A Qualitative Descriptive Study of Millennial Motivational Profiles and Leadership Preferences

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Abstract

Existing research on leadership and motivation generally focuses on how leadership styles impact employee motivation with little consideration of how the employee’s characteristics can influence their preference in a leader. Motivational profiles comprising concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic factors and employee preferences towards transformational or transactional leadership styles were examined. Seventeen Millennials who have entered the workforce in the Western United States participated in a screening questionnaire and interview process designed answer research questions 1) How do Millennials in the Western United States describe their motivational profile once they have entered the workforce? and 2) How do Millennials who have entered the workforce in the Western United States describe their preferred leadership style? A thematic analysis revealed that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are significant predictors of transformational and transactional leadership style preferences. Findings provide merit in both academic and organizational sectors. The findings contribute empirical evidence and practical value. Thus, these results can influence more informed leadership decisions to recruit, retain, and motivate Millennials in the workforce.

Keywords: Leadership, Motivation, Millennials, Organizational Development, Human Resources.

Introduction

Multiple generational cohorts comprise today’s workforce, while Millennials are the largest group in the U.S. labor force (Fry, 2018). The diversity in the workforce requires organizational leaders to advance various descriptions of employee desires and expectations (McCleskey, 2018). As a result, corporate leaders should adapt to generational changes to create success within their organizations (Sanner-Stiehr & Vandermause, 2017). There are many similarities and differences between leaders and employees; therefore, it is essential to create
connection and comprehension of relationships when relating to Millennials’ preferences of organizational leaders (Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019).

**Background**

A considerable amount of research has examined relationships between leadership style and workplace outcomes. Topics researched include but are not limited to employee well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Malik et al., 2017). These studies have provided significant insight into which leadership styles produce more productive outcomes; however, emerging research identifies the role of employee characteristics play when evaluating the success of specific leadership styles (Breevaart et al., 2014). Generational differences in the workplace can mean leaders hold different beliefs, attitudes, lifestyles, ethics, and expectations as Millennial employees (Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019). Therefore, leaders need to understand, accept, and adapt to these differences.

An underpinning in leadership preferences is understanding what motivates employees to complete daily tasks. Motivation is critical for predicting performance outcomes, employee turnover tendencies, and organizational commitment (Malik, 2013). Inherent motivation has been studied extensively regarding how leadership styles may influence the motivation of employees. However, there is less research completed that examined how an employee’s motivation may lead them to prefer a specific leadership style (Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

**Literature Review**

**Motivation**

Motivation comes in two forms: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is “The desire to perform an activity for its own sake, to experience the pleasure and satisfaction inherent in the activity” (Deci et al., 1999; Gong et al., 2017; Kuvaa et al., 2017). Intrinsic motivation comprises self-determination, competence, task involvement, curiosity, enjoyment, and interest (Gong et al., 2017). Intrinsic motivation is non-instrumental; instead, the action is not dependent on any result separate from the behavior itself (Legault, 2016). When leaders understand intrinsic motivation, they can better understand and predict the motivational behaviors in various social situations (Gong et al., 2017). Simply stated, intrinsic motivation is items completed for the satisfaction of completing the task.

Extrinsic motivation is the opposite of intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is defined “as the desire to perform an activity to attain positive consequences such as an incentive or to avoid adverse effects such as a punishment” (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kuvaa et al., 2017, p. 245). Extrinsic motivation is instrumental, meaning the task is performed to attain some form of outcome (Legault, 2016). Extrinsic rewards are seen as an entitlement and are physical, undermining intrinsic motivation for an activity (Deci et al., 1999; Legault, 2016). Extrinsic motivation is actions executed to satisfy outside influences.

**Leadership**

Leadership, defined here, is an interaction between one or more members of a group (Bass, 1990). For this study, the definition used of leadership will be “leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2018; Yachya & Sjarief, 2016, p. 81). Therefore, leadership is a top to bottom interaction.
There are diverse leadership styles; an effective leader inspires, motivates, and directs activities to help achieve organizational goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Other traits that describe an effective leader include visionary, passionate, creative, inspiring, innovative, flexible, courageous, and initiates change (Ahmad et al., 2017). Effective leadership is said to be a product of heart and passion for the organization’s mission. While the connection to the organization is essential, the human element of leadership must be understood.

The term “authentic” has been associated with leadership, which mentions the need for honesty, stability, and high self-esteem (Kernis, 2003; Lee, 2018) among leaders. Authenticity is a Greek term originated by Socrates that means “know yourself” within the realms of personal experience, self-awareness of one’s thoughts, feelings, desires, preferences, and beliefs (Lee, 2018). Authentic leaders communicate with their employees authentically. They will recognize both strengths and weaknesses and exert their leadership to incorporate said strengths to grow as leaders (Lee, 2018). Lee (2018) implied that relationships between a leader and employee are essential because the employee can mimic the information related from leadership at any time. Even if one exercises leadership, it should not be assumed that the leader’s guidance will work unless the employee can recognize the traits (Lee, 2018). Therefore, if an employee can readily identify the authenticity of their leader, authentic leadership is then effective (Lee, 2018). Authentic leaders will continuously develop and challenge themselves and their foundational leadership principles.

**Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership is becoming one of the more implemented models of leadership. Within this style, motivation is a critical component and is recognized among the achievement of team and organizational goals (Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders will move to amplify their employees’ awareness and interests relating to the organization’s mission and purpose, working as a collective entity (Bass, 1990). Therefore, transformational leaders inspire employees to position themselves as working on a joint endeavor instead of singularly, based on self-interests (Bass, 1990). Employees guided by transformational leaders will cultivate feelings of trust, admiration, and loyalty, enhancing the employee’s motivation to engage in additional organizational tasks (Bass, 1985). A transformational leader will follow four key characteristics: intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (Yachya & Sjarief, 2016).

**Transactional Leadership**

Transactional leadership is a style that is an exchange process focused on fulfilling contractual obligations and is generally represented as setting goals, observing, and managing outcomes (Aga, 2016). Transactional leadership builds upon contingent reinforcement, where employees are motivated by the leader’s promises, awards, and praises (Aga, 2016). Leaders who employ a transactional style desire to inspire employees by appealing to their egoisms (Aga, 2016). These leaders motivate employees to realize performance that is expected of them by helping them to recognize task responsibilities, identify goals, and develop confidence when performing the desired expected levels of performance (Shah & Hamid, 2015). Transactional leaders highlight the task-related exchange of actions and rewards between employees and
leaders (Aga, 2016). Ultimately, transactional leadership identifies the extrinsic reward and motivates the employee via that path.

Motivation Profiles and Leadership Preference

The presence of a precise motivational profile that details a Millennial employee offers conflicting perceptions. As it is known for a leader to be successful, they should adapt their leadership style to align with a current situation and the needs of their constituents (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987). Thus, the practical understanding between the connections of Millennial motivational traits and their subsequent leadership style preference is of high importance to provide some contribution to the practical and successful leading of this generation (Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019).

Indifference has been noted as a leading reason for Millennials to leave a job role. This may lend to the thought that Millennials favor a leader who provides them with more responsibility, variation in roles, and the feeling that their contributions impact their team members and overall organization (Twenge et al., 2010). Hence, the transformational leadership style may appeal to Millennials’ intrinsic motivational profiles. Specifically, a transformational leadership style may appeal to the individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation factors, emphasizing personal growth and creativity (Bass, 1990; Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019). Campione (2015) denoted that Millennials like autonomy and freedom from constant supervision; however, they discovered that emotional support, guidance, and individual consideration are appreciated. This may align with the characteristics of transformational leaders who address the qualities of each employee as unique and individualized rather than attempt to control (Graen & Schiemann, 2013; Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019).

Parry and Urwin (2011) suggested Millennial employees are also motivated by extrinsic rewards. Specifically, the achievement of their personal goals and success, instead of the organization's goals and success. This conflict is illustrated by Mencl and Lester (2014), who compared Generation Xs with Millennials’ work values and revealed that Millennials had a stronger sense of extrinsic rewards, such as money, status, promotion, and prestige (Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019; Twenge et al., 2010). The transactional leadership style uses extrinsic tools, such as promotional options and tangible rewards, to encourage employee performance. The transactional leadership style may be appealing to Millennial motivational profiles for this reason (Bass, 1990; Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019). When a transactional leader offers rewards, they do not have to be monetary. Instead, they can include psychological rewards, for example, flexible time, feedback, and goal-setting opportunities (Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019). Transactional leaders will also support the goals of their employees in a way that is explicit (Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019). This method of communication appeals to the extrinsic motivational profile of Millennials who prefer clear directives in their job role (Twenge et al., 2010). Millennials are a diverse generational group that reflects both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. Both scopes of this motivational profile combination are tuned to specific leadership qualities. Therefore, a transformational style may satisfy the intrinsic motivational need, while the extrinsic motivational need may be satisfied by a transactional leadership style (Kobylinski & McGregor, 2019).
Millennials in the Workplace

Millennials account for approximately 76 million individuals in the United States workforce (Calk & Patrick, 2017). Characteristically, Millennials are well educated, realistic, and value positive reinforcement, diversity, and autonomy (Calk & Patrick, 2017). Millennials also value teamwork, personal productivity, self-management, fulfilling work, and social consciousness (Calk & Patrick, 2017; Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Paur et al., 2018). Millennials will make a lateral career move to gain experience, prioritize intrinsic job satisfaction over monetary gain, make a difference over being recognized professionally, and be in a positive work environment over receiving high pay (Calk & Patrick, 2017; Henderson, 2012). Thompson and Gregory (2012) suggested that Millennials prefer feedback and clear direction on tackling specific workplace problems and tasks. Research has also been found that Millennials are not afraid to find new employment if their current position does not satisfy them (Paur et al., 2018). The Deloitte Millennial Survey concluded that Millennials quit jobs due to better opportunities, desired relocation, returning to school, learning new transferable skills, or changing industry (Deloitte, 2019). Therefore, it would be optimal for Millennials’ desires to align with organizational goals.

Methodology

Qualitative descriptive design is a simple non-theoretical research approach that allowed this study to be free of pre-existing theoretical or philosophical needs (Sandelowski, 2000). Using a qualitative descriptive design provided me an opportunity to obtain straightforward and minimally theorized answers to questions relevant to policy and practitioners (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2000). Therefore, I gained information from the general conceptions of naturalistic inquiry (Sandelowski, 2000). Furthermore, the research design was flexible for using thematic analysis to create themes, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved searching for themes by finding patterns in the data aligned with the qualitative descriptive design and relating to the research questions of this study (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

Millennials are the group of individuals following Generation X, and before Generation Z. Dimock (2019) and Fry (2018) explained Millennials were born between years 1981 and 1996. Millennials are the largest group in the U.S. labor force (Fry, 2018). Hall (2017) estimated that, by 2025, roughly 75% of the global workforce will comprise Millennials. The target population for this study was Millennials employed in the Western United States. Participants were recruited from a social network of my peers who are Millennials and a part of the Western United States workforce.

Results

Research Question 1

How do Millennials in the Western United States describe their motivational profile once they have entered the workforce?

Intrinsic motivators of Millennials in the workforce captured each of the participants' awareness of their internal motivational factors. These factors contributed to their work ethic, preferences to work in generally enjoyable and fun environments, feeling connected to the organization's mission, and having a sense of accomplishment from the work they do. Intrinsic
motivation denotes one’s desire to perform a task for one’s purpose and experience pleasure and gratification from the activity.

Millennials are independent, understand their purpose, and take necessary steps to achieve their personal and professional goals. Millennials are fueled by passion and can complete tasks without external reinforcers. Intrinsic motivation factors include self-determination, competence, task involvement, curiosity, enjoyment, and interest. Data also showed that motivated Millennials might make mistakes. Therefore, they will need to be in a psychologically safe environment that allows them to make mistakes. Psychologically safe environments enable employees to express opinions, acknowledge mistakes, and have confidence in engaging in risky, learning-related behaviors without retaliation or punishment. With psychologically safe environments, Millennials who are learners will be able to engage in the discovery process by having the ability to freely ask questions, experiment, and make mistakes. Psychologically safe environments will allow Millennial’s to enjoy their work and colleagues.

Intrinsic motivational factor of Millennials needing to enjoy or have fun in their work environments. Millennials understand the concept of fun is subjective; however, they prefer to enjoy the work they are doing and the environment where they work. Intrinsic motivation settles on the thought that someone will complete a task just for fun. Millennials claim that they can have fun with people with whom they have a “personal relationship.” The concept of relationships supports Maslow’s hierarchy related to motivation. Millennials prefer an environment that is diversely aware that impacts their intrinsic motivation and ability to enjoy their workspaces. It is vital to organizational success to tap into this intrinsic motivation when higher productivity and better attitudes are desired. Managers working in highly diverse organizations are advised to learn the differences in personalities, age, gender, and race when attempting to motivate employees. When these components are visible, they will support Millennial work ethic.

Millennials’ intrinsic motivational profiles suggested that they have a strong work ethic and are task oriented. Millennials desire to make an impact with the work they are doing. Considering 11 of the 17 Millennials who participated in the study were in a helping profession, they acknowledged that they were in their line of work to make a difference. Millennials are seen as optimistic, confident, and have strong morals and ethics. They prefer flexibility, brainstorming, and things to be done fast, accurately, and mobile-oriented. Intrinsically motivated people will engage in behaviors that substantiate their standards and might later achieve a higher goal. Data suggested that the Millennial’s ability to make an impact directly relates to the organizations they work for and the organization's mission. Mission statements that align with the Millennials' intrinsic belief system will better retain that employee. The individual will self-regulate and adjust to their standards. Therefore, intrinsic motivation helps individuals overcome challenges and pursue personal achievement.

Data captured each of the participants' perceptions of their intrinsic motivation factors. The data rendered from Millennial participants corroborates the literature and intent of the study. Millennials’ intrinsic motivational profiles included their internal awareness of motivation, work ethic, preferences to work in enjoyable and fun environments, connection to the organization's mission, and sense of accomplishment from the work they do. Millennials’ motivation profiles also included extrinsic motivation factors.
Extrinsic motivation for Millennials in the workforce encapsulated each participant's awareness of external motivational factors. These motivation factors included their preference for peer recognition and a need for compensation or rewards for their completed work. Extrinsic motivators suggested that a person performs an activity to receive positive consequences, such as incentives, or avoid punishment. Simply stated, extrinsic motivation is anything that motivates one to execute tasks for outside influences.

Recognition is a key aspect of Millennials’ extrinsic motivational profiles. Data suggested that recognition is of high importance as an extrinsic motivator for Millennials in the workforce. The form of extrinsic motivation supports Maslow’s hierarchy of belonging and love, promoting the thought that humans are social entities. Millennials correlate words of affirmation and recognition with their sense of accomplishment and completion of tasks at an acceptable level. Millennials desire recognition as confirmation that their work is acceptable; however, some Millennials feel that recognition should be offered with discernment. This concept of extrinsic motivation focuses on acceptance into groups, families, teams, and organizations. Millennials are aware of their surroundings and relationships with their colleagues, understanding the emotional impact of excelling in relation to their peers. Recognition is not the only method of extrinsic motivation that a Millennial has. Various compensation methods are also extrinsic motivators for Millennials in the workforce.

Monetary or psychosocial rewards, such as money, promotions, or fringe benefits, are a primary extrinsic motivator in Millennial motivational profiles. Extrinsic motivation suggests an employee completes a task for tangible rewards. Monetary and psychosocial rewards are needed as a means of basic survival. Physiological needs are described as necessary items for survival. These forms of reward are how Millennials know they are valued within an organization. Compensation signifies that their work is appreciated and contributes to organizational goals' overall progress. Therefore, Millennials feel that organizations that offer fair wages, promotional opportunities, and fringe benefits are invested in their employees and will continue to use adequate psychosocial rewards to motivate them to do a better job. While these items are seen as necessary and of the lower level in Maslow’s hierarchy, they may be a conduit to fulfill the higher-level needs.

**Research Question 2**

How do Millennials who have entered the workforce in the Western United States describe their preferred leadership style?

As a preference of Millennials, transformational leadership in the workforce encapsulated each of the participants' awareness of various forms of interactions with transformational leaders. These factors included goal-oriented leaders, developing positive relationships, mentorship, and communication. Transformational leadership is a leadership style where motivation is a critical component and is seen within the achievements of high-performing teams with sturdy organizational goals. Transformational leadership amplifies the awareness and interests of employees relating to organizational goals, mission, and collaboration across the collective. A transformational leader will follow four key characteristics: intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence.

Millennials described their preferences in leaders as those who are mentors. Mentorship that supports professional development allows Millennials to set personal and professional goals.
Transformational leaders will move to amplify their employees' awareness and interests relating to the organization's mission and purpose, working as a collective entity. Therefore, transformational leaders inspire employees to position themselves in joint instead of singular endeavors based on self-interests. Mentorship is a key component of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders who connect with their employees and invest in their professional development will be able to build positive relationships. The investment of development showed that the leader “valued their employee.” Leaders who can inspire and motivate employees while passionately encouraging them to follow the idealized goals of the organization as a group is considered to be transformational. As a component of transformational leadership, mentorship will build trust between leaders and their employees.

Millennials also prefer leaders who are able and willing to have difficult conversations with their employees to maintain transparency. Communication is the key component of good transformational leadership. Relating boosting effects to transformational leadership, feedback, and communication will create a sense of meaningfulness about the work employees have to perform. Without adequate communication, intentions and expectations may be misconstrued. Millennials expect and desire direct communication to feel well informed and feel that their leaders are trustworthy. Direct communication and clear expectations allow the employee to be autonomous because boundaries have been set. The ability to openly communicate and be transparent supported the literature on psychological safety, specifically, contributor safety. With certain contributions, change and conflict may arise. Employees must be able to challenge the status quo and still maintain psychological safety. Therefore, transformational leaders must connect and understand the organizational goals and the employee goals, communicate, and foster positive working relationships.

Transactional leadership as Millennials' preference in the workforce encapsulated each of the participants' awareness of various forms of interactions with transactional leaders. These factors included leaders being realistic and accountable. Transactional leadership is a style that is an exchange process focused on fulfilling contractual obligations and is generally represented as setting goals, observing, and managing outcome. Transactional leadership builds upon contingent reinforcement, where employees are motivated by the leader’s promises, awards, and praises.

Millennials prefer leaders who are realistic in their expectations. Millennials appreciate optimism from leadership; however, Millennials would rather have realistic interactions and expectations within the organization. Realism allows for direct communication and setting realistic expectations. While realism was the prominent preference of Millennials regarding personality, they were aware that optimism was a good pairing with realism. Transactional leaders focus on contractual obligations, set goals, observe employee behavior, and manage organizational outcomes.

Accountability is another preference of transactional leadership among Millennials. Accountability among leadership sets the expectations for the constituency and is part of the organization’s transparency, corporate citizenship, and organizational sustainability. Participants felt that leadership should be given evaluations similar to what employees receive regularly. Evaluations open the lines of communication. Millennials prefer various feedback measures and clear direction on how to tackle specific workplace problems and tasks. Leaders who are not accountable for their presence in an organization may have employees who do not trust them.
Two-way feedback fosters an environment that aids in holding to contractual obligations. Transactional leaders hold themselves accountable for their constituency’s needs and adhere to contractual obligations of leadership.

**Discussion**

Findings from this study indicated that Millennials are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The intrinsic factors included the subjective understanding of fun, internal drive, sense of accomplishment, and attachment to the organization's mission. The extrinsic factors that motivate a Millennial include tangible or psychosocial rewards and tactful recognition. Millennials prefer transformational and transactional leadership styles. Millennials who prefer transformational leadership are more engaged and committed to the organization. The preferences of Millennials under Transformational Leadership Theory included goal-oriented, developing positive relationships, mentorship, and communication. The preferences of transactional leadership included leadership being realistic and accountable. Millennials valued positive reinforcement, diversity, transparency, morals and ethics, and communication. The application of the results of this study can aid in better recruitment strategies, decreased employee turnover, and better leader-employee interactions among Millennials in the Western United States. Millennials are self-motivated and are willing to take on additional responsibilities when there is clear communication, transparency, appropriate engagement, feedback, attachment to the mission, and a clear vision.

**Recommendations**

Transformational leadership suggests that emotional intelligence and personality traits are properties that affect an employee’s performance (Bass, 1990; Malik et al., 2017; Wright & Pandey, 2010). Management personnel should connect with a subordinate’s personality, such as introversion versus extroversion, and identify ways to motivate based on the subordinate’s training needs (Northouse, 2018). Future research that aligns personality with leadership types can add to the literature regarding the ability to recruit talent who are aware of different leadership styles.

Millennial’s value organizational cultures that offer corporate social responsibility, diversity and inclusion, work-life balance, ideas above things, feedback and growth, and engagement and purpose (Alton, 2017). Diversity entails age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, personality, and lifestyle. Future research that investigates and details how leaders interact with protected classes based on the quality of work can enhance the organization’s ability to embrace diversity, learning, and working styles of employees, including motivational factors (Al-Sada et al., 2017).

The next generation of employees are entering the workforce. Generation Z are people born after 1997 (Desai & Lele, 2017). This study focused on the predominant members of the workforce, Millennials. Therefore, investigating the next generation of workers, their motivational profiles, and leadership preferences could aid current leadership paradigms in recruitment and management of the newest generation entering the workforce.
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