

JUNE 16, 2025 | LEADERSHIP



By Jackie Ferguson

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Leading Gen Z isn't about lowering standards — it's about raising the bar on how we engage, connect and communicate.

Gen Z is entering the workforce with bold ideas, digital fluency and a demand for purpose — but they're often met with resistance rather than readiness. Labeled "difficult" or "entitled," these early-career professionals are frequently misunderstood by managers who rely on outdated assumptions about work ethic and professionalism. But what if the disconnect isn't about Gen Z's attitude, it's about how we lead? To harness the potential of this generation, leaders must evolve their approach and build the kind of trust that inspires performance, not just compliance.

In one [survey of more than 900 employers](#), one in six hiring managers were reluctant to hire recent college graduates. Nearly 60% said they had fired Gen Z employees within a year of hiring them. Among managers' biggest complaints was a perceived lack of motivation or "work ethic." Yet, that narrative is incomplete, failing to consider the priorities of new graduates.

Instead of expecting Gen Z to conform to outdated workplace norms, leaders must bridge the cultural divide between older professionals and their younger colleagues. To capitalize on their talents, managers and mentors need a more inclusive approach that centers personal connections and trust.

The Roots of a Cultural Disconnect

Previous generations believed in job security, stable paychecks and pensions. Boomers and their Gen X children were confident that hard work would be rewarded — so they came in early, stayed late and worked through lunch to get ahead.

Gen Z has seen a different story unfold. They've lived through the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, mass layoffs and [rising burnout](#). They've watched their parents work long hours for little return. As a result, many young professionals prioritize well-being over overtime and value purpose more than a paycheck.

This skepticism about traditional employment is one reason Zoomers are shaping up to be one of the [most entrepreneurial generations](#) to date. In a 2023 [Square report on Gen Z entrepreneurs](#), scheduling flexibility and work-life balance were among the top reasons young entrepreneurs launched their businesses. Square also found that 54% of Gen Z consumers were considering how they could start a business.

The bottom line: Gen Z is willing to work hard, but they don't automatically trust institutions. It's up to leaders to overcome that skepticism, build relational trust and help the next generation grow into strong, engaged professionals.

Build Trust Through Personal Connection

To lead Gen Z effectively, managers must invest in trust. You can't coach someone hard — or offer [critical feedback](#) — if they don't believe you have their best interests at heart. That's why personal connection is foundational.

My check-ins with Gen Z team members often begin with casual conversation. We might talk about the latest reality television series or exchange stories about our families. These moments may seem unrelated to performance, but they build rapport and establish psychological safety. Once the relationship is solid, high expectations and tight deliverables are easier to navigate.

In contrast, older team members often prefer more transactional exchanges. While trust is still needed, it's more job-related than personal. They want to talk about the work, explore what's required, and be confident they can raise concerns or challenges. But with Gen Z, mentorship begins with mutual respect and strong relationships.

Recognition and Collaboration Matter

Managers — especially Gen Xers and baby boomers — should recognize how Gen Z's educational experience has shaped their view of work. Classrooms today are more collaborative and less hierarchical than in the past. Students sit in circles, share leadership in group projects and expect their voices to be heard.

This mindset carries into the workplace. Gen Z professionals thrive in team-oriented environments where leaders work with them, not just give directions. For example, when one of my team raises an issue or seeks guidance on a challenge, I don't provide the solution. Instead, I ask them, "How would you solve this problem?" The question begins a process of collaborative brainstorming that assumes each person has something important to add to the discussion.

Recognition also plays a larger role than some older managers expect. While "participation trophies" have become a cultural cliché, consistent recognition isn't about coddling — it's about reinforcing desired behavior. In high-trust environments, positive feedback also builds goodwill, which helps when constructive critiques are necessary.

Set Clear Expectations and Avoid Assumptions

Many Gen Z professionals are entering the workforce with limited job experience, due in part to pandemic disruptions and changing academic norms. That's not a reflection of their ability, it's context leaders must understand.

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Be explicit about workplace expectations and spell out the unwritten rules around punctuality, dress codes and meeting etiquette. Professional communication deserves particular attention. Raised on texting and social media, Gen Z team members may default to informal messages, overly casual emails, or may not check their inboxes regularly.

Rather than interpreting these habits as attitude problems, leaders should model preferred communication styles and provide constructive feedback. Mentors can help their mentees hone these important skills by role-playing networking conversations, reviewing email drafts or workshoping presentation skills. The key is to provide guidance without judgement and collaborating on the solution.

Psychological safety doesn't mean lowering the bar. It means showing young professionals what excellence looks like and how to reach it.


Respect Is a Two-Way Street

Strong personal connections — and the conversations that build them — create mutual respect. As a child in a multigenerational household, I was taught by my grandmother, Pauline, "No matter who you are, I can learn from you, and you can learn from me." That belief still guides how I lead and how I mentor.

Too often, Gen Z is dismissed as entitled, overly sensitive or unprofessional. These stereotypes reflect bias, not reality — and they limit young professionals' ability to contribute meaningfully.

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A common example? Assuming a Gen Z employee isn't ready to lead a project or join a high-level conversation. Whether intentional or not, excluding young team members from strategic work signals that their ideas don't matter. To foster growth, give Gen Z employees stretch assignments. Ask for their input during decision-making. Invite them to present to senior leadership.

Leading Gen Z isn't about lowering standards — it's about raising the bar on how we engage, connect and communicate. When we choose to mentor rather than manage, to collaborate rather than command, we unlock the full potential of the next generation of professionals. It's time to trade generational judgment for curiosity, invest in relationships and lead in ways that earn trust. The future of work depends not just on Gen Z showing up — but on whether we're ready to meet them where they are and help them grow.

Editor's Note: Read more leadership tips for 2025 below:

- [How to Use Slack and Comms Tools for Employee Recognition](#) — While comms notifications can serve as a distraction, in the case of employee recognition, new research found these messages drove performance.
- [AI Is Your Leadership Test: Will You Build a Future-Ready Culture or Get Left Behind?](#) — AI is transforming the way business gets done, with or without you. Will your people be part of this revolution or sidelined by it?

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About the Author



Jackie Ferguson is a bestselling author and award-winning entrepreneur who creates world-changing content as Vice President of Content and Programming at The Diversity Movement, a Workplace Options company. She writes frequently about inclusive business practices, and she is an in-demand speaker on diversity and belonging topics. Connect with Jackie Ferguson: [in](#)

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