moving away from simplified, cohort-based stereotypes toward more individualized management strategies grounded in the diagnosis of needs arising from career stage, life situation, and organizational context.

2.2. Generational Diversity and Leadership Expectations

Research on generational diversity suggests that employees may differ in their expectations regarding leadership and organizational functioning. It must be emphasized, however, that these differences are neither homogeneous nor stable, and should be interpreted with caution (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2023), taking into account the overlapping effects of age, career stage, and organizational context. Accordingly, generational membership constitutes only one possible explanatory variable, rather than a comprehensive explanation of observed variation.

The empirical literature indicates that in some studies, older cohorts—including Baby Boomers—more frequently report greater attachment to organizational stability, predictable structures, and clearly defined managerial roles (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Cogin, 2012). From a leadership perspective, this may be associated with a preference for greater decisional clarity, process formalization, and organizational consistency. At the same time, it must be noted that such conclusions are not universal and may be strongly conditioned by sector-specific factors, professional experience, and career stage. With respect to Generation X, some studies indicate a relatively greater emphasis on work autonomy, results orientation, and limited need for operational supervision (Cogin, 2012). These interpretations are often linked to experiences of organizational restructuring and labor market volatility during the period of their professional activity. Here again, however, such differences may be equally well explained by situational and occupational factors rather than exclusively by cohort membership.

Concerning younger employees—Millennials and Generation Z—some studies report greater importance attributed to regular feedback, participation in decision-making, work flexibility, and an inclusive organizational environment (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Schroth, 2019). It must be stressed, however, that these are generalizations of limited predictive power, whose validity depends on the organizational context, industry, and individual career trajectories. Contemporary work environments based on digital technology and hybrid models may amplify or attenuate these preferences independently of cohort membership. Literature consistently points to substantial within-group heterogeneity and the overlapping of trait distributions across cohorts. Meta-analyses and research reviews demonstrate that generational effects in the domain of organizational attitudes and be-

haviors are frequently small, unstable, or highly dependent on research methodology (Costanza et al., 2012; Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

Consequently, there is an increasing emphasis on the need for cautious interpretation of generational categories and avoidance of treating them as homogeneous and deterministic reference groups. From a leadership perspective, this implies that effective management of multigenerational teams should not be based on simplified cohort stereotypes, but on the recognition of diverse and contextual employee needs—simultaneously encompassing individual, organizational, and career-stage factors. In this framework, leadership effectiveness depends primarily on the adaptive capacities of the leader, understood as the ability to flexibly adjust behavior to diverse employee expectations. This approach is consistent with contemporary streams of adaptive and inclusive leadership, which emphasize the importance of behavioral flexibility, contextual sensitivity, and the capacity to integrate diverse team perspectives, rather than relying on universal management styles. As a result, generational diversity should not be treated as the basis for creating separate leadership models for individual cohorts, but as one element of the broader heterogeneity of teams—one that requires the development of leadership competencies enabling effective functioning under conditions of diversity.

3. Methodology

This article is conceptual in nature and is grounded in a structured, critical review of the literature, integrating research from management science, organizational psychology, leadership studies, and the literature on generational diversity. The applied approach combines elements of systematic literature search with interpretive thematic synthesis. The aim was not statistical inference or hypothesis testing, but the development of coherent, theoretically grounded conceptual frameworks for leadership in multigenerational teams.

3.1. Search Strategy and Source Selection

The literature review was conducted in the Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection databases, which provide access to peer-reviewed literature of high methodological quality. Google Scholar was additionally employed as a supplementary source enabling the identification of the most recent publications, conceptual works, and institutional reports (e.g., SHRM, Deloitte, Gallup) not yet indexed in bibliographic databases. The temporal scope encompassed publications from 2010 to 2025, with particular emphasis on research published after 2020, reflecting the increased salience of hybrid work, digitalization, and generational change in post-pandemic work environments.

A standardized search strategy based on keyword combinations was applied:

- “Generational diversity” OR “multigenerational workforce”.
- “Leadership” OR “leadership style*” OR “leadership effectiveness”.
- “Adaptive leadership” OR “inclusive leadership” OR “situational leadership”.
- “Organizational behavior” AND generation*.

An exemplary search string: (“generational diversity” OR “multigenerational workforce”) AND (“leadership” OR “leadership style*”) AND (“organizational behavior” OR “management”).

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following publications were included in the analysis:

- Peer-reviewed articles, academic monographs, and highly cited conceptual works;
- Empirical and theoretical studies addressing generational diversity in an organizational context;
- Publications analyzing leadership, organizational behavior, or the functioning of multigenerational teams;
- Institutional reports used exclusively as contextual sources. The following were excluded:
- Publications lacking a clearly described methodological approach;
- Popular science and journalistic texts;
- Studies unrelated to an organizational context;
- Duplicates and works of low relevance following full-text analysis.

3.3. Literature Selection Procedure

The review procedure was conducted in accordance with PRISMA-inspired principles, adapted to the nature of a conceptual review. The purpose of applying this procedure was to enhance the transparency of the literature selection process and to ensure partial replicability of the analytical process, while preserving the flexibility characteristic of conceptual syntheses. The selection process proceeded in four stages. In the first stage (identification), a total of 180 records were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, and Google Scholar. A deduplication process and preliminary screening based on title and abstract analysis were then conducted, resulting in 95 publications being admitted to further analysis. In the subsequent stage, full-text evaluation of the qualified sources was performed, at which point 47 publications were excluded due to lack of direct relevance to leadership issues, insufficient conceptual relevance, or absence of organizational context. Ultimately, 48 publications were included in the thematic synthesis. The literature selection process is presented schematically in **Figure 1**.

The ultimately selected body of publications constituted the basis for further qualitative analysis and thematic synthesis, directed toward identifying the relationships between generational diversity, leadership competencies, and organizational functioning.

3.4. Data Analysis Method

Thematic synthesis supported by iterative qualitative coding was applied. This approach enabled the integration of heterogeneous literary sources into coherent conceptual frameworks and the identification of recurring theoretical patterns in the analyzed material. The analysis proceeded in three stages:

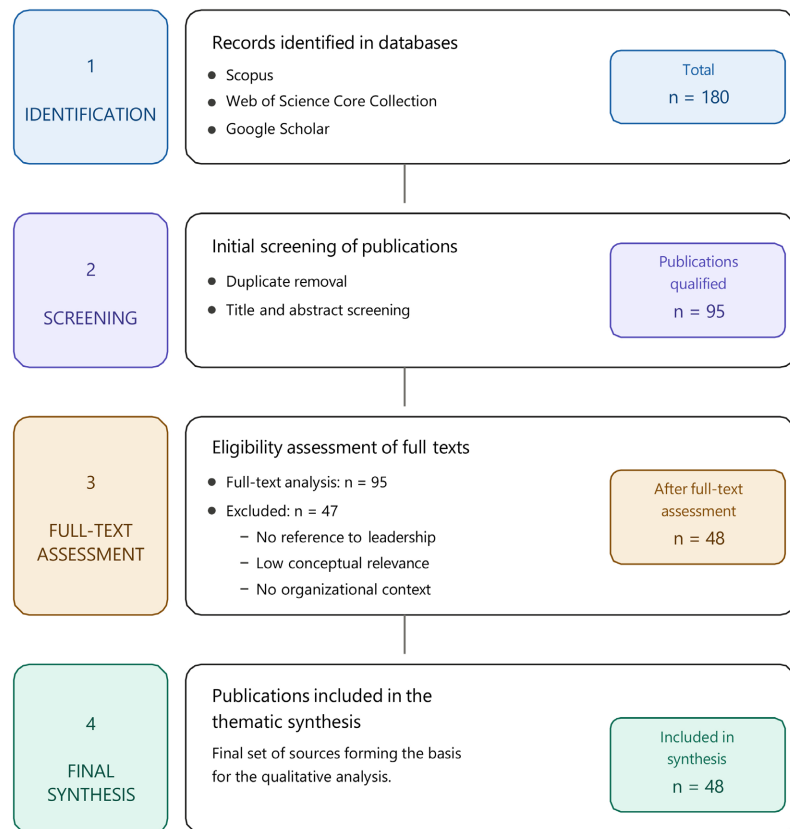


Figure 1. Diagram of the literature selection process inspired by the PRISMA approach. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

- Open coding: identification of basic conceptual categories such as generational expectations, leadership styles, communication, motivation, and organizational diversity.
- Axial coding: grouping of codes into higher-order analytical categories encompassing, inter alia, adaptive leadership, inclusivity, communicative flexibility, and mechanisms of multigenerational team management.
- Selective coding (theoretical synthesis): integration of categories into a coherent conceptual model describing the relationships between generational diversity, leadership competencies, and organizational outcomes. This stage was constructive in character and served the development of a theoretical framework rather than the testing of empirical relationships.

In order to enhance analytical transparency, an iterative process of code comparison and verification across successive analytical cycles was employed. Interpretive consistency was ensured through repeated references to the source literature and consistent application of established analytical definitions. Given the conceptual and interpretive nature of the thematic synthesis, formal inter-rater reliability procedures were not applied. However, to enhance the credibility of the analysis, iterative category comparison, repeated references to the source literature, and consistent application of established operational definitions were employed.

3.5. Methodological Positioning and Limitations

This study constitutes a conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. Its aim is the development and integration of existing theoretical approaches in the domain of leadership and generational diversity. Several important limitations must be acknowledged, as they affect the scope and interpretation of the presented conclusions:

- The dominance of English-language literature, which may limit the transferability of findings to other cultural contexts;
- The absence of empirical validation of the proposed model, which requires further testing using both quantitative and qualitative methods;
- The coding process contains an inevitable interpretive component characteristic of conceptual thematic syntheses;
- Generational categories are inherently contested and may overlap with age and career-stage effects, a consideration that has been incorporated into the interpretation of the findings.

3.6. Operationalization of the Multigenerational Leadership Model

To enable future empirical verification of the proposed model, a preliminary operationalization has been developed. This operationalization is framed as a pre-operational framework and serves as a bridge between the theoretical construct and its potential measurement in quantitative research. The model encompasses four primary variable types:

- Independent variable: generational diversity;
- Mediating variables: leadership competencies;
- Moderating variables: conflict management mechanisms;
- Dependent variables: organizational outcomes.

The model structure assumes that leadership competencies play a central mediating role, transforming the influence of generational diversity on organizational outcomes. Simultaneously, conflict management mechanisms function as moderating variables, affecting the strength and direction of these relationships. The operationalization strategy is grounded in two complementary approaches:

- Utilization of existing, validated measurement scales. Reference is made to constructs widely employed in the literature on transformational leadership, inclusive leadership, and situational leadership, which provide a basis for measuring general leadership competencies and enable the anchoring of the proposed model in existing theoretical frameworks.
- Development of preliminary operational definitions for novel constructs. This applies primarily to the construct of generational intelligence, defined in this model as a set of competencies enabling a leader to understand, interpret, and appropriately respond to the diverse needs of employees arising from their generational membership. This construct is exploratory in nature and requires further empirical validation, particularly through multilevel and longitudinal research.

Figure 2 constitutes a conceptual-operational instrument rather than a validated measurement scale. Its function is to translate abstract theoretical constructs into observable indicators, to facilitate the design of future empirical studies (particularly quantitative ones), and to support the standardization of variables in subsequent stages of model validation. Accordingly, **Figure 2** should be interpreted as a proposed measurement structure requiring further empirical verification, rather than a ready-to-use diagnostic tool. It should be emphasized that **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** constitute complementary and logically interconnected elements of a single research architecture. **Figure 1** presents the conceptual model of relationships between variables, illustrating the directions of influence and the roles of mediation and moderation. **Figure 2** operationalizes these relationships by assigning measurable indicators and potential measurement instruments. Together, both elements form coherent conceptual-operational frameworks that enable the transition from the theoretical level to the empirical research level and constitute the foundation for future validation of the proposed model.

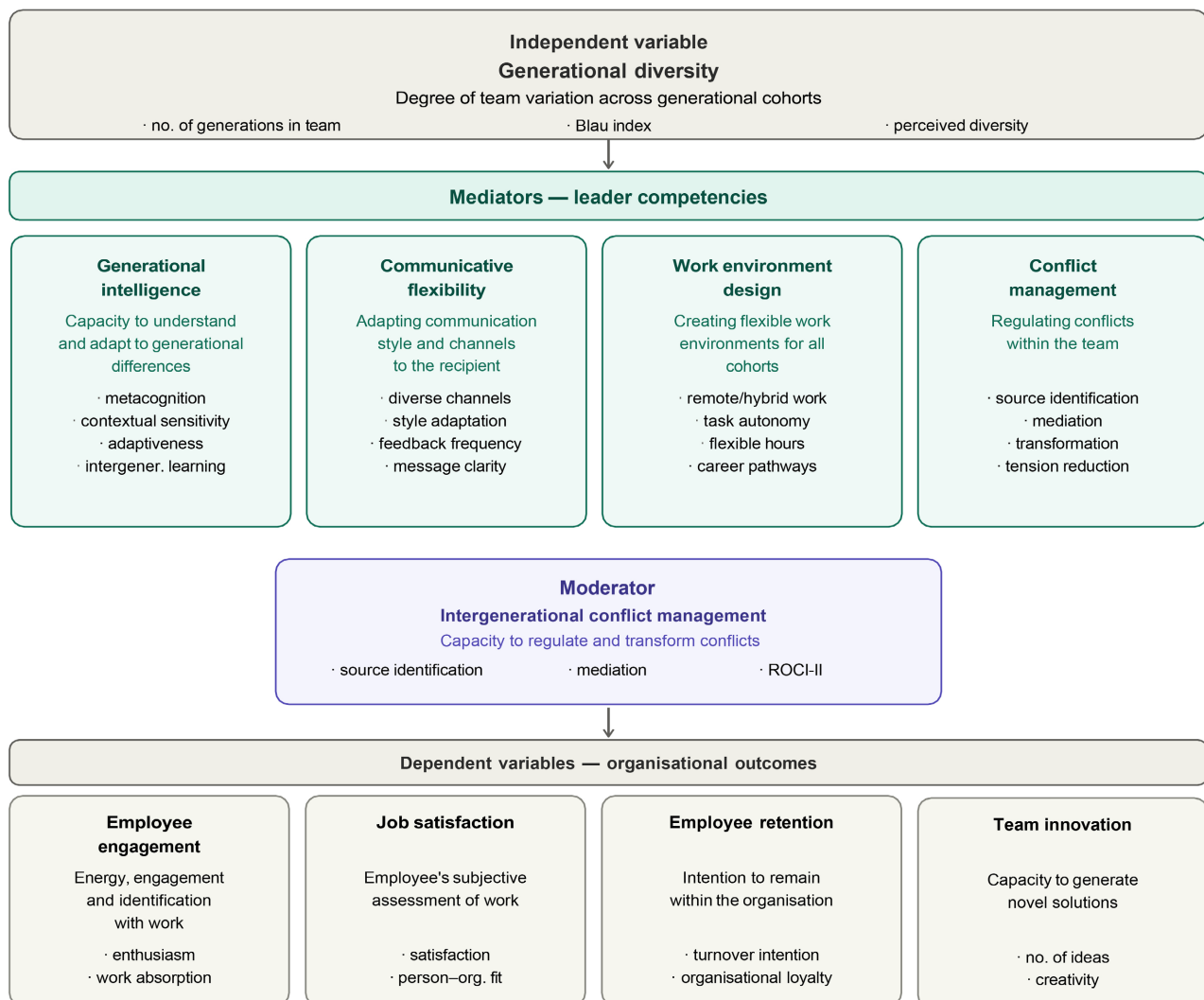


Figure 2. Operationalization of variables in the multigenerational leadership model. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

3.6.1. Conceptual Framework of Generational Intelligence and Implications for Future Research

Given the absence of established measurement instruments for the construct of generational intelligence in the existing literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework intended to serve further theoretical refinement and future empirical exploration of this phenomenon. The proposed conceptualization draws inspiration from the concept of cultural intelligence but does not constitute its direct extrapolation; rather, it represents an adaptation of the logic of adaptive competencies to the specifics of generational diversity in organizations.

Unlike cultural intelligence, which pertains to functioning within distinct cultural systems, generational intelligence concerns the ability to interpret and respond to variation arising from differing sociohistorical experiences within a shared organizational context.

In this conceptualization, generational intelligence is understood as a meta-competency enabling the reduction of oversimplified generational categories in favor of a more contextualized interpretation of employee behavior, one that takes into account their professional experiences, career stage, and organizational conditions. This construct is multidimensional and encompasses four interrelated components:

- Generational metacognition: refers to reflexive awareness of one's own interpretive schemas and potential biases regarding generational categories. It encompasses the ability to critically analyze the influence of personal experiences and organizational socialization on the interpretation of employee behavior.
- Contextual sensitivity: denotes the ability to interpret employee behavior in relation to their career stage, professional experiences, and sociohistorical conditions, rather than relying exclusively on cohort membership.
- Behavioral adaptability: refers to flexibility in adjusting communication styles and leadership behaviors to individual and situational work conditions.
- Intergenerational learning orientation: denotes openness to bidirectional knowledge exchange between employees with diverse experience, treating generational diversity as a potential source of organizational learning.

To support future empirical research, a set of illustrative behavioral indicators has been proposed; these do not constitute validated measurement items:

- Awareness that assessments of employees may be shaped by assumptions regarding age or generation;
- Interpretation of employee behavior in relation to contextual and biographical factors;
- Adjustment of communication and management style to individual and situational needs;
- Facilitation of knowledge exchange among employees with diverse experience;
- Perception of generational diversity as a potential source of organizational learning.

These indicators serve a conceptual function and constitute a starting point for the development of future measurement instruments requiring psychometric val-

idation. Within the proposed model, generational intelligence functions as an adaptive meta-competency conditioning the manner in which generational diversity translates into organizational functioning. Consistent with situational and inclusive leadership approaches, its significance is contextual rather than deterministic. Future research may attempt to operationalize the construct using methods such as exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, following the development and validation of an appropriate item pool.

3.6.2. Proposed Model for Empirical Analysis

For the future empirical verification of the proposed model, a quantitative research approach based on the analysis of relationships between latent variables may be employed. The purpose of this section is not to prescribe a single correct statistical procedure, but to present the analytical logic appropriate to the complex model structure encompassing direct, mediational, and moderational relationships. At a preliminary stage, the application of multiple regression analyses may be warranted, with a view to identifying basic relationships between generational diversity and organizational outcomes (hypotheses H1 - H2). This stage allows for preliminary verification of the direction and magnitude of effects and serves as a reference point for more complex analyses. At a subsequent stage, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is the recommended approach, as it enables the simultaneous analysis of multiple relationships among latent constructs. The application of SEM allows for the accommodation of measurement error and the testing of mediational mechanisms in which leader competencies serve as intervening variables (H3 - H5), as well as moderational effects associated with conflict management mechanisms (H6). Where sample size constraints apply, path analysis may serve as an alternative, enabling the testing of structural relationships under a simplified model specification without the necessity of defining latent variables.

3.6.3. Proposed Design for Empirical Research

The proposed empirical research design assumes the application of a quantitative cross-sectional approach based on the survey method, with the possibility of extension to a longitudinal design for the purpose of analyzing the dynamics of intergenerational relations over time. The unit of analysis may be either the individual level (employee) or the team level, depending on the adopted scope of the study. In the case of multilevel analysis, data aggregation procedures must be applied and within-group agreement assessed using indicators such as Intraclass Correlation Coefficients (ICC), enabling the justification of team-level construct formation. To reduce common method bias, multi-source measurement is recommended—for instance, combining employee and supervisor ratings—as this enhances inferential validity and reduces the risk of methodological artifacts.

Given the hierarchical data structure (employees nested within teams or organizations), the application of Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) may be warranted, enabling the simultaneous analysis of effects at the individual and team levels. The analytical model should also incorporate control variables such as age,

tenure, sector of activity, and organizational size, thereby limiting the influence of potential confounding factors and enhancing the robustness of empirical inferences.

4. Conceptual Model of Multigenerational Leadership

4.1. Model Assumptions and Inter-Variable Relationships

On the basis of the conducted literature synthesis, a conceptual model of multigenerational leadership (**Figure 3**) is proposed, integrating the mechanisms through which generational diversity influences leadership processes and organizational outcomes.

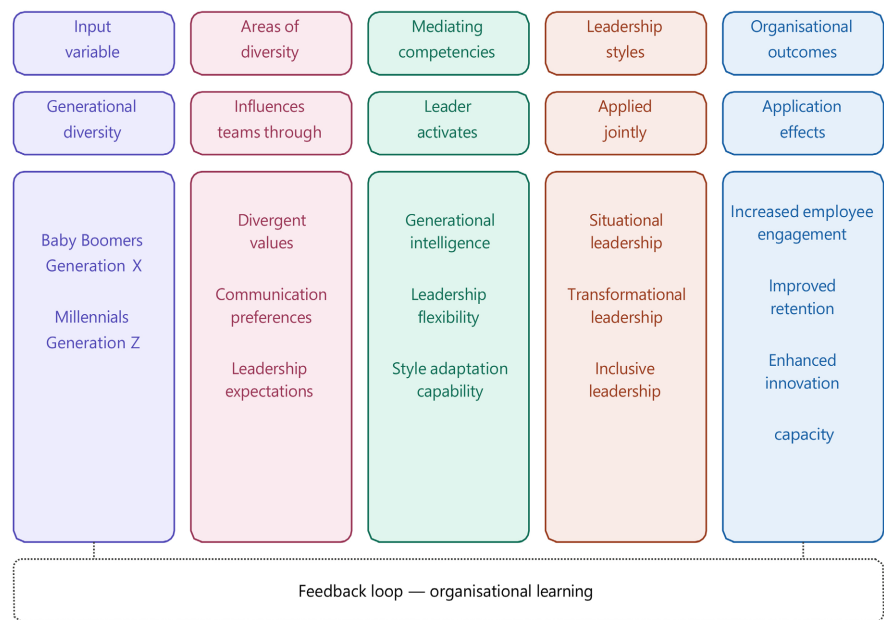


Figure 3. The multigenerational leadership model. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The model posits that generational diversity functions as a contextual input variable, shaping team dynamics through differences in values, communication preferences, and leadership expectations. However, its influence on organizational outcomes is not direct—it is mediated by a set of leader competencies, encompassing generational intelligence, communicative flexibility, the capacity to design work environments, and conflict management skills. These competencies operate as adaptive mechanisms capable of transforming generational diversity into functional or dysfunctional outcomes, depending on the leader's ability to integrate diverse team perspectives. The model also acknowledges that the relationship between generational diversity and organizational outcomes is conditioned by moderating factors—in particular, conflict management processes—which influence whether diversity leads to productive cognitive tension or to relational conflict. In this sense, leadership is conceptualized not as a static style, but as a system of adaptive competencies enabling the transformation of generational

diversity into organizational value. The relationships among model components are indirect and conditional in nature, encompassing both mediational and moderational mechanisms.

Specifically, it is assumed that generational diversity affects team outcomes primarily through cognitive diversity—which may foster enhanced creativity and innovation, but also increase the likelihood of affective conflict and diminished cohesion. The direction and magnitude of these effects are non-linear, depending on the level of leadership competencies within the team. Leader competencies thus function as enabling mechanisms that determine the extent to which generational variation will be translated into functional or dysfunctional outcomes. Within this framework, generational diversity should not be interpreted as an inherently beneficial or detrimental factor, but as a conditional contextual characteristic whose effects are shaped by leadership capabilities. The model should be interpreted as a conceptual simplification of complex organizational dynamics, subject to contextual constraints such as organizational culture, sector specifics, and the degree of digitalization.

4.2. Situational Leadership

Among classical leadership theories, situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Thompson & Glasø, 2015) is of particular significance for managing diverse teams, as it assumes the necessity of adjusting the managerial style to the employee's level of readiness. This readiness encompasses both competence and motivation—individual factors that may change over time in tandem with the individual's professional development. In this framework, leadership effectiveness does not derive from a single, universal management style, but from its flexible adaptation to the situation and the individual employee. The model assumes a balance between directive and supportive behaviors, whose intensity should be contingent on the degree of employee autonomy and task experience.

Contemporary literature on workplace differences indicates that observed variation in employee attitudes and expectations cannot be reduced exclusively to generational membership. Far greater significance is attributed to factors such as career stage, level of experience, and organizational context (Ravid et al., 2025; Rudolph et al., 2018). This implies that interpreting employee behavior through the lens of generational cohorts has limited explanatory value, and that effective leadership requires attention to individual differences in work readiness. In organizational practice, the situational approach translates into the necessity of individualizing leadership style. Employees with less professional experience typically require more structure, more frequent feedback, and more direct task guidance. Conversely, more experienced individuals more often expect autonomy, trust, and reduced supervisory control. Empirical research confirms that matching leadership style to the employee's level of readiness promotes higher engagement, job satisfaction, and team effectiveness (Kim et al., 2023). At the same time, the literature indicates that the quality of the leader-member relationship (LMX)

may amplify the effects of leadership style alignment by enhancing trust, perceptions of support, and collaboration quality (Bauer & Erdogan, 2021; Thompson & Glasø, 2018). Moreover, authentic leadership and high LMX quality may compensate for individual differences among employees, enhancing their creativity, proactivity, and engagement (Sumant et al., 2023). This suggests that the effectiveness of situational leadership depends not only on accurate style matching, but also on the quality of interpersonal relationships within the team. Accordingly, situational leadership should be approached as an individual-centered framework in which the critical determinants are employee competence and readiness, rather than generational group membership.

4.3. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) constitutes an important integrative mechanism in multigenerational teams, supporting the development of a shared sense of purpose capable of transcending individual differences—including those associated with generational membership. Rather than eliminating diversity, this approach embeds it within a narrative grounded in shared values, thereby facilitating collective identification with organizational goals. In the proposed model, transformational leadership is particularly relevant to the motivational dimension of leader behavior, as it can strengthen engagement among employees representing diverse expectations regarding communication, feedback, and authority structures. The individualized consideration component is of pivotal importance here, as it enables leaders to respond to diverse employee needs without reducing them to simplified generational categories. In hybrid and remote work environments, this competency acquires particular significance, since the reduced frequency of direct interactions heightens the importance of communication quality, relational support, and the individual employee's sense of being seen and recognized.

Recent research indicates that transformational leadership can support employee engagement and team cohesion in hybrid work contexts, particularly through mechanisms of inspirational motivation, individualized support, and adaptive communication (Critchley, 2024; Nasution & Sibuea, 2025). Contemporary analyses further underscore that leadership effectiveness in hybrid environments depends not only on leader charisma, but also on authenticity, behavioral predictability, and the consistency of everyday communicative interactions, which reinforce interpersonal trust and employees' sense of psychological safety (Lütjens & Felfe, 2025). It is increasingly noted that employees expect from leaders not so much symbolic authority based on formal position, but relational credibility, communicative accessibility, and the capacity to build trust in distributed work structures. In this sense, transformational leadership should not be interpreted as a universal management style, but as an adaptive set of behaviors supporting the integration of teams operating under conditions of high organizational heterogeneity.

4.4. Inclusive Leadership as a Mechanism for Integrating Generational Diversity

Inclusive leadership, defined as the capacity to foster a sense of belonging while simultaneously supporting the individual uniqueness of employees (Shore et al., 2011), constitutes a significant mechanism supporting effective collaboration in multigenerational teams consistent with evidence that diversity management practices strengthen employees' affective commitment to the organisation (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). In contrast to approaches based on generational categorization, inclusive leadership focuses on creating conditions that enable the surfacing, recognition, and integration of diverse perspectives and individual resources of employees. In this framework, inclusivity manifests through the recognition of complementary forms of human capital, including:

- Digital and technological competencies;
- Organizational experience and institutional knowledge;
- Diverse preferences regarding autonomy and work structure.

By shaping communication processes and participatory decision-making mechanisms, inclusive leadership can strengthen interpersonal trust, reduce relational tensions, and enhance collaboration quality in generationally diverse teams (Huyler et al., 2025). The key assumption of this approach, however, is that the effectiveness of inclusive leadership does not derive from managing “generational differences” per se, but from the capacity to respond to the diverse individual needs and expectations of employees.

4.5. Limitations of Universal Leadership Styles in Multigenerational Teams

The literature indicates that the application of a uniform leadership style in teams characterized by high heterogeneity may yield suboptimal organizational outcomes. In this framework, however, the phenomenon is not interpreted as a direct effect of generational differences, but as a consequence of misalignment between leadership behaviors and diverse employee needs. An excessively directive approach may enhance operational clarity and structure, yet simultaneously limit the autonomy and engagement of employees who expect greater participation. Conversely, insufficient structuring and excessive delegation may reduce effectiveness in situations requiring clear guidelines and intensive coordination. Consequently, the key mechanism conditioning leadership effectiveness is not the selection of a single “optimal style”, but the leader’s capacity to diagnose the context and flexibly adjust leadership behaviors to the situation and the individual needs of employees. In this sense, the leader’s adaptive competencies constitute the central explanatory factor of managerial effectiveness in multigenerational teams—one that outweighs rigid generational categories as decisional heuristics.

5. Leader Competencies in Multigenerational Leadership

Drawing on the proposed model of multigenerational leadership (Figure 1),

leader competencies are conceptualized as contextually conditioned mediating mechanisms that enable the transformation of generational diversity into organizational outcomes. Competencies associated with diversity management and inclusive leadership are, in the most recent theoretical and empirical frameworks (Shore et al., 2011; Roberson, 2019; Shore & Chung, 2022), not regarded as relatively stable, innate individual dispositions, but as dynamic, developable competency resources that are shaped and updated through complex social interactions and in close relation to the organizational context. This implies that the effectiveness of leaders in the domain of inclusivity derives not solely from individual predispositions, but from the capacity for continuous learning, reflexive adjustment of behavior to changing work conditions, and deliberate cultivation of an environment conducive to participation, equity, and mutual respect. Research on human resource heterogeneity emphasizes that the effects of diversity are conditional in nature and depend on leadership practices, team climate, and levels of psychological safety (Nishii, 2013; Randel et al., 2018; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). In this framework, generational diversity is treated as a significant contextual condition, while leader competencies determine the manner in which the potential benefits and tensions arising from team heterogeneity are translated into organizational functioning. A moderating function within the model is performed primarily by conflict management mechanisms, which influence the intensity and character of relational and cognitive conflicts in multigenerational teams. It is precisely the manner in which the leader identifies, channels, and transforms tensions arising from differing perspectives that determines whether diversity becomes a source of synergy or a barrier to effective collaboration.

5.1. Generational Intelligence

The concept of generational intelligence draws inspiration from research on cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007; Ang & Van Dyne, 2015), yet does not constitute its direct extension. Whereas cultural intelligence pertains to adaptation across different cultural systems, generational intelligence concerns the capacity to function within a single organizational system characterized by diversity of sociohistorical, technological, and professional experiences. Contemporary literature indicates that generational differences should not be treated as stable cohort characteristics, but as contextual constructs arising from the interaction of age, career stage, and social experiences (Rudolph et al., 2021; Ravid et al., 2025). In this framework, generational intelligence does not refer to familiarity with stereotypical “generational traits”, but to the reflexive capacity to interpret and manage variation arising from the diverse experiential trajectories of employees.

Generational intelligence may be defined as a meta-competency enabling leaders to recognize, interpret, and adaptively respond to diverse behavioral patterns and employee expectations, while simultaneously limiting stereotyping and attributional errors. This construct is dynamic and relational in character, as its effectiveness depends on the leader’s capacity to integrate individual and contextual information

about employees rather than relying on simplified cohort categories. At the foundational level, generational intelligence encompasses three interrelated dimensions:

- The cognitive dimension, pertaining to understanding diverse value orientations, formative experiences, and occupational expectations arising from differing career trajectories;
- The motivational dimension, encompassing the leader's readiness to engage in intergenerational relations and collaboration;
- The behavioral dimension, pertaining to the capacity for flexible adjustment of communication and leadership behaviors to the situational context.

This three-dimensional conceptualization represents the foundational level of construct operationalization and reflects the inspiration drawn from the logic of cultural intelligence. In this article, however, it has been developed into a more advanced, four-component operational model that enables more precise description of the adaptive mechanisms associated with leader functioning in a multigenerational environment.

At the operational level, generational intelligence encompasses four interrelated components:

- Generational metacognition: awareness of one's own interpretive schemas and potential biases regarding generational categories;
- Contextual sensitivity: the capacity to interpret employee behavior through the lens of professional experiences, career stage, and organizational context, rather than relying exclusively on cohort membership;
- Behavioral adaptability: flexible adjustment of communication styles and leadership behaviors to situational and individual needs;
- Intergenerational learning orientation: treating diversity of experience as a potential source of knowledge exchange, innovation, and organizational development.

In contrast to inclusive leadership, which focuses primarily on building employees' sense of belonging and participation, generational intelligence pertains to the interpretive processes that precede leadership actions. Conversely, unlike communicative flexibility—which concerns the operational adjustment of communication styles—generational intelligence encompasses the broader capacity to recognize and integrate diverse employee perspectives within a shared organizational environment. Within the proposed model, generational intelligence functions as a mediating mechanism between generational diversity and team functioning, implying that the influence of generational heterogeneity on organizational effectiveness is not direct, but depends on the leader's capacity to interpret and integrate diverse employee needs. This conceptualization is consistent with situational, adaptive, and inclusive approaches in leadership theory, which emphasize the importance of contextual fit over universal management styles.

5.2. Communicative Flexibility

Communicative flexibility constitutes a key operational leadership competency

that determines the quality of interactions in multigenerational teams. Recent research on hybrid work indicates that communicative disruptions are among the most frequent sources of intergenerational tensions (Choudhury et al., 2021). Communicative flexibility refers to the capacity to dynamically adjust communication modes, tone, and frequency according to the interlocutor's needs and contextual requirements. It extends beyond digital competencies to encompass relational calibration.

The leader operates across multiple communicative registers:

- Formal, structural, and direct communication;
- Asynchronous, digital-first communication, typical of hybrid environments;
- Relational, information-intensive communication, characteristic of teams with high levels of psychological safety.

Rather than assuming the existence of fixed, homogeneous generational preferences, the approach grounded in communicative flexibility posits that communication preferences are dynamic, contextually conditioned, and individually differentiated (Rudolph et al., 2021; Ravid et al., 2025). Generational categories thus function as analytical tools rather than descriptions of allegedly stable "generational traits".

5.3. Work Environment Design Capacity

Work environment design capacity refers to the leader's competencies in shaping organizational arrangements that enable the functioning of employees with diverse needs, while maintaining the systemic coherence of the organization. This concept is grounded in job design theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Oldham & Fried, 2016) and person-environment fit research (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), which indicates that work effectiveness depends on alignment between environmental demands and individual resources. Contemporary research on hybrid work and flexible employment models (Bloom et al., 2015; Yang & Jiang, 2025) underscores the necessity of balancing dimensions such as autonomy, structure, and flexibility, rather than standardizing them. In this framework, the leader serves as a designer of the organizational system rather than merely an executor of procedures. This includes specifically the design of flexible and hybrid work models, the implementation of adaptive organizational policies, the creation of diverse yet coherent performance evaluation systems, and the development of non-linear and individualized career pathways. This does not entail the creation of distinct systems for individual generational cohorts, but rather the design of modular organizational architectures enabling individualization within common institutional frameworks.

5.4. Intergenerational Conflict Management

Research indicates that team heterogeneity may be associated with both cognitive and affective conflict (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). At the same time, the literature consistently demonstrates that only affective conflict has stably neg-

ative consequences for team effectiveness, whereas cognitive conflict may support learning processes and innovation, provided it occurs under conditions of psychological safety. Conflict management in multigenerational teams encompasses, *inter alia*, the identification of sources of tension—including erroneous attributions regarding generational differences—the distinction between task (cognitive) and relational (affective) conflict, and the transformation of disagreements into structured processes of knowledge exchange and learning. Mechanisms such as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) and reverse mentoring (Murphy, 2012) may support the constructive utilization of team differences. Within the model, conflict management performs a moderating function in the relationship between generational diversity and the intensity of affective conflict, limiting its negative consequences while preserving cognitive potential.

5.5. Research Hypotheses

- H1: Generational diversity may be positively associated with cognitive conflict and negatively associated with team cohesion at low levels of leadership competency.
- H2: Generational intelligence is positively associated with leadership effectiveness in multigenerational teams.
- H3: Generational intelligence mediates the relationship between generational diversity and employee engagement.
- H4: Communicative flexibility mediates the relationship between generational diversity and team relationship quality.
- H5: Work environment design capacity mediates the relationship between generational diversity and job satisfaction.
- H6: Conflict management capacity moderates the relationship between generational diversity and affective conflict.
- H7: Multigenerational leadership competencies are positively associated with employee retention.
- H8: Multigenerational leadership competencies are positively associated with team innovativeness.

6. Discussion

The conducted analysis reveals a persistent tension between cohort-based and individual-centered approaches in human resource management research. Although generational categories are widely employed in both the literature and practice, a growing body of research indicates that observed behavioral differences are less strongly associated with cohort membership than with contextual factors such as career stage, organizational role, and the design of the work environment (Rudolph et al., 2021; Ravid et al., 2025). The model proposed in this article engages with this debate by treating generational diversity not as a direct predictor of organizational outcomes, but as a contextual variable whose effects are conditioned by leadership competencies and organizational arrangements. In this framework, work environment design capacity constitutes an integrative mechanism enabling

the translation of general human resource management principles (e.g., autonomy, flexibility, development) into diverse organizational configurations. In the authors' view, the model advances the perspective of adaptive and inclusive leadership by emphasizing that leader effectiveness depends not only on behavioral flexibility, but also on the capacity to interpret and integrate diverse logics of professional experience.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Generational diversity should be interpreted as one dimension of organizational heterogeneity, shaped by sociohistorical experiences that influence occupational expectations and work styles. At the same time, it should not be treated as a stable, homogeneous characteristic of cohorts, but as a collection of diverse and contextually variable behavioral patterns. The findings of the analysis suggest that no single universal leadership style is effective in multigenerational teams. Leadership effectiveness derives rather from the integration of situational, transformational, and inclusive approaches, supported by adaptive competencies. Leadership flexibility may be understood as a higher-order competency encompassing adaptive interpretation of employee needs, contextual adjustment of leadership behaviors, and the integration of organizational requirements with individual employee needs. It should be underscored that the proposed model integrates diverse research streams and indicates that leadership competencies play an important role in determining whether generational diversity will be associated with positive outcomes (e.g., innovativeness) or negative ones (e.g., dysfunctional conflict). Future research should focus on empirical validation of the model using multilevel and longitudinal approaches, as well as the analysis of contextual conditions such as organizational culture, economic sector, and regional differences (including Central and Eastern Europe).

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article is conceptual in nature, which limits the possibility of empirical verification of the proposed relationships and causal inference. Future research should be directed toward:

- The development and validation of measurement instruments, including a generational intelligence scale;
- The testing of mediational and moderational relationships using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM);
- The application of multilevel (HLM) and longitudinal research designs;
- The examination of cross-cultural validity of the model.

A significant challenge remains the separation of cohort, age, and career-stage effects. Future research should explicitly control for these variables in order to reduce the risk of erroneous interpretations attributed to generational differences.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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