

The Impact of People Leaders on the Millennial Employee Experience

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Business and Management  
of

National University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Masters of Science in Organizational Leadership

By

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March 28, 2021

## **Abstract**

Organizations rely on their leadership teams to create an employee experience that is only sufficient enough to produce positive business results. However, the skills taught in leader development programs may not provide enough to sustain the influx of millennials that will make up the majority of the workforce in just a few short years. The focus of this study was to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from the perspective of the millennial to better understand their mindset, the things they care about, and to measure the impact of direct-line managers on millennials' overall employee experience. Millennials value a leader who is a coach and who knows their team members well enough to give each their own personalized experience. Millennials believe in co-creating and collaboration. They are arguably one of the most balanced generations when it comes to work and home life. They are loyal to an organization that recognizes their value and invests in their individual growth. Armed with this data as well as that gathered from a review of the current literature, a people leader development curriculum proposal was created that may be utilized by any company looking to positively impact the employee experience and therefore increase employee engagement for their teams.

*Keywords:* millennials, employee experience, leadership

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## Master's Thesis Approval

The following project has met the approval of faculty for quality and scholarship as a culminating experience for the fulfillment of the Master of Science Degree in Organizational Leadership:

Type of project:        \_\_\_\_\_ Comparative Study                                \_\_\_\_\_ Applied Business  
Research  
                                 \_\_\_\_\_X\_\_\_\_\_ Thesis                                \_\_\_\_\_ Case Study

Title: The Impact of People Leaders on the Millennial Employee Experience

Approved by:

Julian Buchanan, PhD        \_\_\_\_\_

Lead Faculty, Organizational Leadership

(signature and date)

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this project to the incredible leaders that I have had in my own millennial employee experience: Steve Cox, Kelly Crothers, and Nichole Marcus Moreno. The three of you have empowered me, motivated me, and pushed me beyond my self-imposed limits. You three embody the exact leadership that the future of work needs. I dedicate this project to my incredible husband, who continues to be my knight in shining armor in every way possible. I wouldn't be the woman I am today without your support and unwavering love. I also dedicate this project to my two incredible boys, Caleb and Braeden, everything I do, is for you. Most importantly, I dedicate this project to myself for completing a master's degree, in a pandemic, while working a full-time job, homeschooling two kids, and caregiving for my grandma and uncle. I'm more convinced than ever that I can do hard things and still make an impact in the world.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to acknowledge Mrs. Laughlin who changed the course of my life simply by believing in me and showing me that I can do hard things. She is the reason why I worked so hard to become the first person in my family to go to college. I also would like to acknowledge Dr. K, who I had the pleasure of having for two courses towards my master's degree. In each one, she displayed true leadership by meeting people where they were at in their own development, encouraging healthy discussion, and partnering with her students for the best possible outcome. She amplified my experience at National University.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Millennials will occupy 75% of the workforce by 2025 (Johnson, 2020). LaCore (2015) continued, “Whether you call them millennials or Gen Y, individuals born between 1980 and 2000 will soon be the biggest demographic workforce in modern times” (p. 123). It is imperative to understand this generation—specifically how to lead this generation—in order to fully support the business goals of an organization. The review of the current literature as well as this study, will reveal facts about millennials, such as the following information: what they care about, the perception others have of them, how they define the employee experience, and most importantly, the effect that leaders have on that experience. The goal of this research was to assess the overall impact that leaders have on the millennial employee experience and produce a curriculum that positively fosters that impact for the benefit of the employee, the people leader, and the organization.

This study is important because, with millennials occupying a majority of the workforce in just a few more years, leaders need to develop the skillset to support the future of work. In addition, as millennials progress in their own careers, they will need to consider how they will go about leading the next generation, Gen Z. Therefore, part of leading a millennial will be coaching them on how to be a leader for the next generation. The benefit of organizations investing in this type of curriculum is that emerging research is demonstrating that a positive employee experience positively impacts the overall customer experience as well. Customer Experience (CX) is a more mature practice, but organizations are seeing the value of coupling it with employee experience (EX) for even greater revenue growth. For example, “companies that have both high EX and CX see almost double the revenue growth as those that do not” (Forbes, 2020, p. 4).

Throughout the scholarly literature, it was implied that people leaders have the greatest influence over whether an employee has a positive experience at work or not. This goes back to that adage, “People do not leave companies due to money; they leave due to management.” A strong leader who is invested in their team and their experience is going to produce a dynamic, innovative, and engaged team (Super, 2020). Therefore, it is assumed that leaders have tremendous influence on the millennial experience, so this study measured the *extent* of that influence and leveraged those metrics to build a strong development curriculum to empower leaders to own that influence and shape the workforce constructively.

This study had time limitations that prevented any one-on-one qualitative interviews to really capture the innerworkings of a millennial mind, but there were a few survey questions that were purposely left open-ended to allow for the millennial to go deeper on those responses and provide rationale for the quantitative responses they answered quantitatively. Further research would include more employee listening, more leader listening, and research to compare the millennial generation and generation Z. This will be the future of work and it is important to get this right for the success of an organization and the success of the employee.

There are some important terms that are mentioned several times throughout this project that are important to define from the beginning, such as, employee experience. This project defined the employee experience like Jacob Morgan (2016) does, he stated, “Employee experience is the combination of three distinct things that exist within any organization regardless of industry, size, and location.” Those three things are: technological environment, cultural environment, and physical environment. An organization that can balance initiatives and success in these three environments will see employee engagement skyrocket. However, it is important to differentiate employee experience from employee engagement. Employee

experience (specifically the cultural environment) influences employee engagement (Reissner & Pagan, 2013). They are two distinct factors. Employee engagement is defined by Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2017) as “represent[ing] a work-related state of mind characterized by feelings of vigor, fulfillment, enthusiasm, absorption and dedication.” If organizations can get the employee experience right, then the employee can feel engaged, and therefore serve their customers from a state of fulfillment and enthusiasm, which can be infectious.

The purpose of this study was to begin to scratch the surface of truly understanding the millennial mindset, capturing, in their own words what employee experience and leadership mean to them, and then combine that with the literature to formulate a truly transformative leader development curriculum with an emphasis on situational leadership tenets.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Employee Experience**

Jacob Morgan (2015) said that “every employee experience is comprised of three environments: the technological, physical, and cultural environments” (Morgan, 2015). When he referred to the technological environment, he meant the tools that an employee uses to get their job done. This includes the devices they engage with, the platforms they leverage, and the automation available to them to streamline their work. When he discussed the physical environment, it includes the area in which an employee works – maybe they are in an office, or open-space cubicle, or working from home on a small corner of their dining room table—all these aspects are taken into consideration for the “physical” pillar of the employee experience. Lastly, when Morgan (2015) described the cultural environment of the employee experience, it included the feelings that employees get from working for that organization. Some of the examples of a positive cultural environment include a sense of belonging, co-workers sharing the same values, and feeling like leadership has one’s back. The approach that Morgan (2015) used to describe the employee experience is unique, but because it is comprehensive, it is the lens for this literature review and how it will investigate the millennial employee experience.

### **Employee Experience Versus Employee Engagement**

Employee experience is differentiated from employee engagement. The research makes a compelling correlation between a positive employee experience leading to an increase in employee engagement, which then results in immediate business value to the organization. Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2017), acknowledged that employee engagement “represents a work-related state of mind characterized by feelings of vigor, fulfillment, enthusiasm, absorption and dedication.” One can see how aligning the cultural, physical, and technological environments for

an employee could support a positive state of mind for that employees' engagement. The reason why employee engagement matters is because a *lack* of employee engagement can be detrimental to an organization. Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2017) understood that value and believed that "it has a special bearing on improving our understanding of the employee–organization relationship and the meaning of work in today's challenging organizational setting. More than ever before, managers would agree that employees have a critical impact on an organization's innovation, flexibility, competitiveness, and success." To influence a positive impact on the employee experience and employee engagement, organizations must invest time into recognizing and appreciating the distinct mindset of their employees.

### **Millennial Mindset**

To effectively manage and lead millennials in the workforce, an appreciation of their mentality is required. The research revealed that "Generation Y is dynamic and eager to collaborate" (Arora & Dhole, 2019), "Gen Y wants something to believe in, bigger basis that underpins all we do in business" (Arora & Dhole, 2019), they are "ready to sacrifice their work-life balance in the short term, or even to relocate, in order to find a satisfying career" (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015). "Millennials also need continuous feedback, especially from their supervisor" (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015). "They actually prefer working in teams rather than going solo, for two reasons: (1) they perceive group work to be more "fun," and (2) they want to avoid risk" (Bolser & Gosciej, 2015). "They are comfortable with virtual presence, and the digital mobile platform has become the primary medium of information exchange, making them more informed and curious" (Holt et al., 2012, p. 123). "Millennials tend to examine leadership from a different lens than the generational cohorts that came before them. Their background of sheltered

affluence and lifelong exposure to virtual reality have made them non-responsive to static instructions” (Holt et al., 2012).

The combinations of these traits begin to paint a picture of an employee that thrives in high-technology environments, prefers to work with others to create something meaningful, brings their authentic self to work, and needs an involved leader who is going to be tied closely enough to their work to be able to provide timely feedback for that millennial employee. The literature confirms the vast differences between generation X, Y, and Z through common comparisons, further demonstrating that generation Y (or millennials) is unique. Millennials (generation Y) bridge the gap between generation X, who didn’t grow up with the internet, and generation Z, whose life is defined by the internet and social media. Millennials know of a world before the internet and can realize the impacts and opportunities in a world with internet. Perhaps this is why they appreciate an organization that maintains high-technology and strong cultural environments.

Kuron et al. (2015) summed it up perfectly when they say that “each generation experiences a unique historical context that shapes the unfolding of that development. Thus, the very process of ‘growing up’ is dynamic and evolving over time. In this way, while we may expect that the work values of each generation will change as they transition from school-to-work, the nature of these differences may be different for each generation.” Each generation comes with their own set of needs and recognizing the need to adapt to the various needs of your employees is half the battle of success in an organization.

## **Entitlement**

The term most frequently used to describe the millennial mentality in the research is “entitled.” Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021 recognized that their differentiated childhood results in the perception of entitlement. They stated, “Research suggests that the results of their upbringing have led millennials to feeling confident and assertive, and entitled to praise and recognition.” Furthermore, Alexander and Sysko, 2012, published an entire journal article about the entitlement of millennials stating that, “The Millennials seem to bring with them a hedonism, narcissism, and cavalier work ethic previously unknown in the American workforce.” It would be interesting to survey millennials to see how they feel about this term being used to describe them. “Being entitled” has a negative connotation, so maybe there is another way to demonstrate a more positive attribute and contribution to society.

## **Digital Native**

Another aspect of the millennial mindset worth diving a little deeper into is the fact that they are digital natives. “Technologically, they are also the first truly digital generation who will not consider platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Youtube to be novel” (Holt et al., 2012). Popescu-Dogaru et al. (2019) research found that “The organization of the future is digitalized, innovative, adaptable, but environment-friendly. Its organizational culture is people-oriented and transparent.” And that “Emotional intelligence helps him/her in building, developing the organization of tomorrow, a digitalized, flexible, and creative organization, but with a people-oriented organizational culture, promoting transparency and caring for the environment.” Millennials are the perfect generation to accelerate the future of work because they are equipped with that collaborative, digital, people-centric culture by nature.

## **Millennial's in the Workplace**

The employee experience can best be understood in layers, and one layer that Morgan (2015) does not address in his definition of employee experience, is the employee lifecycle. Cattermole (2019) characterized the employee lifecycle as “six key stages: attraction, recruitment, onboarding, development, retention and separation”. Simultaneously recognizing the three components of the employee experience layered with the employee lifecycle, allows use to accurately examine and define the areas where leader involvement intersects with and shapes the experience of our millennial workforce.

## **Learning Style**

One of the critical stages of the employee lifecycle, especially, with the lens of the future of work, is talent development. Again, with the majority of the workforce made up of millennials, understanding their learning style is essential to effective development. “The millennial and postmillennial students are tech-savvy, prefer experiential and hands-on learning, desire meaningful outcomes and want to have fun!” (Dutta et al., 2019). The research demonstrated that millennials will specifically seek out organizations who emphasize development as one of the key tenets of their culture. “One of the fundamental outcomes of the intersection of technological innovations and increasing longevity is that one-off early education will not be sufficiently strong enough to propel people through their whole working lives. People will need to engage in work that has development opportunities built into it, be prepared to spend some of their leisure time upskilling, and probably take significant chunks of time out of work to learn a new skill” (Gratton, 2018). Organizations that prioritize this see an increase in employee experience, employee engagement and foster a culture of employees that are innovative and willing to think outside of the box to solve a challenge. “Allowing for a reasonable level of



autonomy and self-direction is healthy for Millennials, and in getting such autonomy, Millennials are likely to feel a certain freedom and thus be more creative in thought and innovative in action” (Holt et al., 2012).

## **Motivation**

Torsello (2019) related development to motivation by stating that, “Motivation appears, for instance, to be grounded more in skill development than in financial rewards, or in aspects such as new challenges in the form of daily tasks, cultural diversity, expectations for socialization, and avoidance of repetitive tasks.” “Moreover, in the stories describing a motivating workplace the supervisor in particular was portrayed as a very important source of motivation” (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015). As scholars strive to understand the millennial generation’s desires and motivations, more is revealed in way of the impact that a leader has on their employee experience. The research, so far, has indicated how important it is to a millennial employee to have the support of their leader, to feel like they are invested in their development, and to provide meaningful feedback along the way to continually improve themselves. “Some may argue that organizations cannot, and should not, apply the same style of leadership used on the previous generations, to motivate the Millennials” (Holt et al., 2012).

## **Leadership Styles**

Knowing the leadership style that is effective for millennials may be the key to that somewhat elusive employee experience and employee engagement that each organization is striving to achieve. Millennials have high expectations from their leaders. “Millennials expect their leaders to be accessible and actively performing communicative leader role behaviors such as dedication, hard work, authority, and motivation, among other relational traits” and they “desire leaders to be highly communicative in terms of negotiating, taking a perspective,

resolving conflict, and providing individualized mentoring” (Omillion-Hodges & Sugg, 2019). “Millennials expect their supervisors to be close and to have a leadership style characterized by a balanced mixture of allowing flexibility while setting high demands” (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015). It is interesting to note that “many will forgo leadership status and may instead opt to pursue opportunities as a subject matter expert or career entrepreneur within an organization” (Aziz, 2020). Millennials expect the high caliber support from their leaders but may be unwilling to provide that same level of leadership to the next generation (generation Z).

A leadership style that is particularly advantageous to millennials is transformational leadership. Holt et al. (2012) elaborated that, “transformational leadership fits the needs of the Millennials situation most intuitively. Transformational leaders create synergies within organizations by working together with their followers to achieve organizational goals through creating a culture of meaning that boosts loyalty and nurtures collective potential.” Another leadership style mentioned in the literature is a coaching leadership style which helps coach millennials in a way that gives them supported autonomy to come up with solutions on their own. Pine (2020) claimed that “all enterprises should recognize the value of coaching to the employee experience, particularly in times of business transformation.” With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of businesses have been forced to transform in one way or another, so encompassing a leadership style that is conducive to engaging your employees for a stronger employee experience seems to be a win-win situation for the business and for that millennial employee. Johnson (2020) asserted, “The COVID-19 crisis certainly highlighted just how essential physical, mental, and financial well-being are and the increased importance employee experience has when remote workers are working up to 3 more hours a day as they

juggle competing demands at home and work.” Johnson (2020) reinforces Morgan (2015)’s three components of a strong employee experience.

Leaders are beginning to acknowledge the need to modify their management strategies to be more effective for the millennial generations. “87.8 percent said that they have altered their management style in dealing with millennial employees” (Ferri-Reed, 2014). Organizations have an obligation to equip their leaders with the tools and resources to effectively modify their management style to appeal more to the millennial generation.

### **Business Value**

There is a lot of pressure on organizations to create the perfect employee experience that balances the physical, cultural, and technological environments for millennials. They are also expected to develop the leadership team to embrace a transformational or a coaching leadership style. The reason why they are willing to cater to this generation is to attract and retain these employees. “Surveys have shown that it costs companies between \$15,000 and \$25,000 to replace each millennial employee they lose” (Torsello, 2019). Furthermore, “there is substantial data to suggest that the same worker is twice as likely to leave a company within one year of hire” (Alexander & Sysko, 2012). Therefore, it can get very expensive for an organization *not* to provide the best possible experience for their millennial employees. “If an employee perceives that an employer is not investing in the relationship, the employee may feel a reduced sense of commitment, trust and loyalty” (Alexander & Sysko, 2012). Losing trust and loyalty erodes employee engagement overtime, which impacts the customer experience and eventually the business bottom line. The research is indicating how interrelated each are.

“The organization of the future millennials aspire to is characterized by high-quality services and products, innovation, positive employee morale and high-performance

technology” (Popescu-Dogaru et al., 2019). A growing body of research is investigating the positive correlation between employee experience and employee engagement to business outcomes. As Harter et al. (2012) demonstrated, “An efficient composite of items measuring issues at the heart of the workplace—issues that are important to employees and that managers can influence—has substantial implications for a further understanding of the true nature of overall satisfaction at the business-unit level.” Another example of the importance of leadership influence on employees.

The research that Gonring (2008) started around the customer loyalty index (CLI) and the employee engagement index (EEI) has revealed to executives several examples of organizations that are successful because they evaluate how they measure up against these two metrics on a consistent basis. Companies like Southwest and Cisco are known for balancing these two indexes right. Gonring (2008) explained that “the employee engagement index addresses the challenge of optimizing human capital by instilling in employees the value of working for the organization's greater good, rather than just for personal benefits. Also, through analyzing the data provided by the indexes, executives can identify strategic problem areas, adjust programming and gain a competitive advantage accordingly.” Furthermore, Gonring (2008) acknowledged the 360 experience that Morgan (2015) talks about for employee experience. “As with the customer experience, the employee experience is based on a 360-degree outlook: culture, values, beliefs, flexibility and balance are integral to the decision to become an employee.”

## **Alternative Perspectives**

### ***Responsible for Own Experience***

The research has talked a lot about what leaders and organizations can do to improve the overall employee experience, which is the root for subsequent success for the organization

overall. At what point is the millennial responsible for their own employee experience? This is a research question to be explored further. One could imagine that a combination of leader support coupled with freedom and responsibility on part of the employee could accelerate that employee experience even further. Millennials have this rare dichotomy of seeking validation and feedback from their supervisors with a need for independence. An organization that can marry those two characteristics in the workplace, is going to excel. Part of that need for independence should include the employee owning their own employee experience, in partnership, with their leader and organization.

### ***Leadership Development***

Another research question to be evaluated is how to develop programs that support leader development in this space. It goes beyond fostering the transformational and coaching leadership styles, it involves increasing the emotional intelligence and self-awareness of the leadership team. Aydogmus (2019) reaffirmed, “People with higher EI are more equipped to integrate their emotional experiences into their thoughts and actions. EI competencies affect individuals’ abilities to cope with environmental demands, facilitate their capability in the continuous learning process.” Leaders who are mindful enough to recognize the role they play in the organization and the impact they have on their direct reports are ultimately going to show up differently than leaders who do not have that evolved knowledge of themselves. Research around evaluating the current state of leadership in these areas and then research around the development of these programs are still needed. Then, a follow on of the impact of those development programs would be advantageous for return-on-investment for the organization.

Another leadership style to explore is situational leadership. “The Situational Leadership (SL) model indicates that the most effective leadership style is determined by the individual’s

"performance readiness level" (Tortorella & Fogliatto, 2017). Situational leadership allows the leader to adapt their leadership style to the readiness of the employee they are working with in that moment. Each employee has unique needs (regardless of their generation) and situational leadership style allows for the leader to meet to employee where they are at and continue to develop them to increase their "readiness" level over time. More research on this style and the applicability to the millennial employee experience could prove effective.

It is clear from the research that the employee experience has shifted substantially between generation X and generation Y. The things that organizations and leaders need to focus on today are different than the previous decade. "Research has shown that past generations identified work as being more central to their lives than younger people in the US do today....As work becomes less central to people's lives, they invest in it less. For example, recently there has been a decline in the percentage of people who say they want to move into positions of greater authority. This complicates succession planning efforts because there would be fewer applicants to choose among in comparison to the past" (Deal et al., 2010). Only one piece of the puzzle is "provid[ing] employees with an interesting job, good compensation, opportunities to learn and advance, colleagues they like to work with, a boss they trust, and leaders who are competent, employees of all generations will respond positively" (Deal et al., 2010). Organizations are required to think outside of the box to improve the employee experience because they understand the implications that has on their overall bottom line.

This literature review discussed the millennial mindset and how that relates to employee experience versus employee engagement. This review also examined the benefit of employee experience on the organization overall, reinforces that this is not just an employee "nice-to-have", it is critical to the success of the company long-term. Especially in the future of work,

where business transformation is top of mind and millennials are at the forefront of that majority employees. This research scratched the surface of the connection and potential impact that leaders have on the employee experience. Further research needs to be done to see what aspects of the employee experience can be owned by the employee and what development programs can be put in place to support the leaders of that experience. There is still more to be assessed when it comes to answering the original question of *how* leaders impact the millennial employee experience, but so far, the research has made it clear that the impact is significant.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Throughout the literature, there is an underlying theme demonstrating the tremendous impact that people leaders have on all employees' experience (not just that of millennials). The purpose of this chapter is to examine a mixed method approach to understand the *extent* that people leaders influence the millennial employee experience. The original research surfaced some unanswered questions and this project is an attempt to get closer to fully understanding various aspects of the millennial employee experience because the data shows this is becoming increasingly important. Some of the outstanding questions were surrounding the specific leadership style millennials preferred, what leadership style they felt like they were starting to gravitate towards as they explore leading generation Z and then quantifying specific aspects of the millennial mindset.

During the research, multiple journals cited how collaborative millennials are (example: Bolser and Gosciej, 2015) and this project specifically asked the millennials if they prefer to work as an individual or within a team so that the responses can be aligned to the other questions asked in the survey. Some cited journals documented the importance of a millennial receiving feedback from their leader (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015), so one of the questions in this survey specifically asked, "How frequently do you prefer to receive feedback from your leader?" The survey asked another particular question to capture the business value of a positive employee experience from the millennial perspective and that was "Do you believe that a good employee experience leads to a better customer experience?" In addition, the research demonstrated that millennials are heavy digital natives and technology-focused (Holt et al., 2012), so asking them about the which part of the employee experience (as defined by Morgan, 2015) is most important sparked curiosity. These are just a few examples of the questions weaved throughout the survey



to better understand the millennial employee experience and aid in the development of a people leader development curriculum to better support millennials.

### **Instrument**

A thirteen-question survey via Google Forms asked both qualitative and quantitative questions to capture various aspects of the employee experience for millennials. The data was collected between March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021 to March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021. The survey stopped collecting responses after fifty people completed the survey.

The survey questions presented ensured several aspects were considered: confirming the participant understood the definition of terms (such as “millennial”, “employee experience”, and “employee engagement”) completely before answering with their own perspectives, having them rate their experience (on a scale of 1-5) to support the later roll up of the data, and help the researcher understand the “why” behind some of their responses.

An example of the survey is included in appendix A and as exhibited, the survey questions have a mix of quick quantitative measures with qualitative measures in free-text fields allowing the participant to expand on a few key areas: their rationale for choosing the leader they preferred, the number one skill they believe is important to develop in the future of work, and to share any other thoughts they had on the millennial employee experience and leadership. If time permitted, more qualitative questions would have been asked in a one-on-one interview with the specific participants based on their quantitative responses.

The quantitative questions were created in attempt to quickly assess where the millennial was in their current thought process; asking rating questions about their own employee engagement, employee experience, and leadership preferences. This allows for data analysis to

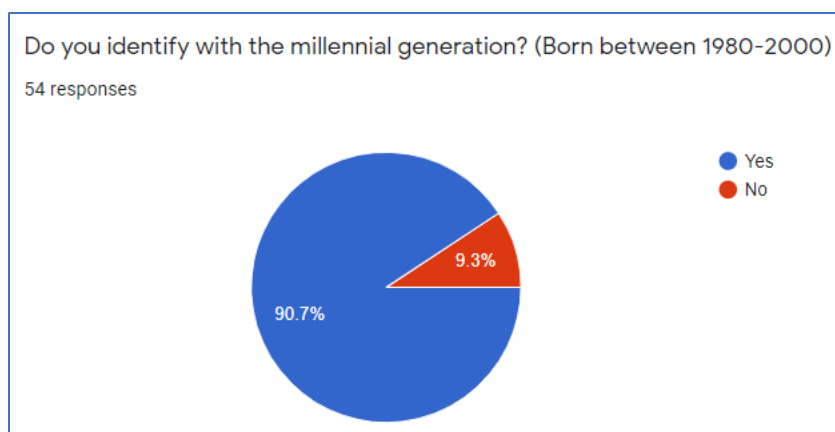
quickly filter based on those specific ratings and read the corresponding qualitative responses to assess developing trends from the data.

### **Target Population and Participants**

The target population of the study was to include only data from those that identified as a millennial (born between the years 1980-2000). The focus of this study was specific to the millennial employee experience, so it was important to seek only the data from that generation. The first question of the survey captured just that, “Do you identify with the millennial generation (born between 1980-2000)?” 90.7% of the respondents said yes, while the other 9.3% said no. If the participant selected “no”, the survey would end and thanked them for their time. This left 49 total people who responded “yes” to that first survey question (see Figure 3.1). All rating scales were 1-5, with 1 being the worst and 5 being the strongest (all in relation to the question).

**Figure 3.1**

*Target Population*



## **Confidentiality**

The survey was completely voluntary and no personally identifiable information was collected.

## **Data Gathering**

The data was collected through Google Forms, which allowed for an external link to be shared through LinkedIn and Facebook networks to capture millennials interested in taking this thirteen-question quiz. A mix of simple multiple-choice questions and a few open-ended questions took less than five minutes to complete. If time was not a limitation to this study, more qualitative data would have been captured through in-depth interviews and less-anonymity to allow for follow-up questions to go deeper into the data.

## **Information Analysis**

Google Forms provides basic out-of-the-box functionality to help with charts and data analysis. Further analysis was done by the researcher in Microsoft Excel to identify trends in the data and to address any anomalies. Google Forms seamlessly downloaded to Microsoft Excel to allow for easy sorting the data and filtering on specific responses to establish the full picture. Examples of the data graphs produced by Google is shown in Figures 4.2-4.9 in Chapter 4 below.

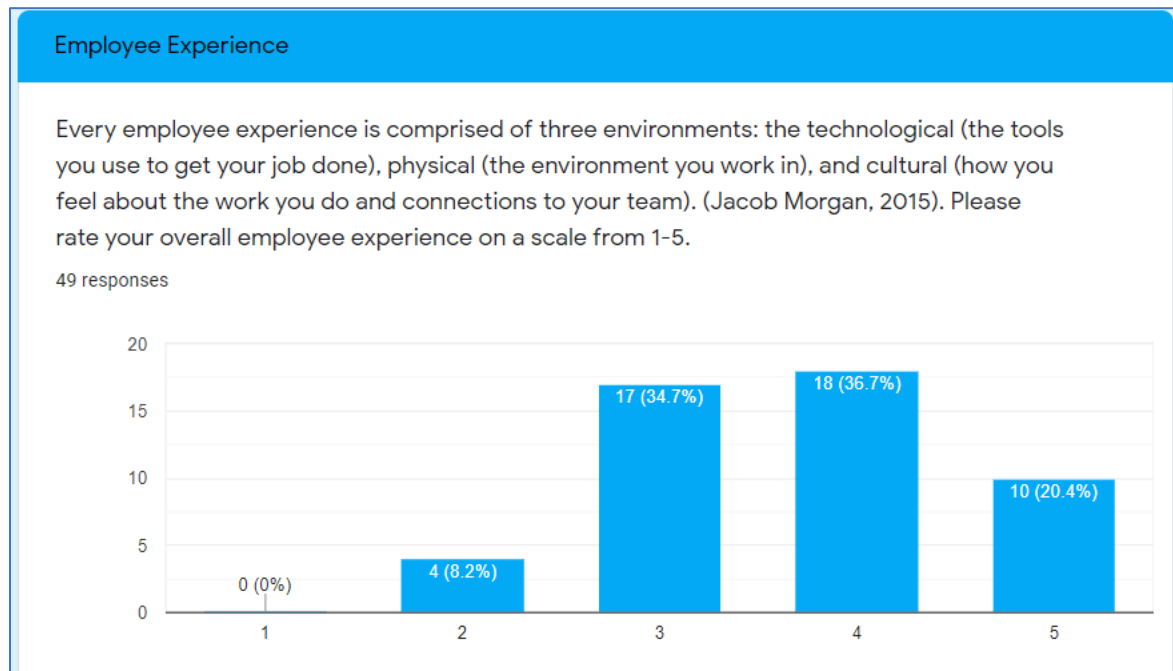
## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

When developing the survey to capture these different aspects of the millennial employee experience, all biases were removed. The questions were meant to be straightforward without leaning one way or another in terms of validating or invalidating the original research question about the immense impact that people leaders have on their employee experience. Instead, this survey sought out to understand the full picture. The extent of the people leader influence was just a small section of the survey itself. Although, with more time, that is the qualitative part that the research could have provided a richer perspective on.

After establishing that the participant was indeed a millennial, the next question defined employee experience and then asked them to rate their overall employee experience. 57% rated their overall employee experience as a 4 or higher on a 5-point scale. Of those 57%, 85% rated a 4 or higher when asked how much they feel their people leaders influence their experience. This study confirmed what the other studies had indicated that people leaders had a huge amount of influence over their experience in the workplace. (See figures 4.1 and 4.2 below).

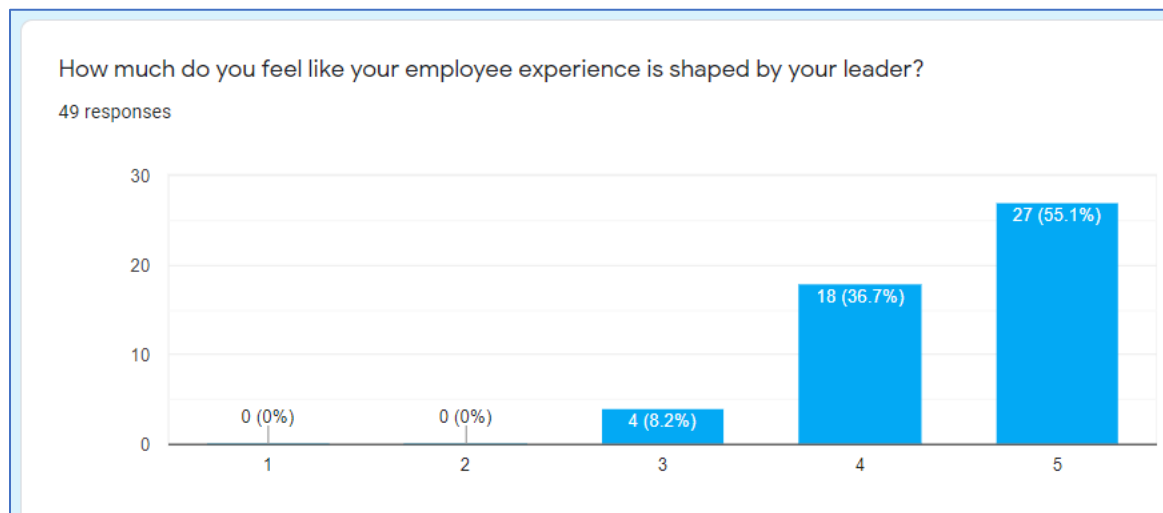
**Figure 4.1**

*Employee Experience*



**Figure 4.2**

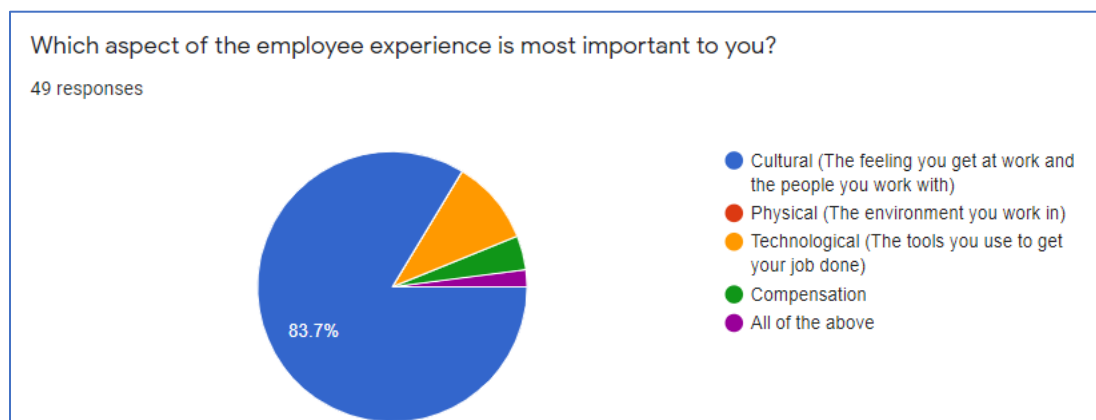
*Leadership impact on Employee Experience*



This was critical to understand because if employee experience is defined as the three environments that Morgan (2015) defined as, most direct line leaders do not have influence over the technologies available on the job or the physical environment of the office space as those are typically decided at the C-suite levels. What we do know is that 84% of millennial respondents said that the most important aspect of the employee experience for them was the cultural piece (that feeling you get at work and the people you work with). The second more important to them was the technological aspect. Not one person selected the physical experience (the actual physical environment they work in). Some did attempt to add in their own options like compensation, and “all of the above”. (See figure 4.3).

**Figure 4.3**

*#1 factor of the Employee Experience*



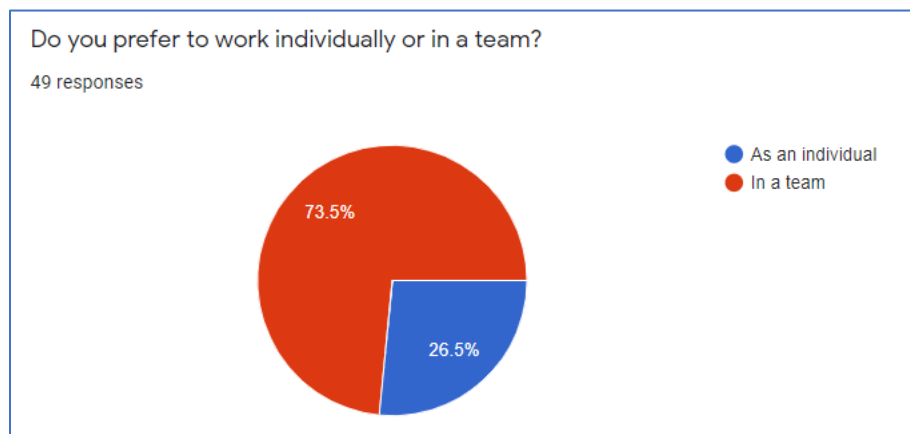
This is especially interesting during the pandemic where majority of millennials are working from home. It appears that the physical environment is not as important to millennials as

the people they work with and having the right technology to do their job. It is understandable that the technology piece came up as a second thought since they are digital natives and advanced technology is their specialty.

Surprisingly though, 63% of millennials surveyed said that they prefer to work in a team, versus as an individual. This datapoint was interesting because the expectation was that it would be much higher since so much of the literature emphasized millennials being the most collaborative generation so far. In addition, the pandemic makes working in a team environment much more difficult.

**Figure 4.4**

*Preference (Individual or team)*

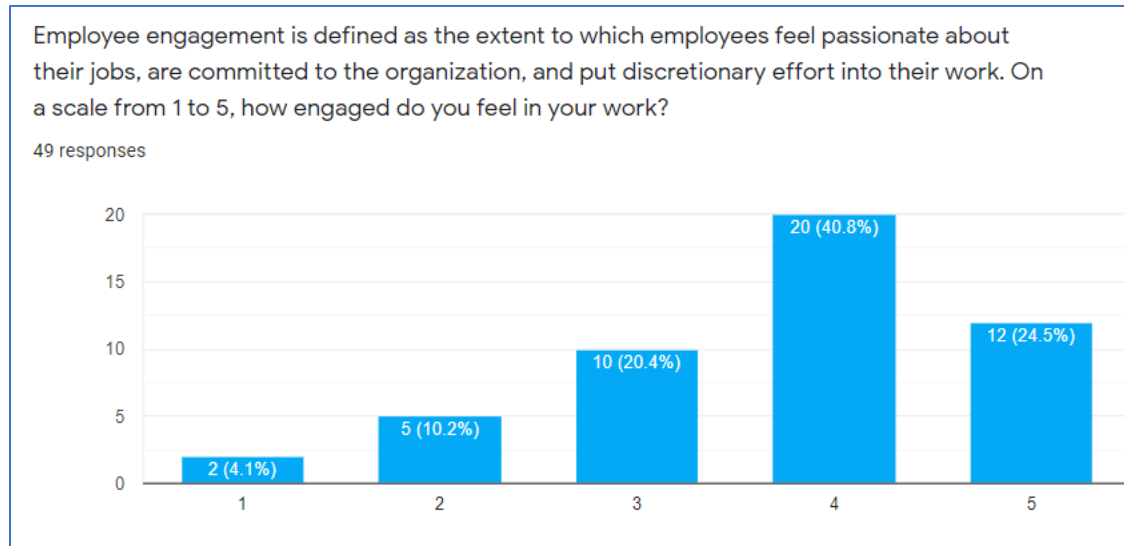


When the survey shifted to employee engagement, it again, first defined it and then asked the millennial to rate where they were in their engagement at work. 65.3% rated a 4 or higher on a 5-point scale. This is aligned to the employee experience rating which was only a few points

shy of this, reinforcing the positive correlation between employee experience and employee engagement. (See figures 4.1 and 4.5).

**Figure 4.5**

*Employee Engagement*



In order to deliver a successful people leader development curriculum, the data needed to provide a business case demonstrating the value of investing in the employee experience and specifically, investing in our leaders to influence that employee experience. So, the survey asked one question to help decipher if employee experience really could impact customer experience, and that was “Do you believe that a good employee experience leads to a better customer experience?” It was a resounding yes. 93.9% believed that a good employee experience could lead to a better customer experience. (See figure 4.6 below).



**Figure 4.6**

*Employee Experience & Customer Experience*



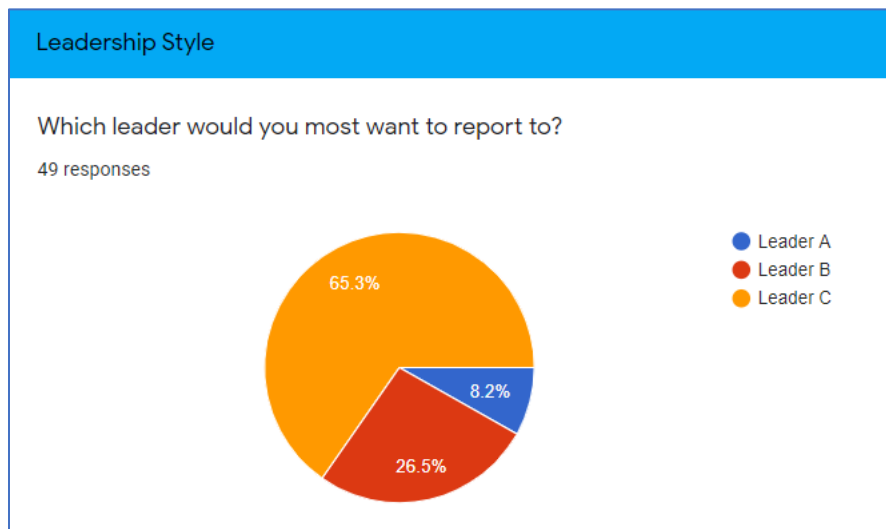
When presented with examples of three leaders that embodied the characteristics of three different leadership styles (servant leadership, transformational leadership, and situational leadership), 65% of the millennials chose leader C (situational leadership leader example) for a leader they would prefer to report to. (See figure 4.7). The next question was an open-ended question to capture why they chose leader C. Some examples of the responses are:

1. “Personalized leadership and coaching. I'm looking to develop myself and my skills in service to my leader/organization...not absentmindedly adopt and work towards their vision.”
2. “Coaching and being part of a team is how I work best.”
3. “Leader C sounds like they have the most emotional intelligence. Each employee is a unique individual with different strengths, weaknesses, and goals. If I were working for this company, I'd have the most faith that leader C would understand me, what makes me unique, and how I need to be supported.”

#### 4. “Getting regular coaching and direction”

**Figure 4.7**

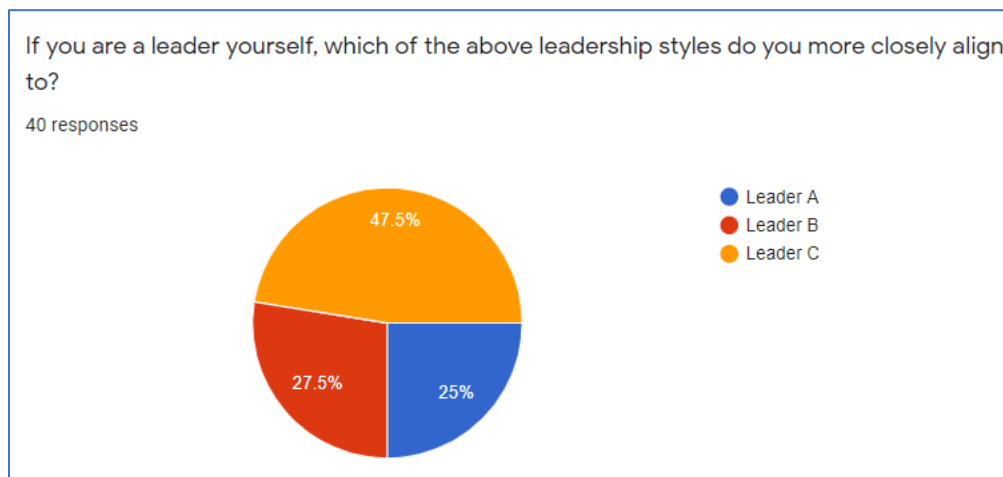
*Leadership Style Reporting Preference*



Furthermore, when sifting through the qualitative data, the word “coaching” was most frequently cited. In fact, 22% of those 65% above, mentioned some aspect of “coaching” in their open-ended response, indicating how important having a coach mentality is for a millennial. In addition, 50% of those 65% also reported that leader C was the style that *they* most identified with for their own leadership style (if they were a leader already). (See Figure 4.8).

**Figure 4.8**

*Leadership Style*

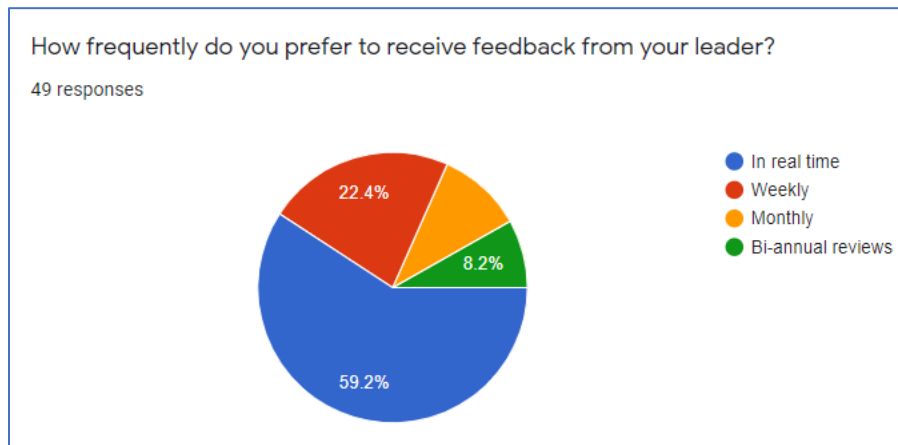


When asked what the #1 skill they feel like leaders will need in the future of work, “empathy” came up for 21% of the total respondents, and the next most important skill was emotional intelligence, and lastly (but still worth mentioning) is some aspect of helping their employee grow. This question was critical to get to the crux of what a leadership development curriculum should include. Empathy, emotional intelligence, and paving the path for employee growth are going to be key to developing the leaders of the future.

One other aspect of the millennial mindset that came up several times in the research was the need for feedback. This project felt the need to truly understand the importance of that and its frequency to decide whether or not to include a piece of that in the leadership development curriculum. The last require question in the survey asked, “How frequently do you prefer to receive feedback from your leader?” 59.2% said in real time and another 22.4% said weekly. The result confirmed that receiving regular timely feedback is important to a millennial.

**Figure 4.9**

*Feedback*



The last (optional) question was another open-ended one, which said, “Please share any other thoughts you have on the millennial employee experience or leadership styles of millennials.” Here are some of the noteworthy responses:

1. “I believe millennials (leaders or not) are really gravitating towards organizations and leaders that motivate them to develop into their full potential and inspire them to change, regardless if they stay in the company. They focus on the development of individual's instead of putting the dollar first and for me personally, I feel that makes the difference.”
2. “My best bosses have been fellow millennials who have been able to better empathize and understand me. My older bosses have tended to come across as less genuine and have struggled to establish rapport with employees. When employees feel like their boss cares more about the numbers than them or is out of touch with the employee experience it can be disheartening and really impact morale and productivity.”

3. “I think millennials want and expect freedom, autonomy, want to achieve results early, and may be less concerned with hierarchy and structure than previous generations.”
4. “Leaders need to learn how to communicate succinctly. We are a generation that speaks in 140 characters. Long-winded messages will be lost on us.”
5. “Leader needs to be flexible as the needs and desires of the workforce as it shifts to the next generation.”

This survey provided some telling insights to the millennial mindset, what they value in the workplace, and how leaders would benefit from a development curriculum that shapes leaders for the future of work, as well as managing millennials for the best possible outcome. Most of the data validated the hypothesis and reinforced the previous research around millennials.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations**

The fact that millennials will make up 75% of the workforce by 2025 (Johnson, 2020), leaves only 4 years to accelerate employee listening, understanding, and development of leaders to pave the way for millennials to be productive, innovative, and fully supported in the future of work. This is not only important because we care about the employee experience and want people to genuinely be happy at work, but it is also critical to the success of an organization as well. The literature, as well as this immediate study, have confirmed that there is a positive correlation between employee experience and employee engagement. In addition, the millennials in this study believe that positive employee experience also leads to better customer experience. There are plenty of other studies (outside the scope of this one) that confirm that a positive customer experience significantly impacts the bottom line of an organization (which is why so many companies have been investing heavily in this area). It feels like “employee experience” is starting to trend now and we will begin to see companies investing more into this space as more evangelists like Jacob Morgan amplify its’ importance and share how organizations who do have it right are outperforming those who don’t.

Our findings solidified what all the previous research alluded to, which is that millennials heavily rely on their leadership to make or break their employee experience and employee engagement. They need a strong leader who is empathic, emotionally intelligent, able to give timely feedback, support their employees’ growth, be transparent, and foster a lot of the qualities of a situational leadership style. The leaders who possess most of these soft skills stand out as strong leadership. They are often referred to by millennials as coaches, mentors, and influential people in the industry that have a considerable following of people who want to be associated to them.

This study was important to me because not only am I a millennial, but I work for one of the biggest technology companies in the world that scored fairly high on Jacob Morgan's Employee Experience equation. I am also one of the founding members of a team that was recently put together called, "Employee Experience". We are responsible for the digital employee experience for all aspects of the employee lifecycle and a huge piece of what we do is about how, as a company, we can better educate, support, and amplify our leaders who are promoting a strong employee experience within their own teams. Right now, we have the opportunity to make a difference within our large company, but the goal is to share our expertise and be thought leaders in this space for our customers and partners as well, thus making an even larger impact. Most of the workforce being occupied by millennials is agnostic of industry or location, this is something that all companies who want to be successful will need to take a hard look at for their own organizations.

The summation of the literature, coupled with the solidification from this research demonstrate the need for a solid people leader development curriculum that can help people leaders gain these soft skills, recognize how they can best show up for their teams and their organizations, and begin to coach millennials on how to lead the next generation. There are a lot of different people leader programs that organizations may develop internally or industry thought leaders may offer, but the value of the curriculum proposed here is that not only it is grounded in substantial research specifically on millennials, but it is unique in that it is intended to support *both* millennials and generation Z.

Future research may include a follow-on study that interviews people leaders who have completed the curriculum and have implemented the strategies in their own millennial teams for at least six months. It was also be interesting to interview the millennials they manage and also

the millennials who are beginning to manage those in generation Z. A compilation of all that qualitative data would help determine the success of the curriculum. It would also be interesting to follow up over time to determine if that success also led to the success of the organization overall. The follow up study is important as the industry is constantly in flux and more data is coming to light on the best strategies for supporting a multi-generational workforce. Iterative and adaptive people leader development programs are going to be key.



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## Appendix A: Participant Questionnaire Example

### Understanding the Millennial Employee Experience

Thank you for offering to take this survey to help me understand the millennial employee experience better. These responses will be used to shape the formation of my masters thesis.

\* Required

Do you identify with the millennial generation? (Born between 1980-2000) \*

Choose ▼

Next

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Every employee experience is comprised of three environments: the technological (the tools you use to get your job done), physical (the environment you work in), and cultural (how you feel about the work you do and connections to your team). (Jacob Morgan, 2015). Please rate your overall employee experience on a scale from 1-5. \*



How much do you feel like your employee experience is shaped by your leader? \*



Which aspect of the employee experience is most important to you? \*

- ☐ Cultural (The feeling you get at work and the people you work with)
- ☐ Physical (The environment you work in)
- ☐ Technological (The tools you use to get your job done)
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you prefer to work individually or in a team? \*

- ☐ As an individual
- ☐ In a team

Do you believe that a good employee experience leads to a better customer experience? \*

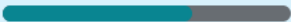
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Employee engagement is defined as the extent to which employees feel passionate about their jobs, are committed to the organization, and put discretionary effort into their work. On a scale from 1 to 5, how engaged do you feel in your work? \*

- |             |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |              |
|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
|             | 1                     | 2                     | 3                     | 4                     | 5                     |              |
| not engaged | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | very engaged |

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## Leadership Style

This section is specific to leadership style

Which leader would you most want to report to? \*

**Leader A:** An inspiring leader with a great deal of influence and who is great at moving the masses towards their vision. This leader has high standards of themselves and expects the same from their team members. They can even appear demanding sometimes. They have an uncanny ability to tap into the strengths of their team members and leverage them towards their vision. Ex. Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, Reed Hastings

**Leader B:** A leader who puts the employee first. They are not micromanagers and are willing to empower their direct reports to do the right thing. This leader asks a lot of questions to seek to understand, sometimes it could feel like they may not be confident in your approach, but it is really because they don't want to assume anything. They recognize that customers and shareholders expectations can only be met once you create an environment that is motivating and high-performing for their employees. Ex. Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Cheryl Bachelder (CEO of Popeye's)

**Leader C:** This leader can quickly assess motivation, focus and skill of each of their direct reports. They are highly collaborative and like to problem-solve scenarios together as a team. They can adapt to the needs of their team members and meet them where they are at in that given point of time. They are not married to a particular leadership style, they instead seek to meet the needs of that employee. Effective at giving regular coaching and direction to their teams. Ex. John Wooden (UCLA basketball coach), General George Patton, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower

Choose



Please explain why you chose the above leader. What part resonated with you?  
What part works best for your work style? \*

Your answer



If you are a leader yourself, which of the above leadership styles do you more closely align to?

Choose ▼

How frequently do you prefer to receive feedback from your leader? \*

- ☐ In real time
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Bi-annual reviews

Thinking about the future of work, what do you feel is the number one skill that leaders should develop? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Please share any other thoughts you have on the millennial employee experience or leadership styles of millennials. \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B: Proposed People Leader Curriculum**

Coming soon