

So, you want to be a leader?

Then...*Transform* yourself with Soft Skills!



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The purpose of this paper is to explore the actual skills, traits, and characteristics that might be developed for Gen Z and Millennial aspiring leaders. Gen Z and Millennials aspiring leaders are defined as men and women in the age group 21 to 40. The discussion of leadership skills, development, and training has been a subject of both scholars and practitioners for centuries. The age-old question of whether leaders are born or made perhaps predates the development of Alexander the Great under the tutelage of Aristotle. The capabilities of a leader may be dictated by their intellect and physical attributes. Although a leader's capacity is important, the training and development that enhance these innate abilities are essential (Wai, 2014).

The phenomena of leadership must first be defined so that it can be recognized, dissected, understood, and developed. However, therein lies the first challenge. Leadership is complex, and the theories of leadership are varied (Wilson, 2023). Rost (as cited in Gini, 1997; Wilson, 2023) noted that there are 221 definitions of leadership. Rost's (1993) 21st-century definition of leadership is transformational and adds the concept of *influence* to achieve change based on a common mission and vision using a set of values to the historic paradigms, put forth by scholars and practitioners like Burns (1978), Deming (1982), Schein (2004), Wheatley (1992).

The knowledge development process of the leaders is critical to the creation of learning organizations (Drucker, 2004; Senge, 2010; M. K. Smith, 2004). P. A. C. Smith and Sharma (2002) posited organizations that wish to sustain successful performance must have employees, especially leaders, who develop and maintain personal knowledge that conforms to complex societal changes. **Lifelong learning is critical for leaders because of changing technology,**

globalization, personal longevity, knowledge transformation, and economic shifts (Morgan, L., 2025).

Bennis (2008) defined “leadership as the capacity to translate vision into reality.” Although simply stated, it incorporates the concepts espoused by Rost. If we use Bennis’ version of leadership and dissect it, the most important concepts embedded in his definition are (1) capacity and (2) the ability to translate. The idea of leadership capacity gives validity to both questions of whether leaders are born or made. Leadership capacity is related to innate capabilities, both intellectual and physical, which one is born with. However, the ability to translate vision into reality to create change may require training and academic development, especially in the 21st century and substantiates Rost’s concept of *influence*.

Change may be the one human dynamic that provides the thread for defining leaders and identifying what leadership encompasses (Tyler, 2007). Leadership is the catalyst of change because leaders create vision – *where the organization is going*. **Vision provides the evidence that change exists.** For change to create innovations that generate new value and sustainable pathways, leaders of the 21st century must infuse their vision with values and socially responsible foundations. Schein (2004) concluded that “one of the most powerful mechanisms . . . leaders . . . have available for communicating what they believe in or care about is what they systematically pay attention to” (p. 247). If true, then the new norm through change led by leaders may be inescapable. A caution that leaders must be mindful of is that success reinforces strong stoicism and adherence to organizational culture. This means success can act to impede change and innovation and undermine trust when a leader tries to deviate from the vision or create a new one (Schein, 2004). **Leaders should not and do not leave the execution of change strategies to chance.** Leaders should anticipate that there will be an undertow of resistance. The life cycle of an organization is challenging, and a leader's character, behavior, skills, and fortitude are the keys to overcoming those challenges.

The challenge for leaders is to minimize uncertainty and create an effective organizational design that leverages the system components of each organizational unit to serve their followers and stakeholders (Schein, 2004). Leaders can only accomplish sustainable change and success if they have continuous development of their leadership skills (Tyler, 2007). Lifelong learning is therefore more than a slogan, it is a must for leaders to be successful as change agents (Ahsan, M. J., 2025).

Leadership Skills and Development

Uhl-Bien, M. (2021) provides that the world is much more complex than before, in part due to Covid 19. This complexity requires a significant change in leadership methodology as Rost (1993) acknowledged. Haslam et al. (2020) describe the requirement for new leaders to be more engaged with followers as partners in the execution of plans and strategies to fulfill goals. **To accomplish this new paradigm of interactive leadership, the employees of the future must be lifelong learners in the development of soft skills, flexibility, self-management, and**

development; while innovation, creativity, adaptation and flexibility are crucial traits for the 21st-century global marketplace (Zukowska & Lemieszkiewicz, 2025).

Olsen et al. (2024) research indicated that self-advocacy, confidence, adaptability, proactivity, having a "go-getter" attitude, being a "self-starter," and effective time management are important leadership skills for early-career advancement. In a study of 60 CEOs desired and needed leadership skills and characteristics, the top five requirements were: Communicative skills, interpersonal skills, ethical values, consensus building, and critical thinking (Tyler, 2007).

According to international studies, business students prioritize five core skills—communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and decision-making—while also valuing strategic thinking and innovation for entrepreneurial leadership roles (Majid et al., 2012). Communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and decision-making are consistently ranked high for both leadership development and career success (Wilson, 2023).

According to Al-Fattal et al. (2024), strategic thinking, team management, and innovation (including creativity and risk management) support leadership roles in dynamic, especially in virtual business settings. Other skills such as time management, self-motivation, and resource allocation were also noted as significant in effective leadership mobility and adaptability.

It is clear that “soft skills” are perhaps the most important for aspiring leaders to have and sustain as they move through the upward mobility of leadership (Barta et al., 2022). The question some may ask is how and where someone can obtain and find credible sources to develop these much needed skills?

There is now a specific requirement for universities to transform student preparation for careers in science, technology, and research to include soft skills and critical thinking as an integral part of the curriculum (Grooters et al., 2023). In the study conducted by Majid et al. (2012), college students recommended that soft leadership skills could best be obtained through hands-on experience and internships rather than academic didactics. These students also overwhelmingly agree that soft skills activities should be incorporated into the curriculum. Programs, clubs, college activities, and internships should also provide the best opportunities for leadership soft skill development.

Even industry leaders recommend that future employees need to add internships to their career development, especially if they strive to have upward mobility and success as leaders (Grooters et al., 2023). Internships provide an interactive dimension that cannot be developed from reading a book or through the didactics in a classroom. Participation in sports teams is another means of gaining the necessary experience to become a leader. Action Centered Leadership (ACL) builds an understanding of both leadership and followership (Krumins, M., 2022). Athletics teaches and develops communication, how to work in a team, goal setting, problem-solving, and the experience of performing under pressure. These critical skills are transferable to business and entrepreneurship.

The simple conclusion that Gen Z and Millennials should draw from this research is that active participation, not just videos, classroom exercises, or reading, is essential to becoming a leader in any field in today's global marketplace.

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