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Leading from the Middle – How Gen X Leaders are Navigating Their Leadership Experience with Baby Boomers and Millennials

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**Leading from the Middle: How Gen X Leaders are Navigating Their Leadership
Experience with Baby Boomers and Millennials**

by

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A Culminating Project

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

Saint Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Abstract

Leadership in higher education is often evaluated and scrutinized. As with many other professional settings, good leadership often defines the success of the organization. This is also true in higher education. In order to help define what success looks like in the area of leadership, one evaluation point is to examine the age and generational position of the leaders within an institution. Looking at these relationships and connections can open a pathway of understanding in relation to quality of leadership and strength of relationships between leader and worker. Other studies and evaluations exist on the Greatest generation, the Baby Boomer generation, and even more recently the Millennial generation. Yet, there is little research on Generation X and their experiences in managing between these other generations.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the evolution of the Generation X leader in higher education and their relationships with Baby Boomers, Millennials, and now Generation Z as they enter the workforce. Ten Generation X leaders working within a public college and university system agreed to participate in the study. Findings from this study, connected to the research questions, reflected themes of leadership journey influences, tendencies of the other generations and how those factors influenced interactions and best practice, and the outlook of leadership in higher education going forward. These themes revealed consistency in best practice, pitfalls, and optimism for what is ahead as Generation X leaders in higher education institutions lead from the middle.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Colleges and universities are experiencing workplace challenges similar to other professional settings in relation to leadership and workplace dynamics. Increased competition for students and expansion of access of opportunities for students has put pressure on the leadership systems of higher education institutions. Kok and McDonald (2017) spoke to this point, “the pressures on universities to act more as businesses and to gain competitive advantage is increasing as the sector expands, both in terms of globalization and with the growth of new providers of higher education” (p. 210). Gen X leaders have a vital role to play in addressing these challenges as they assume leadership positions during these changing times. Ellis and Garcia (2017) outlined several factors and challenges Gen X leaders will need to take on as they navigate their leadership. Financial challenges will test leadership as resources continue to dwindle. Enrollment is continuing to drop at many colleges and universities in part because of the cost of education. Finally, teaching and learning models are changing with the boom in technology options and systems.

This qualitative research study examined the experiences of Gen X leaders as they assume senior leadership roles in colleges and universities and establish themselves and their leadership style. The study explored two key elements of this journey. First, the study examined the experience Gen X leaders have had in developing their leadership journey and as managers and leaders in the system they are working in, specifically an upper Midwest state supported college and university system. Secondly, the study explored the interactions these leaders have with the older workers they manage, the Baby Boomer generation, and the younger generation they manage, the Millennials.

Gen X leaders in college settings have many factors to consider in working to create an effective and successful environment. As Ellis and Garcia (2017) mentioned, challenges around budget, staffing, curriculum, program development, and student recruiting and retention are just some of the challenges facing these leaders. Gen X leaders will need to work to connect with and build their teams to meet growing and ever-changing demands. Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) mentioned that to meet these demands Gen X leaders will need to lead with creativity and innovation as central themes to their leadership (p. 4). Gen X leaders are in a unique position to lead from the middle on these important topics. Ellis and Garcia (2017), who interviewed Gen X presidents for their book, stated, “As a Generation X president, you are the bridge between the generational groups” (p. 68). Successful leadership for the Gen X leader hinges on creating these strong connection points with the employees from the generational groups around them. Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) summarized this idea by saying, “Leaders and managers who excel in the higher education workplace do so through an awareness of the challenges faced by each of the four generations as they interact with each other and with their students” (p.7).

Members of Gen X have had to break through some stigmas in their ascent to leadership positions. Muetzel (2003), in his book *They're Not Aloof, Just Gen X*, used the words “lazy” and “slackers” to describe this generation as they enter adulthood (p. 27). Gen X had less tolerance for authority, generally questioned the status quo, and preferred working independently. He further asserted young Gen Xers, “are perceived to be aimless, without any loyalties to the company, the senior management group, or even their peers within the organization” (p. 31). Looking at Gen X students can help to bring further clarity to their traits and how they were shaped into the leaders they are today. A Bale and Dudney (2000) study pointed out priorities of

Gen X students: “Gen Xers want to see value and relevance in education, or they are not motivated to learn new skills. They prefer experiential learning, they are independent and want to have more control over what they learn” (p. 217). The words *relevance*, *experiences*, *independence*, and *autonomy* reflect these observations and findings. Gen X leaders will have a unique story to share about their leadership journeys.

Defining Generations

There are a multitude of studies and opinions that work to define our current generational boundaries within society and our workforce. Kunreuther et al. (2009) identified the years and overarching characteristics of the four generations currently in the workforce:

- Veterans of change (born 1925-1945) are often referred to as the traditional or silent generation. In social change work, this generation pioneered the formation of new organizations. They are noted for their top-down style management, sense of propriety and loyalty, and emphasis on commitment, especially to their organizations.
- Baby boomers (born 1946-1964) are the post World War II generation whose younger members are sometimes called *Cuspers*. Almost 80 million people, they assume they have the power to make change; they believe in hierarchy but also try to be more inclusive in the workplace.
- Gen X (born 1965-1979), a cohort of 45 million, are also referred to as the sandwich generation because of their position between two larger generations. They are more skeptical than the boomers and more self-reliant. Xers enjoy working with their peers, chafe at being told what to do, and stress results.

- Millennials (born 1980-2000), also known as Generation Y and the Echo Generation, rival the boomers in size. Self-confident millennials now in the workforce believe they will make a difference through their practical know-how. (p. 4)

Cekada (2012) used similar timelines to define the generations existing in the current day workplace: “the Silent Generation (or Veterans, born 1933 to 1945); Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964); Generation X (born 1965 to 1980); and Generation Y/Millennials (born 1981 to 2000)” (p. 40).

Statement of the Problem

Many industries and professional settings are experiencing leadership changes as their workers and managers age and mature. Higher education entities will struggle along with other professional settings in retaining their best talent if they do not monitor quality leadership and workplace culture. Additionally, higher education institutions are experiencing troubled times in maintaining their budgets and resources. Li (2017) described the challenges college leaders can face when resources become scarcer: “Dramatic budget cuts result in an unfortunate reality: college becomes less affordable to students and their families, which has detrimental consequences for access and attainment” (p. 397). Additionally, changing demographics are affecting enrollment numbers and retention efforts. The American Association of Community Colleges studies trends in enrollment at two-year public institutions. Phillippe & Tekle (2017) outlined the decrease in enrollment numbers by saying, “These data indicate that in 2013 public two-year institutions enrolled approximately 6.3 million students. By fall 2016, enrollment at public two-year colleges dropped to around 5.7 million students” (p. 1). As part of the comprehensive community college mission, colleges are also challenged with aligning

programmatic offerings with the demands and needs of their local business community and employers. This work requires many levels of the leadership team to work together. The leaders responsible for connecting with business and industry must collaborate with the leaders of the academic team. Those leaders must be in lock step with these challenges, which creates the demand for strong leadership throughout higher education systems, from college presidents all the way to front line office managers, especially within a public college system. An article by Marcus (2018) discussed a unique program connecting business and higher education: “the \$60 million collaboration is meant to help solve the confounding disconnect between what colleges teach and what graduates need to know to fill jobs that are sitting empty in some of the nation’s fastest growing industries” (p. 20). As the system changes and more Gen X workers assume leadership roles, it will be important to understand the influences and factors that form them as leaders. This creates stronger leaders, better results, and more effective workplaces.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership development of Gen X in a public college or university system. To understand this journey, it was important to examine this primary perspective. The study looked at the challenges of managing an older generation (Baby Boomers) and a younger generation (Millennials). Gen X leaders are in a unique spot as they now hold positions throughout the ranks of leadership in public colleges and universities. As they grow in their leadership positions, it is very important to identify how these relationships, different views of the workplace, and various styles combine to create the working culture of public colleges and universities with Gen X leaders in charge. Numerous studies on Gen X persons as students, as workers, and some as leaders are cited in the following literature review.

This study sheds valuable light on the dynamics between Gen X leaders and the older and younger workers they are now managing.

Rationale

The rationale for this study was to understand the leadership journey of Gen X leaders in a public college system. To understand this journey, it was important to fully understand the dynamics of multiple generations working together, namely Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers. While there is some research and opinions on how these groups interact, there is little research on examining the specific experience of the Gen X leader, and certainly not within the specific setting of higher education and the two-year community and technical college. This research will help to inform current and future Gen X leaders, so they can and will be better prepared to lead forward effectively in their organizations.

Description of Research

In this study, symbolic interaction theory was used to bring clarity and context to the interview questions and results. Herbert Blumer (1969) developed symbolic interaction theory and Tracy (2013) described the theory by saying,

Symbolic interactionism investigates how meaning and identity are co-created through interaction. A central tenet of the theory is that people act and make meaning in the world based on how they define and interpret the situation and people around them. (p. 51)

This framework can be used in the workplace. Jefferies (2017) observes that within the workplace, people have interactions every day that create their frame of reference for future

interactions, particularly leadership in the workplace (p. 47). These interactions drove the questions and evaluation of the data in this study.

Research Questions

This study explored two primary research questions:

- 1) What patterns and influences brought these leaders into and have kept them in a leadership role?
- 2) What interactions and experiences with Millennials and Baby Boomers impacted their leadership journeys?

These questions helped develop the framework of research, questions, and the results of the study.

Summary

An overview of the study examining the leadership journey of Gen X leaders in public colleges was covered. The definition of generations currently in the workforce was provided. A statement of the problem, purpose, and rationale were provided. Finally, the description of research and the research questions were examined.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Gen X leaders in college systems are challenged with decreased resources and maintaining an effective and nimble workforce. To understand the challenges and experiences of Gen X leaders in the higher education setting the other generations they work with must be explored. Arsenault (2003) articulated why this evaluation is important: “Twenty-first century generations are working together more than ever before, thanks to the demise of the bureaucratic organization in favor of a horizontal style, new technology, globalization, and a more information-friendly atmosphere” (p. 125). This review includes a look at the work experiences of Baby Boomers, Millennials, and the overall working experience of the Gen X leader. There is also a brief exploration of the newest generation entering the workforce, Generation Z.

Exploring the literature in relation to these different experiences will help to shape the study and future understanding.

Gen X as Students and Young Adults

The primary focus of the study is the Gen X leader and their interaction and experience in leading the generation next oldest (Baby Boomers) and immediately younger (Millennials). It is important to integrate research into the study around the development and background of Gen X leaders as students and young adults. This literature can provide insight into the development of these leaders and shed light on how they lead and why they lead the way they do. The early research and observations of Gen X are less than flattering in relation to their work ethic and future. Howe and Strauss (1993) are preeminent researchers in generational studies. They had a generally negative view toward Gen X in saying,

They are the most diverse generation-ethically, culturally, economically, and in family structure, the only generation born since the Civil War to come of age unlikely to match their parents' economic fortunes; and the only one born this century to grow up personifying (to others) not the advance, but the decline of their society's greatness. (p. 7)

Howe and Strauss (1993) identified the originator of the Gen X term: "Author Doug Coupland, himself a 'baby boomer' if demographers are to be believed, originally suggested 'Gen X' as a title for this four-year cohort of Boomer-NOTs" (p. 12). With this said, they chose to use the term 13er in their book saying, "counting back to the peers of Benjamin Franklin, this generation is, in the point of fact, the thirteenth to know the American nation, flag, and Constitution" (p. 17). Howe and Strauss (1993) summarized many messages in their book by stating, "adult Americans are by now of the settled opinion that 13ers are, front to back, a disappointing bunch ... no one can blame them if they feel like an economic black hole" (p. 23). We now know that all is not necessarily lost in relation to Gen X, but these perceptions made an impact on interactions with other generations as Gen X pursued education and entered the workforce.

There are further examples of these types of perceptions as Sacks (1996) talked about his experiences as a teacher in a community college back in the mid-1990s, "while the larger culture embraces anti-intellectualism as simply a sort of healthy, All American trait, Gen X is putting its own spin on the old idea that ignorance is bliss: It's also very cool" (p. 149). Sacks also addressed another perceived trait of early Gen X members, entitlement, by stating, "Gen X was born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, America's entitlement society had become deeply entrenched. Unlike any generation before it, America's X babes grew up with mighty powerful images of comfort and style to live up to" (p 157).

As time passed, these negative stereotypes were challenged in research and observation. Haworth (1997) acknowledged some of these stereotypes by stating that “in 1990, for example, *The Washington Post* ran a story on our nation’s youth with the headline ‘The Doofus Generation.’ A few months later *New York Times* columnist Russel Baker referred to today’s students as a numb generation” (p. 10). Haworth mentioned that many of these stereotypes of Gen X were perpetuated by the media and the public: “If we look to Hollywood for the answer, we’ll learn that they’re nothing more than a bunch of flannel-wearing misfits who have a lousy work ethic” (p. 11). Haworth continued by citing research that refutes much of what has been made in relation to the perceptions of Gen X:

Data that I have reviewed from many sources constitute a growing body of evidence that today’s college students and graduates are just as committed as their elders to working hard at making a living. In a survey published in the January/February 1994 issue of *The Public Perspective* (the journal of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research), for instance, 87 percent of eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds responded that they had a “strong sense of loyalty” to their employing organizations, while another 69 percent said that they believed people “get ahead by their own hard work.” (Haworth, 1997, p. 11)

These observations in research were further supported in looking at Gen X students as they learned and became young adults. Gen X students show a progression of development into adulthood as they learn and ultimately become workers and leaders. This not only applies to the reflection of Gen Xers as young college students in the 1990s but also those same students in more recent times as adult learners in various advanced degree programs. Mitchell (2012) described some traits of the Gen X student in relation to the classroom,

this generation prefers to spend less time at work and more time enjoying their interests. In classroom, they experienced smaller classroom size and student-centered activities. Computers invaded this generation and played a large role in developing their learning styles. (p. 98)

These traits touch on varied classroom set ups and the importance of technology as these students progressed through the educational process. Mitchell (2012) also stated the importance of recognizing the prominence of value-shaping life events for every generation: “Gen X experienced the AIDS crisis, Three Mile Island disaster, the Challenger explosion, recession of the 1980s, corporate downsizing, and a rise in crime and divorce rates. They also experienced the beginning of technology” (p. 99). Mitchell (2012) suggested educators working with Gen X learners have awareness of these aspects as they consider the type of learning style and values these students have.

With this awareness in hand, Collins and Tilson (1999) expanded on more specific learner traits of the Gen X population as “independent problem solvers and self-starters, technologically literate, responsive, focused, life-long learners, ambitious, and fearless” (p. 581). Some other observations made by Collins and Tilson (1999) included, “their craving for simulation, need for personal contact, preference for concrete and specific information, desire to learn leading edge technology and quest for traditional goals, all while keeping their options open” (p. 581). Work life balance was also cited as a need of the Gen X learner.

With these characteristics and knowledge realized, there is room to consider specific approaches or techniques that might be effective in working with Gen X students. Similar traits will be noticed in the working life and leadership traits of this review. These strategies include

focusing on outcomes rather than techniques, making information relevant to the real world or work, using experiential learning as part of the curriculum, and allowing Gen X students to control their learning by creating independent learning opportunities (Collins & Tilson, 1999).

These observations associate with a study conducted by Bale and Dudney (2000) in which they examined the effectiveness of andragogical learning principles with Gen X students who were pursuing degrees in finance. Bale and Dudney (2000) made similar observations of the previously identified learning traits by stating Gen X students are “independent problem solvers. Many Gen Xers grew up with computers, so they are comfortable and familiar with advances in computer technology. They have been conditioned to expect immediate gratification, they expect immediate answers and quick feedback” (p. 217).

These traits drove some innovation into exploring various models of delivery of content to Gen X students. As with previous studies, Bale and Dudney (2000) identified other key traits that educators needed to be aware of:

Gen Xers want to see value and relevance in education, or they are not motivated to learn new skills. They prefer experiential learning using as many of the five senses as possible; they are independent and want to have more control over what they learn. (p. 217)

At the time of this study, most Gen X students were taking classes from Baby Boomer instructors. Bale and Dudney’s study worked to inform Baby Boomer instructors on preferred modes of instruction and effective andragogy, as they called it. Bale and Dudney (2000) defined Andragogy as “assuming learners are self-directed and self-motivated and prefer learning that is active, participative, problem centered and relevant” (p. 216). Working from that definition, the

researchers compared the traditional pedagogy model, which “involves adults leading or accompanying children” (Bale & Dudney, 2000, p. 217) to the andragogy learning model.

The comparison of andragogy to pedagogy gains importance in this study as there are certain assumptions and practices that accompany these models in the classroom. Throughout this comparison, Bale and Dudney (2000) weighed these characteristics against one another. For example, in relation to course topics, pedagogy would suggest the instructor takes complete control of driving topic areas throughout a course. Andragogy allows for more consideration of the learner’s needs and experiences in determining course direction and outcomes (p. 218). This comparison also explored learning motivation within these two models. Andragogy assumes more ingrained internal motivation to learn whereas those teachable moments need more formation with pedagogy. In bringing clarity to the definition, Bale and Dudney (2000) stated, “andragogy dictates that instructors transfer the responsibility of learning to students by using adaptive, problem-centered teaching methods that clearly demonstrate relevance to the learner” (p. 218).

Gibson (2009) put together information in comparing various generations that supports much of the work previously discussed. She discussed some of the circumstances they experienced that may impact they ways in which they learn. She said, “They were raised in the midst of high divorce rates, single parenthood, the first Gulf War, and the Challenger disaster. Many were latchkey kids and spent their formative years playing with and learning from rapidly evolving technological innovations” (p. 37). With that background defined, which closely mirrors Collins and Tilson, Gibson (2009) defined characteristics of the Gen X learner as being,

“comfortable with multitasking, are motivated to get the job done, value efficiency and directness, expect immediate responses, and look at education as a means to an end” (p. 37).

With those concepts in mind, Gibson (2009) provided key points for faculty to remember when communicating with Gen Xers: “Avoid unnecessary meetings; speak quickly and directly; cut to the chase; address work/life balance; give clear, direct explanations for changes; present specific information immediately; give them a piece of the task they can do ‘their way’” (p. 38). She also addressed keys in teaching and motivation: “Provide short learning activities followed by group interaction; provide short-term, challenging goals; use bullets to highlight important points, include online supplements, consider coaches or mentors” (p. 39). These suggestions have parallels to other research in relation to communicating with and teaching Gen X students. This perspective on Gen X students and young adults shows parallels to what we see in Gen X workers and ultimately in current day managers and leaders as we explore their experiences as professionals in the workplace.

Gen X as Workers

To further the exploration of the development of Gen X leaders, we must explore their past and current experiences as workers in the professional setting. Lee (1996) cited the work of David Cannon in identifying eight key traits of the early professional Gen X worker. First, the exposure to technology and quick hitting information drove most Gen X workers to want stimulating work that has meaning. Most were and are not drawn to jobs driven by routine or repeatable steps. Secondly, Gen Xers desire connection and feedback as they progress through their work. Gen X workers also want to be told in concise, specific ways how and what is expected of them. They become frustrated with vague instruction (Lee, 1996).

As previously mentioned, Gen X workers have been on the cusp of new technological advances since their childhood. This desire to use and be exposed to cutting edge technology carries on into their professional working lives. Lee (1996) also mentioned Gen X workers desire more normalcy and stability around family life than they experienced as children. They also desire work life balance to help ensure home life stability. Gen X workers also desire work that is unique and difference making. If possible, they shy away from jobs for the masses (Lee, 1996). Cran (2010) supported this difference-making thought process while referring to preferred Gen X project work: "Provide projects with a defined outcome and timeline. They prefer to focus on projects versus tedious task-orientated daily work" (p. 50). Lee (1996) used the words "emotionally repressed" to describe Gen X workers coping skills with difficult work situations and emotions. They can cope well and will keep their own emotions in check. Finally, Gen X workers prefer to maintain a variety of options as they consider initial career paths or promotional opportunities (Lee, 1996).

Masibigiri and Nienaber (2011) explored various factors that impact retaining the Gen X worker: "Retention is important for organisations [sic] as it ensures that they have the right skills at all levels and occupations to enable them to achieve their goals, especially that of high performance" (p. 2). In their research, Masibigiri and Nienaber (2011) used purposive sampling in a case study model to explore factors that influence retention of Gen X public servants. They explored the case studies of eight public employees in South Africa. The two primary factors that emerged in this student that impacted retention were career growth / professional development and flexible schedule/working conditions (p. 7). Identified in this work was the observation that the public agencies employing these workers were underutilizing the skills

available in these workers. This speaks to the previously cited factors of job advancement and desire for opportunity to grow Gen X workers want. Directly related to this factor was the ability to access training programs and the opportunity for professional development. The participants asserted the opportunity to advance themselves with access to further training had a big impact in their wanting to continue working in their current job (Masibigiri & Nienaber, 2011). This trait is also cited in research done by Muetzel (2003) that speaks to allowing workers the opportunity to move around the organization to gain experience: “If the employee is bright and dedicated, do not be intimidated by their need to move. In the future, this type of employee could be used in a number of different departments within the same organization” (p. 45).

The workers mentioned by Masirbigiri and Nienaber (2011) also cited their relationship with their supervisor as a factor in job satisfaction. They tied this together with the specific factors of professional development and flexibility with schedules and work life balance. Additionally, these employees were looking for that specific direction and direct lines of feedback cited in other research (p. 10). In their conclusion, Masirbigiri and Nienaber (2011) emphasized the impact of retaining the Gen X worker in the workplace: “The retention of Gen X employees is important because they are the knowledge repositories of organisations [sic]. They help to create sustain competitive advantage and to achieve organizational [sic] goals and good performance” (p. 10).

Rodriquez et al. (2003) conducted a study focusing on the factors and strategies in leading Gen X workers. Their research and preparation align with other studies cited that Gen X workers can be nomadic and on average move between positions or companies every three to five years (p. 68). In their study, they compared the differences in preference around five factors

as they compared Gen X workers and Baby Boomers: fulfillment, flexibility, technology, monetary compensation, and work environment (p. 68). They conducted quantitative research using surveys and received 805 responses from 1,000 surveys distributed. Rodriquez et al. (2003) identified numerous differences in preference between the generations as workers in this study. In the category of fulfillment, Gen X workers preferred to find challenge and accomplishment in their daily work versus the Baby Boomer who preferred a longer runway in finding fulfillment, over the course of days or weeks (p. 74). This is consistent with the research cited by Lee (1996).

The next factor explored was technology. The research found that Gen X workers preferred using more modern technological tools to communicate in the workplace as opposed to the Baby Boomer worker who preferred more traditional tools (Rodriquez et al. 2003). Rodriquez et al. (2003) noted the importance of this differentiation in that it could cause miscommunication in the workplace (p. 74). Flexibility was evaluated next. Gen X workers preferred a flexible work schedule that might include working for home, working on weekends, and possibly working outside the realm of the traditional workday hours of 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM (p. 74).

This need for flexibility in work life balance is supported in research by Johnson and Johnson (2010) who discussed providing flexibility to employees: "Money is an important consideration but it's not the only consideration and, sometimes, it's not even a consideration at all. You will be better able to hire and retain Gen Xers by supporting their need for a well-rounded lifestyle" (p. 85). Finally, Rodriquez et al. (2003) explored the preferred monetary benefits of the research group. These questions were specific to retirement plans and related

benefits. These Gen X workers preferred retirement plans that were mobile and could move with them if they happened to change jobs. This theme is consistent in relation to the nimble environment and nature preferred by the Gen X worker (p. 74). The conclusions around leadership in this study are telling considering it was from 2003. Rodriguez et al. (2003) raised questions about what the preferred leadership style would be for Gen X workers. They asked questions about the challenges of leading Gen X workers who would or will become mobile workers or working from home at different hours of the day. This research and these questions were insightful as we have witnessed what has happened in workplaces since this study (p. 76).

Kunreuther (2003) explored the workers and their reasons for desiring employment in what she called social-change organizations. Colleges and universities could be included in the social-change category. Kunreuther cited in her findings this research contradicts what she called popular literature on the commitment of Gen X workers in social-change organizations (p. 452). She found that they were extremely committed to the cause of their organizations, loved their jobs, and were led to serve. Kunreuther (2003) noted, however, some differences between Baby Boomers and Gen X workers in three areas. First, she talked about their motivation that led them to enter the profession. For the Gen X worker, it centered around a personal experience or a traumatic event that drove them to this sector of work.

For the Baby Boomer, there are more social or political reasons that guided them to the field (Kunreuther, 2003, p. 453). Secondly, Kunreuther (2003) made observations about work life balance, which has been mentioned in numerous other studies. She noted that a difference in existing research and her work suggests Gen X workers put in the same amount of effort and time into their jobs as their Baby Boomer counterparts. However, Gen X workers struggle with

finding the balance between that commitment to work and their home life: “Some were locked in a struggle between their work, which they felt required enormous time and commitment, and their desire to have and be involved with their children in ways that meant spending fewer hours on the job” (p. 454). Gravett and Throckmorton (2007) supported this thought and offered other work life balance tools employers can offer Gen X employees; generous paid time off policies, flexible work schedules, childcare benefits/options, and telecommuting opportunities (p. 94). Finally, she talked about how younger directors in these organizations were more willing to try new things around management and team structure. Kunreuther (2003) noted younger leaders had worked to develop structures in leadership that created a stronger team structure, gave more input to outside constituents, and offered input and leadership opportunities to the general employee population (p. 454). This point is supported by Mulrennan (2015) in relation to allowing Gen X workers room to influence and grow. They wrote one should “allow Gen Xers to take the lead on collaborative projects and teams. Gen Xers are highly competent team leaders who are self-motivated to set the plan and also empower other to get the work done in their own ways” (p. 82). Kunreuther’s (2003) final observations noted social-change organizations need to respect the contributions of the younger workers, provide opportunities for growth, and develop upcoming staff so they can take on more responsibility (p. 456).

Hessen and Lewis (2001) raised consistent themes found in other research as they identify key aspects of engaging Gen X workers. They stated these workers need to have a clear understanding of the direction of the organization and feel a connection to it to stay engaged (p. 42). As Kunreuther (2003) noted in her research, Hessen and Lewis (2001) cited the importance and imagination around corporate/organizational structure and emphasize it is of high

consequence to the Gen X worker: “Changing from a traditional divisional organization to a market sector arrangement; to embrace customers with more responsive, personal attention; could be a better alignment for Xers’ temperament” (p. 43). Hessen and Lewis (2001) also call out the importance of the mentoring process and how leaders can use strategies to help develop the Gen X worker. They recognize Gen X workers are generally independent but also require consistent and direct feedback. They want clear direction that aligns with department and organizational goals. They also desire that technology be part of the training and mentoring process (p. 43). Hessen and Lewis (2001) identified a long list of strategies employers can use to engage and foster the skills Gen X workers bring to an organization. A few key strategies listed include: thanking them in a public setting, recognizing good performance on the spot, scheduling flexibility and work life balance, setting team goals along with individual goals, providing organizational updates quarterly, and offering frequent and relevant professional development opportunities (p. 44). These strategies intersect with the research previously cited in this review.

Gen X as Leaders

In recent years Gen X workers have assumed more leadership roles in a variety of professional sectors. As they take on leadership roles from middle management to president or CEO, they are at a unique point in their leadership journeys. They are managing older workers (Baby Boomers) and younger workers (Millennials) simultaneously. As this transition occurs, there is a transition happening between outgoing Baby Boomer leaders and Gen X leaders taking over leadership positions. Carucci and Epperson (2011) offered unique insights in their research as they examined their own relationship as a Baby Boomer mentor and an up-and-coming Gen X leader looking for mentorship and guidance. They cited the challenge or clash of legacy and

potential in this transitional phase. They called on their own experience to encourage current Baby Boomer leaders to share their knowledge, find ways to mentor, and to not guard or protect their institutional and intellectual property to the detriment of future leaders (p. 68). In return, Carucci and Epperson (2011) told Gen X leaders to be patient as they assume larger roles and bigger responsibilities:

To further the conflict, younger leaders often interpret and feel threatened by older leaders' needs to control the pace at which they gain influence as muting their influence and hindering them from realizing their full potential. Feeling marginalized and constrained, they often defect to other organizations where they hope such constraints will not exist, thereby further stripping the organization of the leadership capacity on which it's future depends. (p. 68)

Carucci and Epperson (2011) continued this line of thought with some solutions to the challenge of transition and staying patient and humble. They summarized that point this way: "The most sustainable leadership between generation embraces the truth that potential is predicated on legacy, and legacy rests of the shoulder of potential" (p. 69). Mulrennan (2015) addressed the perception that Gen X leaders have been forgotten in the hand off of leadership from Baby Boomers to the next generations:

Now is your time. But you can't sit around quietly waiting for someone to notice.

Because the fact is: others noticing Gen X may never happen. In fact, every day there are more and more articles coming out about Generation Z – the ones born after the Millennials. Take a lesson from both the Baby Boomers and the Millennials and speak up. There is a huge leadership development opportunity for Gen X, and that is to

better learn how to actively elbow your way up to the front and find your voice. (p. 92)

These thoughts on this leadership transition are important as we explore the remaining literature on Gen X leaders. Whitehouse and Flippin (2017) offered additional insights into the dynamic of Gen X leading older Baby Boomers and younger Millennials. Leading in between two larger generations at an important time was noted: “In education and work environments, how leaders work with older and younger people is as critical today as it has been at any time in history” (p. 10).

Whitehouse and Flippin (2017) pointed out the importance of connection Gen X has between Baby Boomers and Millennials by writing; “Gen Xers are now leading organizations in a time of political and economic transition as both democracy and capitalism are being radically reshaped by many forces, including ongoing social inequality and environmental destruction” (p. 10). These leaders are in charge at a critical time, and exploring their leadership tendencies, qualities, and experiences could help to shape the direction of organizations for years to come. Mulrennan (2015) offered additional insight into how Gen X leaders are bridging the gap between Millennials and Baby Boomers in working through transitions and conflicts in the workplace:

Create roles where Gen Xers are the internal consultants, liaisons, and conduits between the how and why. They become the liaisons, explaining to younger employees how Baby Boomers originally structured the organization, how change has been managed historically, and how the previous leadership’s approach to the business, combined with the fresh ideas and energy brought in by the millennials, can come together to inform plans moving forward. Serving in this type of role will also benefit Gen Xers in this

phase of their careers, allowing them the opportunity to transfer knowledge while actively demonstrating their ability to build trust and lead millennials in a collaborative environment. (Mulrennan, 2015, p. 77)

Houlihan (2015) explored key elements included in engaging and retaining Gen X leaders as they assume the reigns from Baby Boomer leaders in their organizations. She recognized norms in many organizations and then suggested solutions for strong communication and effectiveness in leadership. She mentioned that Gen X workers are self-starters who prefer collaboration. Baby Boomers are more accustomed to directive leadership and focusing on tasks. Houlihan offered Gen X leaders need to start from a place of building trust and lifting the background, knowledge, and know how Baby Boomers offer in the workplace. With open communication and a collaborative approach Baby Boomers are more likely to acclimate to the Gen X leader's approach (p. 7). Houlihan (2015) went on to speak about organizational retention and strategies both current Baby Boomer leaders and newly assigned or placed Gen X leaders can use to make sure organizations retain their people and intellectual property. She mentioned creating mentorship programs that could help to pass on knowledge from more tenured workers and creating incentives that keep each generation engaged and active in the decision-making processes of the organization (p. 7).

The mentoring theme is strong in many threads of the literature. Ellis and Garcia (2017) spoke to this in their book. They talked about the process of creating a mentor/mentee relationship that helps to learn from those who have done before, prepare for future work and responsibilities, and to develop a strong coaching relationship (p. 35). They also introduced what they call intrusive mentoring. This happens when a leader might seek out an individual

who shows the aptitude and abilities to take on a large leadership role. This can include regular connection points, planned support in roles and journeys, and preparation activities to be ready for a larger leadership role. This could happen in any sector, but this was described in detail in the process of cultivating new candidates for the role of community college president. As with many sectors, the reason for this approach was a perceived shortage of capable up and coming leaders to assume the role of community college president:

Community college leaders view the leadership shortage as a threat to the future of the community college sector and achieving student success. Thus, they are motivated to become mentors and strategically identify and help prepare the next generation of leaders (p. 36)

Gen X leaders have an opportunity in a system like this to not only learn from those leaders who came before them but to also learn how to be a mentor for the leaders that will come after them.

Odom (2015) explored the steps Gen X leaders can engage in to ensure they are maintaining a proper pipeline of talent as they ascend to leadership roles in organizations where Baby Boomers are starting to exit. Odom referred to this as succession planning and spoke to it from a variety of angles. He emphasized Gen X leaders need to be thinking ahead, planning strategy, and scanning the existing pool of employees to be grooming the next group of leaders for their roles. This strategy allows for leadership teams to have multiply options when considering who is next in the leadership pipeline (p. 52). Further their own educational attainment is also an important aspect for Gen X leaders. Miller and Laspra (2017) noted some mid-range Gen X leaders are continuing their education journeys: “Forty-four percent of Gen X young adults completed a baccalaureate or higher degree by their early 40s, compared to 32

percent of their parents. Four percent of Gen X young adults earned a doctoral or professional degree” (p. 28).

Odom (2015) offered additional advice to the Gen X leader as he combined the actions of taking over leadership of organizations with being effective in the role. He encouraged leaders to consider context and relevancy when making decisions for their organizations. Within this advice he mentioned taking time to consider factors, making sure one’s own lens is not the only view the leader considers, and to measure all the facts before acting. He also advised Gen X leaders to leave assumptions aside and strive to find clarity. To find clarity, you must consider multiple aspects and take time to make a good decision. He also encouraged leaders to engage in and take advantage of professional development opportunities. Leaders should develop themselves but also learn about what the people they oversee do so they clearly understand the work happening on their teams (p. 102). Odom (2015) concluded these leadership thoughts by calling out the challenges Gen X leaders face in managing a 21st century workforce; an exodus of retiring Baby Boomers, different generational values at work, and a difficulty in maintaining and managing the intellectual resources within the workplace, “seek to influence and inspire, not to drive and direct” (p. 103).

To build on Odom’s (2015) sentiments around inspiring and building influence, Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) emphasized the importance of a concept they called servant leadership. This is reflected in Odom’s (2015) comments about learning what the people that work for you do. Servant leadership, specifically, is the concept of getting the team to believe they are not being asked to do anything their leader wouldn’t do themselves (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016, p. 98). By adopting this model, Fitch and Van Brunt described how a Gen X leader could execute a

professional development/team building plan in a higher education setting with a ten-step process.

Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) said it is important to define and make clear the objective of the training. Secondly, they suggested leaders find training that has the potential to carry on or create impact beyond the initial training session. Next, they stated using the creative energy of the group will increase enjoyment and engagement. They went to say paying attention to the details is very important, the participants will notice if details are missed or not shared out in a timely fashion. In doing this, they suggested soliciting the help of other team members to help with the planning. By getting others to help, the burden does not fall onto too few people. They also mentioned being creative if budgets are tight or limiting. There are likely talented people on the team who can provide useful information to other colleagues. They then suggested planning breaks or meals together so that the staff have time to connect with each other over meals or snacks. As the training is happening, they suggested encouraging leadership and participants to celebrate and acknowledge breakthroughs and accomplishments of individuals and the team. Finally, it is important to have the entire team thank the presenter or content expert for sharing their expertise. This servant and team approach to professional development should serve the Gen X leader well in developing their team (p. 100).

Lancaster and Stillman (2002) supported this idea of servant leadership by talking about respect. They added to gain respect you must also show it to those you are managing. They used case studies to show that as young Gen X leaders took over leadership of divisions and teams they were best served to recognize the experience around them that made the organization work. Asking for advice from older employees and learning from their experience can help the

organization succeed and help all workers find mutual respect (p. 298). Lancaster and Stillman (2002) also addressed the team concept that is part of the servant leadership idea. When team are forming within groups Gen X leaders are managing, they need to find ways to engage even though it might not be part of their natural tendency: “You can help rather than hinder the team by offering input on how team members will check in or how decisions will get made. Ultimately, there is a lot to be gained by strengthening the team and its efficiency” (p. 305).

A key component in any training endeavor is strong communication. Blending communication avenues, efforts, and methods will be key to Gen X leaders as they start or build their leadership journey. Grubb (2017) offered some advice on method and on strategy as Gen X leaders build communication plans within their teams, “to help keep employees of all ages current on new technologies in the workplace, consider implementing a reverse mentoring program in which younger employees teach their colleagues about the latest offerings” (p. 129). Grubb (2017) stated this reverse mentoring training can have residual effects. Namely, she talked about the added benefit of allowing millennials to take the lead and offer up expertise only they might have. This helps them bring value to the organization and helps to build rapport. Within these interactions, Baby Boomers might also find opportunity to share their experience and expertise. Also, as older workers gain new skills through this type of training, they feel a renewed sense of relevancy and empowerment (p. 130).

Building the team coincides with building a strong culture within the organization. Gen X leaders are now tasked with building teams with dwindling resources all the while maintaining a strong culture, so they can retain the talent they have and attract the talent they need. Gravett and Throckmorton (2007) spoke to this challenge and laid out some strategies to assist in

accomplishing the culture task. First, they mentioned leaders must build a brand employees can relate to and be proud of. The four key parts of this include: The essence of who you are, features and attributes, performance, and a set of values. This strategy should include valuing all employees for their unique gifts, regardless of age or tenure within the organization. They also recognized the importance of measuring progress and communicating that progress to each employee on an individual basis as well as to the organization as a whole. They suggested doing this in small groups through training and making sure the groups have a strong cross section of employees. Finally, they suggested creating and aligning values to the whole of the organization as this will help to ensure strategy, progress, and outcomes line up with the direction the employees and leadership expect the organization to take (p. 170).

Kunreuther et al. (2009) provided a good summary on what Gen X leaders should focus on as they build their own leadership capacity and skill set. They call out the importance of supporting the development of the millennial employee and to be sure to listen to their ideas. Millennials will also bring challenge and new ideas that should be considered. In relation to Baby Boomers, attention should be given to their experience, but opportunity must be provided and supported to bring new training and technology to these workers. Managing through change with Baby Boomers is also important for Gen X leaders to consider. They added Gen X leaders must be willing to bridge the gap between Baby Boomers and Millennials, they should not be threatened by the Millennials bringing challenge and their enthusiasm, and to encourage teamwork and systems change (p. 149). Urick (2017) supported this idea of Gen X working effectively between two different generations: “Gen xers are at their best when serving as mentors to Millennials in order to bridge the gap between older and younger individuals” (p. 76).

Baby Boomers as Workers

More Baby Boomers are staying in the workforce longer based on economic and work ethic drivers. Cekada (2012) spoke to these factors: “Many baby boomers hoping to retire early lost that opportunity during the recent recession. Consequently, many will work until later in life to support their current lifestyles” (p. 40). As the economy has improved some of these workers have retired but others continue to work. They bring along with them a wealth of knowledge and experience. Cekada (2012) cited the general notion that these workers have a strong work ethic and bring some competitiveness to the workplace. These workers are also loyal, many Baby Boomers Gen X managers work with will have been at the institution, or at a minimum in higher education, for many years. The question of longevity and loyalty holds true in other areas of education as well. Seipert and Baghurst (2014) shared through a study about preferred work values between Baby Boomers and Gen X principals: “Baby boomer principals feel a stronger sense of loyalty to the school district as they are closer to retirement age and want to stay in their current positions until they retire” (p. 362). Gentry et al. (2011) added that some believe Baby Boomers are too focused on work:

Baby boomers are often described as materialistic workaholics who desire self-fulfillment and who place high value on work and acquisition of things, sometimes at the expense of family. Compared with other generations, they are particularly driven and willing to go the extra mile. (p. 40)

In relation to managing the Baby Boomers and their fit in the workplace, Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) described challenges that could be encountered:

Managers might find themselves struggling to honor the historical position of Boomers in the workplace, given they have long enjoyed a position of power and attention there—that may wane as Gen X and Millennials come forward with new ideas. (p. 20)

Arsenault (2004) shared research on preferred leadership style traits for Baby Boomers: “They prefer a collegial and consensual style. Passionate and concerned about participation and spirit in the workplace. They espouse lots of communication, sharing of responsibility, and respect from each other’s autonomy” (p. 130). The formal nature of the baby boomer workforce is also noted within the forming teams and teamwork. Reflecting to the collegial and consensual style, Sirias et al. (2007) implied Baby Boomers are more aligned to the collective group than their own individual needs: “We might suspect that people with a collectivist orientation would be more sensitive to the socio-emotional aspects of team process than those with an individualistic orientation” (p. 753). Through the work of this research Sirias et al. (2007) concluded that Baby Boomers appreciate the team aspects of forming work groups more so than Gen X workers. Sirias et al. (2007) stated Gen X leaders should be conscientious as they manage and form teams that include Baby Boomers They wrote, “the current paradigm, and the heart of a Boomer’s approach to team-building, is that teams should be built around established normative concepts, shared values, consensus decision-making and a collaborative approach to conflict resolution” (p. 758). This paradigm does not necessarily align with the preferred practice of team building for Gen Xers, who value more individualistic traits in building out teams (Sirias et al. 2007).

Gen X leaders can also learn best practice in leading Baby Boomers by observing and communicating with Baby Boomer managers. Johnson and Johnson (2010) made this

observation in support: “Asking baby boomers to recommit themselves to their jobs in new and creative ways will often recapture their hearts and stimulate them to contribute until the day they leave” (p. 45). The natural handoff that is occurring in the transition from Baby Boomer managers to Gen X managers can provide value for the Gen X leader. Cran (2010) provided an alternative term for Baby Boomers by using the term “Zoomer” that she credits to Canadian Moses Znaimer. She wrote, “In his estimation, a Zoomer is a Baby Boomer who refuses to age” (p. 11). Defining this term helps us understand her point about Baby Boomers bringing value to Gen X leaders and the environment that Gen X leaders need to provide. Cran (2010) stated, “Many Zoomers are afraid to teach what they know to Gen Xs because they are worried about job stability. It is important to coach and teach Zoomers to get comfortable with ‘downloading their knowledge’ to their teams” (p. 12).

Johnson and Johnson (2010) supported this thought around the importance of Gen X leaders creating an environment that allows Baby Boomers to share their knowledge. They offer some ideas around mentorship that can help engagement and buy in. The suggestion would be to assign a mentee or two to each Baby Boomer manager or employee (p. 43). They went on to say by assigning this task as a job duty and by giving the Baby Boomer mentor some say in the goals and outcomes of the mentee a Gen X leader can create more buy in for the work and create an environment where the Baby Boomer is more comfortable in sharing what they know (p. 44). Johnson and Johnson (2010) also spoke to the potential value of investing in Baby Boomer workers as they near retirement. Many of these workers feel undervalued and by reinvesting in them you can help create an environment where they are comfortable sharing what they know

with younger workers they, in turn, might give increased effort and output as they prepare to retire or continue working throughout the last phases of their career (p. 46).

There are other options to consider as Gen X leaders ponder various pathways for the Baby Boomers they manage or work alongside with. Kunreuther et al. (2009) described several other options for Baby Boomers. One productive task discussed included a cross generational strategic planning exercise that includes younger workers planning alongside the more tenured Baby Boomer workers (p. 90). This is another avenue to help shepherd forward the knowledge built up over time by the Baby Boomer employee. Another option mentioned by Kunreuther et al. (2009) is to consider development of a leadership program to pass on what Baby Boomers know by “creating more opportunities for younger staff to take on more responsibility and authority. Staff members, in turn, need to learn to rely on their own decision-making ability rather than look to the leader for constant affirmation” (p. 88). Using Baby Boomers to create these connection points could be valuable in maintaining consistency and high morale in the colleges Gen X leaders are directing. Grubb (2017) offered similar advice around the importance of creating a strong mentoring connection when engaging the Baby Boomer worker: “Young can learn from old, old can learn from young. Make employees teaching their coworkers skills a natural part of coming to work so no one feels weird when being mentored or mentoring someone from a different generation” (p. 70).

With these strategies in mind, Zemke et al. (2013) reminded us that managing Baby Boomers comes with challenges: “Boomers can be political animals, especially when their turf is threatened. Their rapport building skills are used to sell a plan for self-protection or territorial improvement or self-betterment masked as concern” (p. 78). Zemke et al. (2013) continued on to

describe additional strategies to keep the Baby Boomer engaged and feeling like they can share concerns. They mentioned making sure Baby Boomers feel valued in their current work, and that their previous experience is valued. They also mention that Baby Boomers appreciate opportunities to excel and being put in a position to be successful is valuable to them. Even though their longevity in the job might be short, describing to them how their skills might be valuable in the future keep Baby Boomers motivated (p. 80). Zemke et al. (2013) also provided key points to remember in developing and motivating the Baby Boomer employee. Baby Boomer employees need to be challenged in ways that allows skill development but also pushes them out of their comfort zone. They enjoy training and professional development opportunities. They also appreciate collaborative decision-making processes, public recognition, and rewards for their self-perceived work ethic (p. 82). Grubb (2017) reinforced the thought around decision-making processes and being in the know on company or organizational happenings by pointing out that Baby Boomers appreciate the additional inside information: “Have the employee expand his or her knowledge of the company by job shadowing another executive. Baby Boomers who may be nearing retirement and aren’t seeking for a promotion appreciate gaining insight into the senior-most workings of the company” (p. 58).

Lancaster and Stillman (2005) reinforced and mentioned other strategies Baby Boomers appreciate as they engage in the current day workplace: “If there is one thing that demotivates an older employee with a younger boss, it is when the employee feels his or her experience isn’t valued” (p. 298). This theme resonates with other research in calling out the importance of Gen X leaders respecting the experience of the Baby Boomer employee. Grubb (2017) called out this strategy as well in relation to managing older workers: “You don’t need to know everything.

Use their experience as a sounding board. You're still the one who has to make the decision, but there's no reason you shouldn't get their input" (p. 69). Additionally, Lancaster and Stillman (2005) encouraged incorporating the Baby Boomers skills and knowledge into the work. They also encouraged Gen X leaders to be open to learning from the Baby Boomer employee. As with many generational dynamics, it is best to show you are willing to listen and admit mistakes. Baby Boomers appreciate the chance to show value in the experience they have built over time (p. 299).

Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) outlined several strategies used by managers to build the managerial relationship that echoes much of the research cited in relation to the Baby Boomer employee, specifically in the higher education setting. First, they emphasized the importance of building rapport and trust with the employee. The basics include listening, finding common ground, and smiling (p. 107). The second tactic is to ask the employee about their previous experiences in being managed and what worked well, and what did not. The previous research cited the importance of respecting the past experiences of Baby Boomers and incorporating what value they bring. This includes using strategies to find out their expectations, preferred communication models, creating motivation in their work, and management style (p. 110). The next strategy is to address defensiveness within the working interaction. Zemke et al. (2013) alluded to this in their research. Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) identified active listening and showing concern as strategies in working with defensive employees (p. 111). Other strategies include using humor in the work place and being approachable in the way of having an open-door policy (p. 112).

Millennials as Workers

Millennials, as previously mentioned, are the generation born between the years of 1980 and 2000. The youngest of this generation have exited high school and most are now in the workforce. As with all three generational groups mentioned in this study, research shows millennials have specific characteristics researchers have noticed. Gentry et al. (2011) mentioned millennials seem to be more comfortable working with and integrating technology tools in their personal lives and in the workplace. They also mentioned millennials grew up being rewarded for participation and value winning and competition differently. This carries over into the workplace as millennials are more averse to competitive environments and workplace politics (p.41). Gentry et al. (2011) also mentioned millennials do not always agree with the status quo or traditional lines of thinking on decision-making processes in the workplace. Additionally, Gentry et al. (2011) said: “Millennials are thought to be skeptical of long-term commitments and are said to desire greater flexibility in work” (p. 41). Arsenault (2004) offered additional insights into characteristics of millennials: “(They) prefer a polite relationship with authority. Like leaders who pull people together. Believe in collective action and a will to get things changed” (p. 130). Murray (2011) conducted a study focused on millennial leaders in library systems and in it he identified specific traits and motivational factors he found through research: “This generation has been strongly influenced by the attacks of 9/11 and shootings in schools, and members have had access to computers and the internet for virtually their entire lives” (p. 59). Murray (2011) mentioned millennials are becoming a larger part of the workforce, prefer collaboration, and handle change well. He defined five key traits of

millennials, “the primary traits of the millennial generation are collaboration, integration, multitasking, experimentation, and nomadic behaviors” (p. 60).

These baseline characteristics provide us more insight to the specifics of the millennial as a worker and their preferred relationships with their managers or directors. Millennials are a large part of the workforce, and their attitudes and preferred mode of work and management style has a strong impact on the Gen X manager. It is important to explore more of these observed traits and trends within the research. Dries et al. (2008) conducted a study about career beliefs between the four generations in the workforce. They observed millennials have the work-related values of passion, learning, security (not stability), and willingness to work (p. 910). Dries et al. (2008) discussed a shared characteristic between Gen X and Millennial workers: “These generations have learned not to take anything for granted, as the future is unpredictable. They do not count on organizations to take care of them and offer them security and stability in their career” (p. 909).

Mhatre and Conger (2011) evaluated differences in workers from Gen X and Generation Y (Millennials) in their study. They wrote: “Generation y individuals exhibit a greater preference for seeking guidance, structure, and supervision from their superiors. They tend to follow directions well, value collaboration and teamwork, and are not so independent as their older counterparts” (p. 73). In exploring more differences between the two generations, Mhatre and Conger (2011) wrote millennial workers are more adept at adjusting to change in organizations. As other research has noted, they also are very proficient at working with and integrating technology into their work, including instant messaging, videoconferencing, and social media (p. 74). Mhatre and Conger (2011) also discussed what they called the motivational

profiles of Millennials: “Gen yers, however, are driven by needs for ‘affiliation’ and ‘achievement.’ They value collaboration and teamwork more than working independently” (p. 74).

Reisenwitz and Iyer (2009) identified similar traits in Generation Y (Millennials) when exploring differences in generations for the sake of the workplace and for marketing purposes: “Generation Y employees are not as independent and tend to follow directions well, requiring structure in the work environment and guidance from their supervisors, albeit with flexibility to get the job done” (p. 94). Reisenwitz and Iyer (2009) made some unique observations about Millennials in relation to their social responsibility traits. They mention the importance Millennials place on engaging their communities and the importance of work life balance. Also, they have an expectation that their employer will think the same way and support them in the time commitment for volunteering (p. 93). In a study conducted by Boyd (2009) a similar observation was made in relation to the importance of social responsibility in relation to the workplace. They wrote:

Their younger organizational colleagues, though, focus less on compliance with preconceived protocols. Instead, they direct attention beyond the company itself.

Regardless of the posture that prevails at a particular moment, invariably they are loath to surrender their soul to any corporate goal. (p. 469)

Webber and Forster (2017) offered a similar observation around the millennial’s attention to factors outside the workplace, “this group has a consciousness about the world that supports both the idea of leading community and the social change outcomes desired by transformative learning” (p. 50).

Cekada (2012) identified some corresponding traits a Gen X manager might want to be mindful of. She used these terms and concepts to describe Gen X managers: optimistic, open to and embracing of diversity, making new rules in the workplace, technology savvy, good multi-taskers, prefer structure, prefer teams, embrace community, need flexibility in work schedules, and prefer a work to live versus a live to work mentality (p. 43). Cekada (2012) also identified some advice in training and teaching Millennials in the workplace: “This is a demanding group that wants to be continuously entertained. Training can be made fun by using nontraditional methods, such as incorporating physical movement into the class and employing the learners’ multitasking skills” (p. 43). Lancaster and Stillman (2005) introduced related ideas in training the millennial worker. They wrote: “The millennials are poised to become our first true generation of lifetime learners, and the companies that will succeed with this generation will be the ones who just keep on teaching” (p. 281). These are important lessons not only for Gen X leaders but also institutions of higher learning who will be competing for these employees with other industries. Gravett and Throckmorton (2007) identified additional strategies that engage the Millennial worker during the training and professional development process. They stated providing an environment that captures their attention is important because they will likely be multi-tasking if they do not feel engaged. They suggested using a casual and laid-back style which feels more comfortable and inviting to the Millennial worker. They also suggested tying the content of the training to the organizational values. Millennials also value a fun training environment and one where they are provided consistent feedback in relation to what they are learning (p. 159).

There are several factors Gen X leaders need to be mindful of as they engage the millennial employee. Grubb (2017) walked through some of these factors as she talked about the ideas Millennial employees bring to the table. She stated Gen X leaders need to be open to new ideas and not to automatically discard an idea just because it is coming from a newer or less seasoned employee. She shared the Millennial enthusiasm for new ideas and applying a new lens to a situation can be useful to the organization to grow and implement new designs into the operation (p. 131). Kunreuther et al. (2009) identified additional ideas around development of the Millennial worker the Gen X leader can help to foster. They suggested allowing the Millennial worker to acquire new skills, allow for new idea generation and different ways to approach new or challenging work within the organization, and to develop skills around critical analysis of organizational practices to create better processes and efficiency (p. 148). Kunreuther et al. (2009) also listed pitfalls Millennial employees should avoid in working to build their influence and skills: “Don’t ignore previous generations and lose ground by not learning from the past. Don’t move on instincts and passions without connecting to others and don’t ignore analysis of structures and systems that create problems that need to be addressed” (p. 150). Zemke et al. (2013) made additional related suggestions Gen X leaders can use to engage and maximize the work and contributions of the Millennial worker. They stated Millennials must be made to feel connected to an organization; their ideas must be listened to and respected so they feel they are solving problems with their other colleagues; they are able to find connection between themselves as individuals and the company as a whole; they feel valued and receive recognition for their work, and that they have an opportunity to foster social and professional relationships simultaneously (p. 139). While trying to accomplish this, Gen X

leaders should be mindful of the workload and pace of work and how Millennials value their time. Clark (2017) stated Millennials have lower job satisfaction and higher burnout rates than Baby Boomers when they feel stretched thin or exhausted. This might be linked to their tendency of valuing time away from work more than work itself (p. 385).

Odom (2015) offered additional advice on the conditions and management style preferred by the Millennial worker. He also talked about the desire Millennials have around being empowered. By providing Millennials the opportunity to succeed, or, to fail you will gain the most out of them and see them give maximum effort (p. 134). He also interviewed a Millennial worker who challenged the notion that Millennials cannot be given latitude to do their work. That Millennial said, “Yes, we may have been praised more than most, but we also learned pretty quickly what it was like to deal with peer pressure and competitive situations with our peer group” (p. 134). Odom (2015) concluded these thoughts by emphasizing a key point that has come up in other parts of the research. He emphasized Millennials want to be connected to important work, they value development and key career experiences, and they desire a steady stream of career development opportunities (p. 135).

Johnson and Johnson (2010) emphasized other key traits in their research. They mentioned the opportunity leaders have to tap into the technology aptitude of the Millennial worker. Millennials have talents in working with and integrating technology tools other generations do not have. They are also the savviest generation in the workplace in using and integrating social media into marketing efforts (p. 115). Work-life balance was also explored. Millennials use technology to stay connected to and complete their work outside of the traditional 8-5 schedule. In a world and workplace that is more global and 24/7, utilizing the

preferred work mode of the Millennial and their natural abilities with technology can be useful in executing certain types of tasks and work (p. 118). A key to attracting and keeping Millennials satisfied in the workplace is related to how companies implement their corporate social responsibility policies. Millennials are attracted to employers who put priority on conservation, reduce energy consumption, and provide for volunteering activities. Johnson and Johnson (2010) suggested putting the Millennial employees in charge of organizational efforts related to conservation, community connections, and volunteering (p. 120). Cran (2010) identified similar elements that engage and excite the Millennial worker: “Altruism or philanthropy. If your company is giving back to society Gen Ys want to be a part of a bigger contribution. Environmental improvements. Green projects are motivating and inspiring” (p. 50).

Fitch and Van Brunt (2017) offered some firsthand accounts and specific examples of leadership and preferred management styles specific to higher education. In one example, a Millennial student affairs worker was interviewed about the management traits she has preferred as she has grown in her career. She specifically referenced the key traits and values she preferred from the Gen X managers she had: “A combination of the importance of fun, adaptability to change, confidence and competence, and the ability to respond to the changing landscape of the field better than other generations” (p. 27). She discussed her desire to have consistently scheduled one-on-one meetings where updates and feedback could be shared. She emphasized the need to have clear expectations set and to have an avenue available to get feedback on her work (p. 27). This living example is consistent with other research and is supported by Fitch and Van Brunt (2017) as they identified priorities important to the Millennial worker: “Flexible workplace, work-life balance, mentorship, and career advancement programs

(p. 28). Firfiray and Mayo (2017) conducted similar research that focused on what they called person-organization theory (P-O) which gauges propensity of the differing generations to be attracted to certain employers based on work-life benefits (WLBs). They revealed these P-O fit perceptions influence the career path and employer choices Millennials make: “In the future, scholars can continue to develop recruitment models that take generational groups into consideration and attempt to determine the factors that have the most positive impact on job seekers’ attitudinal reactions and job pursuit behaviors” (p. 643).

Generation Z Entering the Workforce

Gen Z is the latest generation to enter the workforce. As with the other year ranges associated with previous generations, there is variance around the agreed upon end date of Millennials and the start date of Generation Z. Wiedmer (2015) defined the range as being between 1995 and 2015 (p. 55). This would overlap the previous definition of the Millennial range. Either way, we now have Generation Z workers entering the workforce, and they are beginning to interact with Gen X leaders. Early research is indicating that technology tools are driving interactions with these young workers. Wiedmer (2015) said: “Many are highly connected to having the lifelong use of communication and technology such as the World Wide Web, instant messaging, text messaging, MP3 players, mobile phones, and tablets” (p 55). Wiedmer (2015) stated they do have some similarities to the Millennials in that they pay more attention to the environment and social causes. They are independent learners and appreciate project-based work that aligns closely to their skills. They will desire collaborative environments where they can work in teams. They appreciate flexibility in their work schedules and will find unique ways to build their skillsets using technology (p. 56). The findings related to working in

teams is supported in research conducted by Christina (2016) who found Gen Z workers prefer group work and collaboration (p. 51). She also stated Gen Z is open to and desires mentoring and cross generational relationships in the workplace (p. 51).

Grubb (2017) provided additional insight into Generation Z and what Gen X leaders should consider about Gen Z traits as they fill positions on their teams. Grubb noted the starting birth year as 1998. She observed them as globally oriented, strong with technology, pragmatic, and socially progressive. In the workplace, they are very adept at using technology and they value investment into their learning through professional development. They might struggle with keeping their attention on tasks long enough and naturally, because of their age, they lack experiences that might help them navigate issues (p. 22). Many of these traits are reinforced by Puiu (2017) in her study which found Gen Z prefers a say in setting the workplace rules. They appreciate ongoing and consistent training, and they prefer regular and frequent feedback. She also pointed out that Generation Z prefers unconventional professional development or training opportunities and when learning on the job prefer problem solving exercises and working in teams (p. 67).

Lanier (2017) echoed previous sentiments in identifying five key traits organizations should be aware of with the influx of Gen Z employees entering the workforce. She stated Gen Z is the first truly digital native generation, even compared to Millennials. From birth, they have been exposed to technology and the internet has always been in existence for them. They also have specific expectations for diversity in the workplace; technology and social media have given this generation a connection to people from different parts of the world and walks of life (p. 289). Lanier (2017) also noted the oldest of this generation lived through a global recession

and have stronger expectations for training, competitive pay, and good benefits. She also cited research indicating Generation Z is more entrepreneurial than Millennials. Managers could look to capitalize on this trait when building teams or looking for new ideas in their operations. Finally, Gen Z has shown in most cases they prefer face to face communication, even though they are very used to communicating digitally. Managers should be mindful of these preferred communication channels (p. 289).

Summary

Gen X leaders find themselves in a unique position as they hold leadership positions within higher education institutions. There are a variety of factors to consider when looking at the workplace tendencies of the Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Z. Gen X leaders must navigate their leadership journey with considerations of who they are leading and calling upon their own experiences that shaped and formed their leadership style in order to be successful. Goings (2016) referenced strategies Gen X leaders can use to successfully navigate their leadership, including collaborating with and encouraging Baby Boomers to work as long as they would like to and partner with Millennials to keep them interested and engaged in working in higher education (p. 6). This review and synthesis of literature was meant to lay out those challenges and opportunities and set the stage for a deep review and study of current Gen X leaders working in higher education. Although there is little, to no, reference to this leadership dynamic specific to higher education institutions in the literature, this was the primary motivating factor for this study.

Chapter 3: Methods

For this study, I examined Gen X Leaders in higher education, using narrative inquiry. In this chapter I state the research questions, explain the qualitative research theory basis, and describe my research design. The research questions were: What patterns and influences brought these leaders into and have kept them in a leadership role? And, what interactions and experiences with Millennials and Baby Boomers impacted their leadership journeys?

Research Design

For this study I conducted a qualitative research study using narrative inquiry as the research design and applied symbolic interaction as the theoretical framework. Tracy (2013) stated that “good qualitative research helps people to understand the world, their society, and it’s institutions” (p. 5). This combination allowed me to create understanding and create clarity around the information I gathered. Tracy described symbolic interaction theory here, “a central tenet of the theory is that people act and make meaning in the world on the basis of how they define and interpret the situation and people around them” (p. 51). At the core of my study I asked the participants to make meaning of their surroundings in relation to the people they work with. Narrative inquiry helped me gather the data in the most effective way considering my research questions and interviewees. Daiute (2014) supported that thought by stating, “a common rationale for using narrative in research projects is to gather information about personal experiences, memories, feelings, and knowledge” (p. 10).

Theoretical Framework

Tracy (2013) stated, “symbolic interaction focuses on the *symbolic* dimensions of human communication” (p. 51). Herbert Blumer is recognized by Tracy and others as one of the

founding fathers of symbolic interaction theory. Blumer (1969) described the theory this way: “Symbolic interactionism is a down to earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct” (p.47). The participants in my study work in groups and have close professional and interpersonal connections, these interactions are key to this study. Interactions between Gen X leaders and the people they manage are at the core of this study. Blumer also provided an overview to the importance of using symbolic interaction theory to bring meaning to interactions by saying, “An institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation they are in” (p. 19).

Narrative Inquiry Methodology

I used narrative inquiry as my research methodology. Daiute (2014) summarized narrative inquiry this way, “dynamic narrating is, in summary, a concept emphasizing the interactive, communicative, purposeful nature of narrating, leading to strands of meaning researchers can identify to enhance findings about human problems, understandings, and behaviors” (p. 29). I was able to connect the experiences Gen X leaders had in managing multiple generations in the workplace by connecting those strands of meaning and information Daiute described. By applying this design, I was able to dig deep into the experiences of my study participants and explore my research questions at a meaningful level. Patton (2002) provided further definition to narrative analysis, “narratology, or narrative analysis, extends the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction” (p. 115). I was able to use this framework to design questions and process the feedback from participants as they describe their experiences in managing multiple

generations in the workplace. Patton asked these two questions that, when applied, form the foundation of narrative inquiry, “what does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came? How can this narrative be interpreted so that it provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that created it?” (p. 115). This context helped create meaning for this study because I was looking at participants in a specific public college system and within a defined age range, describing the world they live in and the culture that is created. Clandinin et al. (2017) emphasized the narratives created around the social, cultural and institutional aspects of an individual’s experiences as being core to narrative inquiry. These points about culture and understanding are important because I focused my study specifically on the culture created in a higher education setting. The “world” of higher education was an important factor in processing the interviewees feedback, meaning their work environment provides a lens to examine their responses. Understanding that world helped in processing the data.

Data Collection

Addressing the research questions using this method and design was effective in the immersing process Tracy (2013) referred to. In this model, I became an instrument of data collection through the hands on, direct approach used in the semi-structured and informal conversation process. As I made the commitment to conduct a qualitative study, I needed to be consistent in my questionnaire design and data gathering processes. Tracy discussed the importance of the interview question types and ordering of the questions. She suggested four key types of questions that should be included in all interview designs. These four question types are opening questions, generative questions, directive questions, and closing remarks

(Tracy, 2013). Opening questions allow for the formality of informed consent, time to build rapport, and to gather general information about the interviewee's experience (Tracy 2013). Tracy described generative questions as providing the framework for the discussion. Directive questions allowed me to gather specific information I was looking for within the framework (Tracy 2013). The wrap-up will allow me to bring closure and describe next steps and possible follow up with the interviewee (Tracy 2013).

Along with the previously described structure, narrative inquiry, symbolic interaction theory and the semi-structured interview process allowed me the flexibility to question, then evaluate, then question again, and evaluate again. This process allowed me to reach a deep understanding of the data I gathered and to form a solid and concise analysis and synopsis. Tracy (2013) described this as meaningful coherence: "Meaningful coherent studies hang together well. The literature reviewed establishes the context for interpreting the findings. Research questions or purposes arise logically from the literature" (p. 246). By combining the methodology, framework, and knowledge gained from the review of literature, I was well prepared to process my findings.

Interviews

The semi-structured interview process using narrative inquiry gave me the opportunity to learn: (a) about influences of leadership style for Gen X leaders in a state college and university system, and (b) if the system these leaders work and function in had an influence on those leadership traits as they have developed. This interview process provided a framework that helped me develop, order and sequence questions (Patton, 2002) to mine the best depth of response and information for my study. These tools helped me reach the depth of understanding

I needed to address and synthesize the data gathered around my research questions (Patton, 2002). There are several methods I used to address research problems and to establish credibility. First, it was important to invest the proper amount of time to gather the information for the study. The semi-structured interview process needed to be conducted with care over a period weeks and months. As I proceeded, it was important to remember that taking enough time to reflect and re-visit key concepts, ideas, and questions increased the quality of the study.

Credibility

Credibility and trustworthiness are major components of any qualitative study (Tracy 2013). Credibility can be established by engaging in thick description, multivocality and by ensuring partiality (Tracy, 2013). Adopting a stance of neutrality in my approach and evaluation of responses was crucial to establishing credibility (Patton, 2002) as I conducted my study. I worked to strike the right balance of understanding my own experiences of being a Gen X leader in a state college and university system with the information I gathered through the interactions I had as a researcher talking to the participants in my study by finding that neutrality and building trust with my participants. The use of the key components described by Tracy (2013) and Patton (2002) above helped me create credibility within the study by developing the concepts and ideas that resulted from my interactions with participants. I focused on creating thick description by using strong listening skills and transposing those feelings, ideas, and key concepts into an organized, well-written flow of ideas.

Multivocality, defined by Tracy (2013) as “the inclusion of multiple voices” (p. 237), associated with the earlier described process of seeking out various participants for the study within the state college and university system. Being aware of the differences in my participants

allowed me to better frame the themes and ideas. I considered how to use member reflections as I worked through the study. In the process, I provided them with feedback on my findings and sought any more input they may have upon further reflection.

Participants

The population/sample for this study included Gen X leaders in a state college and university system. The participants were determined by their generation/birth years of 1965-1979. There are various definitions of what years of birth constitute Gen X. Penney (2011) stated: “Very few books on leadership solicit and report the views of emerging leaders—Gen X (born 1965-1979) and Generation Y (born 1980-2000). These generations are the leaders of the future, and their voices need to be heard” (p. 55). This study, as stated, focused on Gen X. Ten people served as participants in this study, and they meet the following criteria: born within the years of 1965-1979, work at the same group of public college system institutions and have attained a role that would be considered a leadership role at the dean level that must include managing staff within that same public college system institution.

All participants have served in a leadership role for at least three years, this was to help ensure they have had rich experiences managing Baby Boomers and Millennials. Specific to the campuses, the participants came from a mix of the two-year and university system within Minnesota State. These campuses range in size from 4,000 to over 15,000 in student headcount. I interviewed five men and five women.

With these criteria, I gathered an appropriate range of viewpoints and experiences. I sampled this group of participants through the following process. Through my previous work and experience in the system, I have experience with multiple Gen X leaders who I highly

respect and admire. I needed to practice self-reflexivity in order to properly process the data. Tracy (2013) defined that here, “self-reflexivity is an honest and authentic awareness of one’s own identity and research approach, and an attitude of respect for participants, audience members, and research stakeholders” (p. 233). Tracy encouraged using practices such as making notes about participants’ reactions to myself as the researcher and including myself in the write up of the research (p. 234). I worked a plan to network through individuals within my cohort who work with these leaders in their institutions and places of work. I also asked initial participants in the study to refer me to other professionals they thought would be good candidates to participate in the study. Finally, I utilized faculty members and other professional connections to identify the participants for this study.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

I collected data through semi-structured interviews during the winter and spring of 2021. The interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted online through a Zoom meeting connection. During this process, I took notes to document the general tone and mood of the participants to track or ascertain any tendencies or similarities within the participants. I confirmed consistency here through researching organizational charts and comparing like sized and purposed institutions. I attained this information in advance, and used it to prepare for each individual interview, this allowed me to be able to take a more specific line of questioning with each participant based on that information.

As mentioned in the sample section, participants came from a mix of the two-year and four-year institutions in a public college and university system. I had three participants from four-year institutions and seven from two-year institutions. I was able to be very specific with

age as I studied one generation of leaders. By having these leaders come from a wide variety of campuses within this public college and university system I was able to create comparisons on leadership styles, potential career tracks, and opportunities for these upcoming leaders. Below is a table associating the participant with their position and institution type.

Table 1

Participant Pseudonym with Associated Position and Institution Type

Pseudonym	Position	Institution Type
Zeke	Provost	4-year university
Zoey	Provost	4-year university
Wayne	Vice President	4-year university
Samantha	President	2-year community college
Renee	Dean	2-year community college
Roy	President	2-year community college
Nathan	Dean	2-year community college
Nick	President	2-year community college
Missy	Dean	2-year community college
Kim	Vice President	2-year community college

Analysis

A common way to approach the analysis of data within qualitative research is to begin with a process of coding (Punch, 2009). Coding can be described as a way to label and systemize your data (Tracy, 2013). This process began with transcribing my semi-structured

interviews and informal conversation transcripts line-by-line (Tracy, 2013). I used the software tool NVivo to assist in this process. I was able to enter the entire transcript from each interview and organize the data into various groupings. This process allowed me to identify key words, statements, sentences, and quotes that highlight the process and struggles encountered by the participants in developing and building their leadership characteristics as Gen X leaders. By using this process, I was able to develop codes through what Tracy defines as primary-cycle coding which “refer(s) to these initial coding activities that occur more than just a single ‘first’ time. The data might need to be read and coded several times during this primary stage” (p. 189). These resulting primary-cycle codes allowed me to progress into the next phase of the coding process called the constant comparative method (Tracy, 2013). This work took me into a process that has similarities to the research design phase. During this time, I was looking at codes, evaluating them, breaking them down again, and re-evaluating. I was using the narrative inquiry methodology as a framework of evaluation while walking through this process. This process was enhanced with the NVivo tool as I was able to analyze and cross-reference the data in various ways. This assisted me formulating the key themes in the following chapter.

I transitioned from the coding phase and while cycling through the information I began the task of more advanced data evaluation. I utilized axial coding at this stage (Tracy, 2013). Tracy described axial coding as reassembling data and systematically grouping together various codes under categories that make sense. This process resulted in finding exemplars in the data. Tracy defined exemplars as “significant and multi-faceted examples researchers identify in the data through coding” (p. 207). This process allowed me, as the researcher, to define my data and help push forward in the analysis within my study more clearly.

As I proceeded, I used typology to track the progression and development of the leadership characteristics of my participants and this informed me in answering my research questions. Tracy (2013) defined typology as “classificatory system for ways of doing something” (p. 210). By combining the professional and educational histories of the participants along with the semi-structured interviews, themes on leadership characteristics developed through creation of a typology.

Role of Researcher

I needed to integrate tools to ensure my study was accomplished with a sense of quality. First, I needed to be aware of myself, my approach, and my attitude. Tracy (2013) described self-reflexivity as, “an honest and authentic awareness of one’s own identity and research approach, and an attitude of respect for participants, audience members, and other research stakeholders” (p. 233). This process needed to be continuous as I worked into interviewing the participants and examining the data.

I have a close tie to this subject as I have been a Gen X leader in a state college and university system. Tracy (2013) referred to working in an area where you are very familiar: “One of the most convenient places to start fieldwork is right where you are – in your own workplace, culture, social group, classroom, vacation destination, or watering hole” (p. 107). I was able to use my previous experience to assist in relating to my study participants as I have been one of them before in my previous professional experience (working as a Gen X leader managing Baby Boomers and Millennials). This allowed me to probe more deeply into feelings, observations, and the experiences of my study participants. This dynamic created a trust factor that allowed me to truly see the leadership traits and skills of these individuals at a deep level. I

needed to be cognizant of my close familiarity with the participant's experiences so as to not allow my own biases to enter my evaluation. I needed to be consistent on differentiating what I heard from my own experiences and background to maintain neutrality, this is why self-reflexivity was so important.

My background and knowledge of this public college and university system was a factor and influence into how I proceeded and how I gathered information from the study participants. My previous experience assisted me in framing questions and interpreting answers knowing these leaders have or will have experienced similar things to each other and to what I have experienced. I was able to use my previous experiences (within this system) and my current separation from this system (employed outside of the system) to my distinct advantage as it pertains to depth and scope of research and data collection.

With those perceived advantages, I needed to be aware of my own biases. I was afforded numerous opportunities within this system in my time working there, but I also experienced situations that I interpreted to be unfair or poorly managed. I needed to take care to not allow those past experiences to guide or inadvertently affect my line of questions or even my reaction to answers I received. This was another opportunity to apply self-reflexivity to the study. Those biases could have been perceived as negative or misguided by my participants which could have skewed their answers or viewpoints. Most importantly, it could have jeopardized the trust I needed to gain as I proceeded with the inquiries. I also needed to be aware that this public college and university system is a large system and dynamics change between institutions and even between different areas of the state (metro vs. rural colleges, for example). Awareness of

these advantages and biases helped me to identify the correct mix of participants so that I was gathering the most useful data possible.

Human Subject Approval (IRB)

All participants were asked to sign the IRB form approved by St. Cloud State University that I provided to them. This form sets standards for rights as human subjects who participated in this study. This form explained the purpose of the study, the expected benefits, and any risks. I sent out the IRB in advance of any face-to-face interviews and then re-introduced or re-visited the document upon meeting with the participants online. As is standard practice, I created a cross referenced list of the real names of the participants with pseudonyms, or use pseudonyms paired with participants initials, to preserve confidentiality. I will save this reference document on a separate external hard drive and keep it locked away.

Summary

This dissertation study focused on the leadership characteristics of Gen X leaders in public college and university system. This chapter described my use of narrative inquiry as my methodology. The data collection and interview processes are previously examined. All IRB information were in hand before gathering data from the willing participants. I interviewed 10 Gen X leaders through semi-structured interviews. I used coding and typology to organize and structure the narrative responses and feedback that informed the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the research findings. Four major themes emerged from the data. This chapter also assists the reader in relating the research problem and purpose of the study to the data.

Gen X leaders are currently occupying many leadership roles in higher education. They have a unique story to tell as they have ascended to these roles as the generation ahead of them (Baby Boomers) shift into retirement and the generation behind them (Millennials) work their way into professional working roles and senior leadership roles within higher education. In order to help these leaders be as effective as possible, it is important to understand their background, experience, and journey in relation to leading Baby Boomers and Millennials in today's higher education environment. This study focused on these leadership journeys and the impact leading Baby Boomers and Millennials has on those journeys.

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership journeys and characteristics of Gen X leaders within a state higher education system. There were two research questions:

1. What patterns and influences brought these leaders into and have kept them in a leadership role?
2. What interactions and experiences with Millennials and Baby Boomers impacted their leadership journeys?

This section includes a detailed description of themes that emerged from the data. There are four themes that emerged from the data, three of which are related to the research questions. These themes are Factors Influencing the Leadership Journey, Influence of Managing Baby Boomers, Influence of Managing Millennials, and Thoughts on Leadership. The final theme is related to

the intrinsic motivations around leading people in general, and what lies ahead for the leadership journeys of the participants. The sub-themes are presented in detail ordered under each main theme area.

Factors Influencing the Leadership Journey

What factors influenced the leadership journeys of these Gen X leaders in a public college system? All 10 study participants currently work in higher education leadership positions within a public higher education system. Their positions range from deans to college presidents.

Entry into Higher Education

The study participants entered higher education at various points in their career tracks. Most entered higher education either while in college working as a graduate assistant / teaching assistant or immediately following graduation. A lesser number worked outside of higher education first then entered the higher education work force later in their career trajectory. Zeke was one who started briefly outside of higher ed but came back quickly, he shared:

Immediately after graduation I went into working as an analytical chemist and about a year into that position the department chair at my former alma mater called and asked if I would help teach an introductory chemistry section. So I thought “well I’ll try it I’ve always been kind of interested in teaching.” So I came in and helped them out and found I really loved it, but I also loved the analytical chemistry work. So I was in a bit of a debate about what to do about my career. I also love English and it’s just harder to get a job right out of the gate in English than it is in analytical chemistry so that wet my

appetite. I started thinking serious about graduate school and chemistry so two years after that I started grad school and I started thinking more and more seriously about higher ed.

Samantha had a similar experience:

I started a doctoral program and I had a teaching assistantship, so I had to teach, it was totally a means to an end. But I loved teaching. I really loved teaching. So I engaged in this doctoral research and nothing worked, my research failed. So after a lot of soul searching I said I'm done with this program. They said, no, no, just take a break. I took a break and said I'm done. They said fine, we will hire you to teach. But this turned out to be the best thing ever because I got to teach for over five years being part of the faculty. I got to teach; it was the best job other than the one I have right now.

Other participants also commented on how teaching influenced their decision making to pursue higher education endeavors. Zoey described this experience, "when I was in graduate school I was getting training to run my own research lab. I found I was really interested in teaching so I sought out extra opportunities to teach other grad students." Nathan also deepened his interests in higher education with an opportunity to teach, "I got my master's degree there and one of the features was to teach grad students. I was a teaching assistant and then got hired on a fixed term full time instructor." Kim took a similar track, "I ended up making the decision go and get a master's degree in communication studies with the emphasis that I wanted to teach college students in higher education when I was done."

Other participants had individuals influence their decisions to venture into higher education or free tuition for graduate programs helped influence their thinking. Wayne said, "I

had a good conversation with the hall director and she was sharing more with me about how you can go to grad school for free, and I was like tell me more. I ended up in grad school.” Renee had a similar revelation:

I ran across a program in student affairs and I went there and became a graduate school hall director. I didn’t know what a hall director was. In my undergrad I didn’t know who my RA was. So I said wait now, you want me to live there, like in the residence halls? And they said yeah, people do it for a full-time job which I couldn’t believe, and I said, you know what fine it’s free housing, free meal plan, free tuition I’m in and I’ll do it. I did it and loved it and the rest is history.

Other participants had a business or sales background as they entered higher education. Roy described his experience, “Coming from sales, I love what higher ed can do for people and how it can change lives and really move people so I applied and I got a job at a proprietary school as an admissions recruiter.” Missy described her entry point this way, “I got hired on in 2008 and the technical title is customized training representative and then my title evolved to business development director. As I got more experience I became the director.”

Entry into Leadership

Some participants came across leadership opportunities early in their career while others decided to enter leadership roles later in their tenure. These experiences entering leadership shaped the remainder of their journeys. Often there was an interim position that opened the door to leadership opportunities, Kim explains her story here:

I taught for five years and there was an open Dean position, and it was an interim opening. It was a one year opportunity for someone leaving to work on a special project.

And, you know, I never saw myself as an administrator and I had faculty colleagues that came up to me and said, oh, you should apply for that. And my first reaction was, you know, it's interesting because I've learned throughout my career, and I've been in higher ed for 18 years now, that sometimes unique opportunities come along and you really don't even know that their best for you until someone else says, you know, you should probably just at least look at this. So, I said, it's only one year and if I like it, that's great. If I hate it, I'm going back to the classroom. The Dean actually stayed away on special projects for two years so I was the interim for two years and I found a place where I actually really enjoyed the work of a Dean you know it was interesting.

Samantha had a similar experience in relation to colleague encouragement and having others notice quality traits she has:

Opportunities opened up at the college and my Dean left and they had this opening. And somebody came up to me and said you should apply for that. And I said, have you lost your mind? Like, I can't do that job. Oh yes, you can. And this person was just self-serving because this person was a scientist who did not want somebody who couldn't get the job done right. They didn't want someone who wasn't a hard scientist. I remember the conversation. I don't remember their name now but I remember thinking you're crazy. I applied for the job and somehow I got it. I did that for a couple of years and then the vice president of the college became the president and he asked me to be the interim VP. And I said, I don't, I can't do that job, and he said, yes, yes you can.

Moving from faculty member to dean was also a lived experience for Zoey:

I think within my first maybe two or three years of being a faculty member I was

asked about serving in an administrative role part time. I worked at a small university so faculty were involved in administration. My first opportunity was to serve as an assistant dean in the college of arts and sciences. I was asked to work on summer school and you know, some other duties and then I got involved in assessment of student learning.

This also describes the experience for Nathan, “all these Baby Boomers were retiring, yeah, there was a lot of opportunities for people like me. My department endorsed me to be the chair when he left, and I did that for two and half years.” Nick was given his first leadership opportunity coming from a faculty position combined with interesting leadership dynamics:

The president at the time was looking for somebody to work on strategic initiatives, but also was looking for a workaround for a vice president with whom she didn’t get along with very well and so I applied for and got that position again it was a release position. I did that for two years and that was sort of a lead into administration.

Zeke describes leadership positions opening for him out of necessity related to some sort of crisis:

The president decided that she wanted to get me into the acting provost role to help the institution manage those changes, so she made me the acting provost. I came in kind of under emergency circumstances and we went into an accelerated search process for the provost position and I was the successful candidate for that position. I guess that is somewhat relevant because, in my career that’s been sort of the way things have gone is I’ve been sort of a position or two down from some kind of leading role, some crisis occurs, and for whatever reason I end up being the person stepped into that role sooner than I really anticipated. I would never want any of these crises, but they’ve offered me

opportunities to advance and show my stuff, so to speak, so that's kind of the story of how I've advanced in my career.

Other participants reference their interest or aptitude to leadership that brought them into their leadership journey. Wayne references that here:

I had a father who was assistant superintendent, so I grew up in a household where he was a community leader and I saw that, you know, front row seat kind of thing and then from like my junior year in high school I had various leadership or teaching responsibilities at summer camps and I was pretty active in boy scouts as a leader so all those kinds of things, I think, just kind of manifest and have always kind of fit me are the opportunities to be invited to help kind of organize and I'm drawn naturally to dynamic environments that need a little fixing. I like that, I get energy from that.

Roy recalls his first higher education leadership experience:

I ended up in that role and I really loved it. I just, that hooked me. And I think one of the advantages I had was, I started off in student services, specifically in recruiting, so I knew the programs really well, good and bad, you know, the good things and where we were doing not so good. And, you know, the relationships with the faculty, because this admissions person I was always scheduling time for students and you've worked in higher education, getting people together. And so you have had a lot of relationships already built in so probably in hindsight I was probably more prepared than I even thought I was at the time.

Baby Boomer Influence on Leadership Traits/Style

One consistent theme from participants that was not anticipated was the regularity of participants mentioning the influence Baby Boomer managers had on their development. Generally, the participants had positive recollections of their learning opportunities and experiences with Baby Boomer managers. Work ethic was a common theme, Kim mentioned this in her experiences:

When I was a faculty my dean that oversaw me and hired me, she was a hard worker. You know, she was one of those people that would be there at the crack of dawn before anybody else got there and was the last person to leave. She juggled a hundred things at a time. When I was a dean she was my coach and taught me a lot about being a dean. She was a phenomenal person, wonderful work ethic. She passed those things onto me and when I think back that really shaped the person I became. Some things have shifted over the years, but it really laid the foundation to how I became a leader in those earlier years of my leadership life.

Nathan also learned skills he carried over from his Baby Boomer influences:

I feel like I learned a lot, how to be a good leader from her. I saw how she dealt with conflict. Faculty can disagree, you, know, vehemently with each other. In department meetings she was a very good mediator. She would listen and she would make sure that one person got to say what they thought and so would the other person, and she could form consensus and people learned to respect her. In higher ed people are very intelligent, they have strong ideas about things. I don't necessarily want people to like me but I do want them to respect me, I want people to trust that I can lead them. Trust is

one of those things that I've learned is really critical and I watched how everyone trusted her and respected her and I just wanted to be able to emulate that in my own leadership somehow.

Roy mentioned something similar in the theme of listening and mediating:

So some of the things I've learned along the way that was helpful is those presidents that I felt were the best presidents were the people that had good ability to allow people to be heard in the decision-making process. And so there's a couple of them along the way that I felt that they were gifted at the ability, you never felt bad about being told no, and that's an art.

Zoey learned similar things, "it's important to allow people to think creatively and allow your people to bring their perspective to the table. You need to create a safe environment where people feel comfortable bringing forward new ideas." Wayne had two similar takeaways, "he was always great at making sure I had the opportunity to ask questions and he gave me responsibility. I always feel like he was invested in me." Samantha reflected on the instilled confidence from a different point of view "what I learned was that was the first time someone saw something in me I didn't see in myself." Missy also felt that inspired confidence from her first Baby Boomer manager:

I was so young and fresh and so what I really learned from her at the time was to probably hone in on your skillset, like, know what drives your energy. It was like saying, hey, you're good at this have you every thought about leading? So, she really had me do an internal review of myself and say where's your next journey. Have you thought about that and what does that look like as you go down your leadership path?

Renee had a slightly different experience with Baby Boomer managers in relation to decision making, but took away positives as well:

What I learned from her specifically was how to be a compassionate leader and have empathy for people. But, I also learned that there's a fear it seemed in her, and then I would say the same thing about my next Baby Boomer manager, I learned that they seemed hesitant to make decisions, very hesitant to make a decision and almost secretive when they do about the why, the where, the how; even that the decision was made.

Zeke picked up unique perspective from his first Baby Boomer manager:

I think of her English training, I think she's a literary critic using a feminist literary criticism lens and I learned a tremendous amount from her. Using a feminist lens, you look at the world very differently than the way I had been looking at the world. She would talk about who's not at the table, versus who is. And she would talk about what's not said and reading between the lines and the limitations of language. I found it really, really fascinating.

Current Positions in Higher Education

The participants shared their current positions at their institutions. I feel it's important to share the scope and scale of their positions here as the various positions held by the participants provide further context into their leadership experiences. In the interest of protecting the identities of the participants I will speak to their experiences in general terms of position type and position types managed.

Three of the ten participants are presidents at institutions within this state system. They report directly to a system chancellor and collaborate with each other on different

initiatives/projects. They have various vice presidents and director level personnel reporting to them at their campuses. There are four vice presidents/provosts within the participant group. This includes a mix of vice presidents/provosts from two- and four-year institutions in this state system. They have a variety of deans, unionized professional staff, and student workers reporting to them. They handle both student affairs and academic functions within their roles. There are two dean-level positions within the participant group. These individuals primarily oversee faculty groups and specific academic program areas within their institutions. All the participants currently manage or have managed Baby Boomers and Millennials while functioning in their leadership roles.

Influence of Managing Baby Boomers

All the participants have experience managing Baby Boomers. These sub themes explore those interactions and how they influenced past, current, and future leadership practice within the participant group.

Baby Boomer Traits

Kim talked about the influence culture and experience has on her approach with the Baby Boomers she leads:

That is my culture, we have a lot of respect for elders, and we have a lot of respect for historical knowledge for people who are older than us and really valuing what they bring to the table. And so that has always been a part of my values. And what I've learned about Baby Boomers, as I work with them, is that when you come to the table with a deep appreciation for their institutional knowledge and many of the Baby Boomers that are here have worked here a very long time. They have put in many years at the college so

when you come in the room and respect that institutional knowledge and you still ask for their input as you sit at the table with them they are more willing to support you.

Samantha had similar observations in relation to the culture of the institution and life experiences:

My first job is to really understand the colleges and their culture and the biggest influence on that are people and their experiences. So, in particular, I think with people that have been there a long time, they often fall into the Baby Boomer generation. So when I meet someone who has been doing that work for 20 years I admire them and I want to learn from it. So, I always start from that perspective of help me understand you, your work, your college what's working, what's not and just help me become part of it.

Missy had a similar thought, "I think managing Boomers who come in with lots of life experience certainly want that experience to be acknowledged and valued." Zeke shared more in this line of thought, "I find what is most effective is to let them know I respect them, and their discipline, their experiences, and their contributions. I want them to be included and energized."

Nick's observations speak to different traits:

What I learned from managing Baby Boomers is that they prefer an approach to let people do their best work, encourage, nurture, and try to knock down barriers to doing that good work. They prefer a steady leadership style where we hold the ship steady and move things along at a safe and stable pace.

Renee noticed differences in the generations in relation to information sharing:

I've been influenced in that I remember being frustrated by not understanding and knowing why something is or isn't being done or worked on. As I'm managing I don't

want my people to feel that frustration. I want there to be this open communication and understanding that all the things that are brought forward we are being as open and transparent with as we can. I do think generationally it gets less and less conservative in our actions. As I see down the line, like, I am definitely more open minded about sharing more with my staff than the generation ahead of me. And I definitely see the Millennial generation being even more open minded and willing to say what they think and question than even I am.

Zoey made observations about decision making and control, “I try to be really clear about the parameters for decision making. What are the things deans have control over and what are things we’ll do together. I want to give them ownership and responsibility over their areas.”

Roy mentioned engagement and succession planning, “And so finding ways to keep them engaged and refreshed and also starting to work with the succession planning side too, getting them to share that knowledge.”

Wayne talked about his experience with technology and Baby Boomers:

During my time at one of my colleges we made some pretty strong investments in technology. That seemed to be a demarcation line for some folks because there was quite a few who self-selected retirement at that point and we made a decision we’re going to a new CRM because we can’t do stuff on post it notes and 3x5 cards anymore.

We are going to make this investment. I did see it was interesting for about a year and a half we had quite an exodus of folks, really good folks, and they probably would have learned but they made that choice.

These influences helped to shape the leadership journeys of the participants. Elements and observations included recognizing the strength in Baby Boomers institutional knowledge, setting up strong and balanced parameters for how the work would be done and shared, and recognizing that quick changes involving technology might be hard to manage.

Challenges in Leading Baby Boomers

Being skeptical of change and openness to try new things was a core theme with the participants. Zeke shared his experience with these thoughts:

I've had a couple where I just haven't been able to get the point, they just aren't willing to extend trust. They see me as just one of the many people who have come and gone and all I have to do wait a few months and he'll be gone and so I haven't really gotten through to them you know. They are senior members of the faculty and they're in safe spots and well down on the roster, they're untouchable essentially and they know that so there's very little leverage I have over them.

Samantha shared similar thoughts:

I think though that particularly Baby Boomers, who have been in the same position for the same college, same job for a long time tend to be very change resistant so I think that's a challenge. You've been in the position a while; you've seen some stuff. So I think they tend to be very skeptical. I think that is challenging. Some of the hardest questions I was asked and continue to be asked during the interview and in my life are from people that have a deep history and knowledge and have become confidently comfortable in that, you know, skeptical, about what you will really do, you know, that skepticism.

Nathan shared thoughts related to this on change:

I think that's the generation that has been the most difficult to accept that mindset that you may have to change what you've been doing, because it was done to you doesn't mean that's the way it has to continue to be. We have to actually change what we do as a college and what you do as an instructor so we're student ready, even when our students aren't college ready. That is probably one of the biggest challenges with Baby Boomers I'd say is getting them to recognize that they might have to make some shifts on how they do things, even though they've been doing them in their minds very successfully for the last 10, 20, 30 years.

Zoey had similar experiences:

One way I've seen it come up as a challenge is if things have been tried before and they haven't worked. We tried this in 1980 and it didn't work then so it won't work now. I think a great awareness and a sense of urgency about the fact that student experiences are not equitable when we think about it. We should just keep doing things the same, of course, that like the system that we have is perfectly designed to get the results we are getting and they're not equitable. So how do we, you know, having people with this wealth of experience is really helpful if they're willing to consider doing things in a new way.

Technology was mentioned as another challenge. Wayne shared this response, "you know, on occasion, technology, trying to figure it out, their comfort level. The technology is changing pretty fast." Kim shared her thoughts, "They're still learning how to use technology in

many cases. Once they learn they can be quick but they need that time to learn and they need time to seek information differently.” Renee shared a similar response:

I guess I would hate to say this because it’s so cliché but it’s true, it’s technology. So much is changing in the world of technology. I inherited an employee, and she could not keep up with the technology required and didn’t want to admit it. We tried training and she couldn’t grasp it and she wasn’t going to be able to. It’s not a challenge for everybody but it’s hard.

Missy cited similar concerns in communication and using email:

For informational purposes or they have a question and set of kind of clearly outlining and oh now I’m switching to a different subject and it’s all running in one email. And I have to ask ok what are you trying to say? They’re like well since I have to send you the email I’m just going to put everything in one email and then I’m like wait, okay? Stick to one topic at a time.

Missy also shared thoughts on work ethic and work life balance, “all they do is work, they don’t know how to just not work.” Kim shared a personal story related to work life balance:

I still have employees that they work so hard and they don’t take any vacation time and so they bank up all their vacation time. I had one employee, he hadn’t taken any vacation time for years. He came to me and said, I need to take three months off or I’m going to lose this vacation time. I told him I can’t let you take three months off in vacation, if you were sick of course, we’d make it work but I can’t let you take this time off, it would disrupt our operations. I worked with him to take as many days off as possible during that time but he still lost vacation. It didn’t make any sense to me because I believe in a

thoughtful balance between life and work and I believe people are healthier employees when they take vacation days throughout the year. It's that type of work ethic that is challenging, I would say.

These were observations shared by participants about the challenges in managing Baby Boomers. These observations included challenges around handling change management and new initiatives, implementing technology into communication and maintaining effectiveness, work/life balance challenges in relation to time off, and building trust.

Advantages Realized in Leading Baby Boomers

Participants were consistent in their feedback around a couple of key themes in relation to advantages realized in working with Baby Boomers. Their broad and wide-ranging experience was one area noted. Wayne said:

They've got such a breadth of experience, you know, that they bring to the conversation. Whether it's brainstorming or understanding connections or knowing people in the field or ways to navigate things that's a strength that comes with time and place and it's so helpful. I will say, I don't know, it's probably more global but there just seems to be a natural respect for age that at times you can leverage with your team and your employees by having somebody part of critical conversations that can bring some maturity to that just seems to be respected. They may not even be a content expert but just that wisdom, the people are naturally more respectful if somebody is a little bit older.

Kim shared similar views:

You really need to value their perspectives, their historical perspectives. Valuing that they are older and they can bring that life experience, that professional and personal

experience to a conversation. What I've learned about my leadership style is that I love addressing an issue by looking at all of the perspectives and if I can fill a room full of people who think differently than me that actually helps me to make better decisions. I think Baby Boomers bring that type of perspective as well as, you know, a lot of other diversity qualities that people bring to help you analyze situations and problems and issues and things like that. So I would say, you know, just that perspective.

Samantha noted loyalty and commitment to the work, "I think, and that is as a generation, I see them as very committed. So often, when I sit down with these folks, they're really committed to this work, and I think that's something that's noteworthy." Zoey added similar thoughts, "I would also say in my experience the Baby Boomers that I have worked for and the Baby Boomers that have worked for me have also been, you know, very committed to their organization." Missy noted their comprehension to key points, "I would say, the best things about managing Baby Boomers is I typically don't have to repeat myself. I can say it, they get it."

Another theme formed around the Baby Boomers influence on other workers and the effect they have on others around them, Nathan noted:

Some of the Baby Boomers can be very good role models, I think, in many ways. They often have more experience than some of the younger generation that I supervise and sometimes I am able to have them take on that role of a role model or leader among peers and that is rewarding to see them take on these mentoring roles.

Renee shared the effect they have on other and on change management:

It's really been beneficial to me as a leader to understand that's a really good part of the

conversation when you're trying to do something different or new is to find out the history of us every having tried that before. So I really appreciate the history. Another thing is that all of the Baby Boomers I manage right now, and there are a lot, they all seem to have this consistent calm and grace, calmness and gracefulness.

These were a culmination of thoughts on the advantages of managing Baby Boomers. The points of feedback included valuing their knowledge and wisdom, asking questions about and considering their perspective, and understanding their commitment to their work and to the organization.

Influence of Managing Millennials

All the participants have experience managing Millennials. These sub-themes explore those interactions and how they influenced past, current, and future leadership practice within the participant group. Feedback was also gathered on experiences with Generation Z.

Millennial Traits

Nathan shared an observation on integrating Millennial workers with his Baby Boomer manager:

The Millennials that I've tended to manage have been ambitious, creative, and entrepreneurial and I've loved that because they get things done. Where it's a bit more challenging is managing that mentality with a more measured approach. For example, one person I managed who was in charge of our university partnerships, she was very entrepreneurial, she would get people in the room and say come on people, we've got to get this done – kind of the impatience of an entrepreneur. I reported to a Boomer who found this Millennial to be an absolute pain in the ass, right, you're circumventing all of

my processes, you're not going through my chain of command. So, there was some really awkward conversations where she'd come to me and, in fact, our relationship did not end very well. That tension was a big reason I left that institution and went to another. I was trying to manage a very young department, you know, anywhere from early 20's to mid-30s and they wanted to do things and I was under somebody, who, is very cautious about change, would do change, but liked to do it incrementally, liked to do it in a controlled way. So, my folks would create all kinds of organizational tension and then I would have to try to manage that.

Renee provided similar feedback, "I would say always let them know that they're doing they're doing well and being willing to have one on one conversations and hear what they have to say, let them be creative as possible." Samantha shared a similar sentiment:

I often try to motivate them by saying your voice is very important. You don't, you know, you may not have been here for 20 years but your voice as someone who's new to the institution has fresh eyes and has new ideas is really important. Because I think sometimes that generation tends to downplay their voice and they can be spoken over by those, particularly in higher education, who tend to be loud. So I'm always trying to get to everyone's voice, it matters.

Nathan had similar feedback:

I work with them the same way in a sense, I do the same thing with them that I do with the Baby Boomers. I make sure, you know, that we hear their voice. I try to make sure they get their voices heard on important strategic decisions that we're making. I think

they like to see their input matter. They aren't okay with me just saying thanks for the input, I think they want to see their fingerprints on some of what we're doing.

Zeke tied in thoughts on motivation:

I generally find people that are younger than me are easier to manage. I don't know if it's just an age thing or if it's truly a Millennial quality but that's because my style is to look for inner motivation. What I find is that Millennials and even Gen Z want to have a purposeful life, they want their work to be purposeful. It's a less paternalistic economy today than it was 20, 30, 40 years ago for better or worse. I think people realize that and so they're more creative, they're more willing to freelance, they're more willing to go it on their own, they're more entrepreneurial. They want to have purpose-based careers. As you dip into recent college grads you find that in spades these are people that want to change the world.

Missy provided a good synopsis to this line of thinking:

I said that, so, we need to make sure we are including them. But, not giving them what I would say grunt work but saying I value you as an employee. So, therefore this is what I'm going to utilize, your skills and listening to what you'd like to tell us.

Roy provided some interesting insights into technology and how that impacted perceptions during the pandemic:

They expect to be communicated with differently, they expect to communicate or do their jobs differently. Classic example, for whatever reason, we didn't have laptops, we all had desktops. We started to move the needle. A couple of year ago, we switched to laptops and when Covid hit we just picked up our laptops and went home. Before, if you

were doing emails you were sitting in your office. That's not how it works for them, there doing them on their own time and they are doing them on their phones. So, it's tested our technology and our processes. And, that starts with me, I needed to mature as well. Somebody's not in their office, they're still working, right? That's not how I grew up. I grew up as you're in your office. If Roy isn't there, Roy must be messing around or doing something that's not productive, and that just wasn't true. And fortunately, Covid has put that on steroids for all of us. We just all kind of matured, because you had to be like we can work from home. This was not something we really had our head around 18 months ago. It was if you're working, it's because you're in the office and you're at school and accounted for. So, we've really had to change that and I think that's the takeaway of Covid that will be here now and I think for us is we have people that can self-select if there's no one out and they don't want to drive in just do their stuff at home, that's fine.

Wayne shared some final thoughts on transparency and asking for what they want:

I think they appreciate transparency, more than other groups that I have supervised. That will probably continue to grow within them even more. Work with the idea that you are super clear about here's what we are expecting of you and here's how you'll be rewarded for it and here are the opportunities for advancement. They seem to be needy and want more of that verbal and social contract of their understanding of what they're being asked to do.

Wayne shared the example of asking for what they want:

Compensation is, by far, you know, I will say that I made some errors early in my career, where I took on additional responsibilities and I received a pat on the back and man, I was excited to have those opportunities. But, it wasn't until I was little more seasoned, that I realized someone took advantage of me and I didn't realize it. I think Millennials, either because they've learned Gen X is getting burned by that or what, is that if I'm going to ask you to supervise the halls I don't just say man it's time to step up for the team. I'm going to give you an extra \$500 bucks a month because it's real work, it's impacting your life balance. I think Millennials, in some ways, have driven that, in a way that has probably been uncomfortable for some of my peers like they want something all the time to do something more. In reality, I think it might be correcting some injustices there were there in the field.

These responses from participants outlined experiences in managing Millennials. These observations included noticing that Millennials can handle and will push for a higher pace of change, that they, at times, need assurance that their voices are being heard, that they are purpose driven in their motivation, that they will lead out on new ways to use technology, and that they appreciate transparency in work direction.

Challenges in Leading Millennials

Work life balance questions, work ethic questions, and longevity on the job were the leading themes. Kim shared these observations from her experience:

The challenge about them is probably just this, I feel it's work ethic. I was just so different, you know. This idea I can show up not on time and it's okay. And that, you know, if I show up 15 minutes late, I'll just work 15 minutes later or just take a shorter

lunch sort of thing. Whereas the Baby Boomers are there early, and they leave late. The Millennials have a bit differently defined work ethic, a little bit different certainly. I think that they are more likely to take more time off. They use up their vacation time, they use up their sick time. It's interesting, I had a couple of Millennials, I'm like, I need you to do your job, you need to be here. You need to give 100% when you're here. I need you to work 40 hours a week. I need you to do your job 100% and I won't ask you for anything outside of job if you can do that. And so we transition to this exchange of I'm going to work my 40 hours and I'm not going to give you more than that, but I'm going to do my 40 hours. I'm going to give you 100% during my 40 hours but don't ask me to do anything beyond that. So, if I work another 15 minutes, and then you better pay me my overtime for those 15 minutes I'm working. I am struggling with that mindset.

Missy shared her observations about why she thinks the work life balance is challenging for Millennials:

I think probably the biggest thing I've noticed with Millennials that I've managed in the past is that balance, that work life balance. If they get stressed, they don't know how to handle it. They'd rather throw up their arms or hands up and just not deal with it. I need to help them know it's not the right approach, they just need to communicate, "Hey, I have this going on. Can I have grace, so to speak, for this project not getting done or getting done late?" They seem to struggle with work life balance. They are bringing everything to work and then they're scattered; they can't focus because there is so much going on in life and now work is kind of on the side.

Nathan shared related struggles in creating a productive work environment:

I think sometimes Millennials have expectations that I can build for them or that they'll have access to some sort of build your own work model or that I'll be able to customize it for them. They want to customize everything, and I don't feel like that is really suitable for them. Especially in higher ed, it's just a little bit overboard, just not understanding the constraints of what we do.

Zeke offered similar thoughts in line with the impact of the institution of higher education on the work environment:

I find myself having to explain the value of higher ed to young people because you can't have ROI without having organization like the institution. You need the machinery of an institution to offer what we do you really can't do it in a freelance way. How would you have the credentials, how would you have the standing, how would you have the breadth of disciplines, how would you get financed, how would you get validated? It's one of those things that makes my head spin, we aren't just about individual goal realization it's about community. It's about community goals, we as individuals are members of the community. We want to uplift community and you can't have community without organization. I find myself having to have this conversation with younger folks whereas I don't think I've ever had to have that conversation with a Boomer.

Job instability was another theme, Nick shared his thoughts:

It was harder for me to keep them long term as employees. If they were here a year, they'd come in and say so, will I be up for a raise this year? Whereas, you know, I was probably more like the Boomer in that I was happy to get a salary. Ever salary offer I've ever been offered I've accepted, never negotiated. It just didn't really occur to me. But

my Millennials were always wanting to know what's the next incentive. And so, what would happen is they would work for me, I had one who worked for me for a couple of years and he was off to the next college. For the time he was with me he did good work, he had that kind of entrepreneurial spirit. He was always looking for what's next and was excited about that shiny thing ahead, and so that made it tough to manage them for that reason.

Wayne shared similar observations:

So they would say, cool, I'm onto the next thing. I am actually a little envious of that in that it seemed they could make those breaks cleaner that I could navigate them at times. That's because you're losing talent, knowledge capital and you're bringing somebody else in around the corner and, you know, it's tough in running an organization dealing with that kind of frequent turnover.

Roy talked about the tie to technology as a primary option to solve problems:

Inside of that Millennial there are different styles around that, where every answer or every problem was solved by another software system or technology application or whatever is helping them understand. Sometimes just having an Excel spreadsheet with a list of names on it is plenty effective. It doesn't always need to be this super integrated software system that you can pull up on an app on your phone.

Renee had a different viewpoint on the team/community aspect that Zeke offered:

I think there is a really big need for community and a sense of community and friends and team within that generation that I don't see with my Baby Boomer staff. The Baby Boomers just want to go in a corner and work on their project and be done. I see the

Millennials saying we need to have lunch; we take walks around the building together. There is this togetherness factor, we are a team, and we can celebrate together and complain together and work together and there's great in both of those things, but that can be a challenge too because not everything is a team.

Samantha shared these thoughts by referencing confidence and being heard:

They tend to lack confidence and I think that can be challenging, particularly in an eye on the higher education environment where you have people that have been there a really long time. So it's hard to make those new ideas kind of percolate to the surface. If someone doesn't have that confidence and thinks yes, my voice really matters. So that confidence piece is a challenge. And, they tend to take things quite personally. If you are criticizing or questioning the work, they take it personally, which I think happens less with boomers.

These were thoughts from participants on the challenges of managing Millennial employees.

The key themes included questioning work ethic, commitment to the role/moving between jobs, and lacking confidence in their work or their voice.

Advantages Realized in Managing Millennials

Innovation, adaptability, tech savvy, and conscientious about inclusivity and accessibility highlight the terms participants used when describing the advantages realized in working with Millennials. Zoey shares a story about a colleague she noticed some of these traits in:

This assistant dean I worked with, thinking of her leadership, which I think might be in part a product of being a Millennial, is just a fierce commitment to inclusivity and accessibility and she just challenges us to be better. As an example, she's made a self-

commitment that she will not distribute a document that's not fully accessible. We have lots of documents at our institution that aren't fully accessible, and she will work her tail off to make them accessible before she'll send them out or she just won't do it. It is really important to her, and she just wants it to be really important for everyone and is really challenging us to be better.

Zoey shared more thoughts specific to inclusivity and social justice:

There are inequities built into the system and you have to be willing to change the system. But you also have to know the process or the ways in which things can move forward. You also have to have patience. In my experience, the millennials that I've worked with have been super passionate about inclusivity and social justice and making sure that, you know, including people and making sure voices are heard. I would say that I saw some of this as they were students at my former institutions. They were really pushing the institutions to not just say that you're about these things but that you have to show it and do it. You need to demonstrate it and make sure students actually feel it.

Wayne shared this related feedback, "Millennials are some of the brightest people I've worked with and that part's pretty exciting. They seem to respond well to been given more responsibility and trust."

Another common theme found from participants was around the theme adaptability/change adoption. Samantha shared her thoughts:

I think they're extremely adaptable. I see for myself and hear people call them resilient. With that resiliency they can adapt to change very quickly. They are often the first to embrace change, sometimes on the very first day of the change happening. I think the

sense of adaptability is something that I try to learn from the millennials.

Renee added this feedback, “the reward for me is that they are quick, excitable, and honestly so open-minded and willing to try everything all at once. I love that because that’s a dream as a manager.”

Roy shared another experience that highlights the change orientated nature of a Millennial he worked with:

I worked with a millennial once who was just six months out of college. I told somebody were going to put a head cam on and I’m just going to follow him around, just learn from him because he was so refreshing for us. He was an admissions person and one day he said to us, how am I supposed to get a hold of people? We said to him, well, you just pick up the phone and call them or email them. He started laughing at us, he said nobody answers their phone, and who reads an email? I need to be texting. We said okay we just hired a really talented education person and he thinks he has no tools that are going to help him, he thinks we’re just dinosaurs. He wanted to text everybody, he wanted to use Snapchat or all these ways to communicate with people and we were just like, well, we don’t have cell phones for employees. You know, these are process pieces that are just fascinating. Then, he brought a ball to his office, and he was driving everybody crazy up in his area because he was using this little basketball hoop on his door. You could just see him using this little basketball hoop and his brain was working so fast. And we were like, you can’t bounce a basketball in your office. And finally somebody said, it’s just how he works. I don’t care what he does, you know, it was just to see the way his brain was working. He was texting these prospective students on his device and he’s shooting

this basketball. He was phenomenal, he was maybe the best recruiter I've ever worked with in my life, he was really talented.

Nathan shared similar thoughts around new ideas and innovation:

Some of the benefits working with millennials is that they are very innovative. They see things, they see things very easily and they bring things up that are very useful. New, innovative ways of doing things and I think that's a positive thing. I don't always have to ask them they step up and are often willing to take on leadership roles and are often the first people to volunteer for doing things in the division. They take on leadership roles and committee work within the division. I think some of them naturally want to have an active role.

Kim offers a great synopsis of these advantages with her feedback:

I think the reward of Millennials is that they do see the world differently because they experience the world differently. They are less patient with things that don't move, and they get frustrated with things that don't move. They get frustrated by too much talking and no action. When I have a team that is more millennials, I actually see a lot of good work that comes out of that because they don't want to sit in a room and deliberate for a whole hour and walk away with nothing. They don't want to go through something for an entire year in a work group or committee and get anywhere. They want to know what the thing is that we need to work on, just let me get it done. They use their time wisely that way. So, you get a lot of productivity from them because they want things to get done, they want to take action. So much of it is being tech savvy. I think it's also access to information; they know where to look. They are able to use their time and interact

with the different software and technology we have a lot quicker. So, if you hand them a project they know where to go to get things done and they can work with the technology with a lot of ease to be able to get that work done.

Generation Z Observations

Some participants had not had interactions with Generation Z members. Others had worked with them through work study opportunities. Zeke shares an overview of what he has seen with his interactions and observations of Generation Z:

This is a generation that has seen war, they've seen economic meltdowns and now they've seen the coronavirus as they are getting into the workforce. They are a traumatized generation, but they are a generation with a lot of hope. However, there is this lack of belief that the economy could actually work for them, that society could actually work for them. That's because their experience is one of society being broken, society being at war, terrorist attacks on our soil, economic implosions. With all that in them, I still see them being hopeful.

Zoey shared her observations:

What we are hearing from these students is a desire for authenticity. You can't just say that you are doing something or say that is a value. They are looking for you to demonstrate it, they want to see you live it out. It's just interesting and it's a fair critique. They are sensitive to things where they feel it's lip service and it's not real.

Wayne noticed a desire to learn and an assertiveness element:

They want to learn more, they're quick to figure out how to communicate and seem to be professional enough to reach out to different audiences to start their interactions. They

seem to take a lot of initiative which I really appreciate. The last two or three I've hired have moved quickly onto other jobs and seem to be moving up the ranks pretty quickly. Nick provides a synopsis to these observations with his thoughts, "They love to challenge things and I've seen them being very open and very comfortable challenging me. I've been open to that it's just part of my style that I don't wrap myself around the authority of the position." Although not all participants had managed Gen Z employees, the insights shared were valuable in seeing what the future may hold for Gen X leaders managing these employees.

Thoughts on Leadership

Participants provided input on their intrinsic motivation for leadership, and how that play out for them in higher education. They also provided thoughts on their futures and where their leadership journeys might take them.

Why We Lead

Many of the participants discussed the satisfaction they receive from helping people reach their goals. This manifested itself through connections and contact with faculty, staff, and students. All participants called on these experiences at some point during their interviews and while sharing their thoughts on their leadership journeys. Zeke shared his thoughts:

I think the most rewarding part of leading people in a higher ed situation is that it's we do in higher ed, its helping people find and realize and develop their potential. As an industry, that's what we do. When I can help people do that themselves, or, even more powerfully, when I can help people help others get theirs that's nirvana, that hits all the sweet spots. Our product is so incredibly important it's hard to imagine something more important than helping human beings realize more of their potential. So, if my

leadership style today is about helping people work from their own personal motivation, find a goal, and work together toward an end that method requires that those people are personally motivated. That method falls flat if people aren't personally motivated. That to me is just an intriguing problem, because I have to ask myself why are you in higher ed if you don't have a passion for it?

Wayne shared similar sentiments:

I have this kind of personal mantra that I found over my career and I start every day with it. The idea of how can I help someone be better today? That is my role right now, it spans everybody from the awesome rock start student leaders, faculty, staff all the way to the other end of the continuum to the last person at the university. Like, the person that's messed up so much that I'm going to suspend you as an employee, I'm going to suspend you or fire you. Or, with students, we might just have to part ways because you might not be ready for this so that mantra can be applied across the entire continuum, you know? It spans from complementing that rock start student and pointing out a new opportunity because they are so good and don't necessarily see how good they are to the student who's got one foot out the door and maybe they need that push out the door because they're not ready for this and they are spending a lot of money and they need to mature or find something that is going to be a better fit because their heart and head isn't in it. That's a hard thing for some people to do. I view it as if I can get you closer to the right path I'm helping. We might not know what the right path is but the current one isn't it. So, what can we do to help you find it? That's kind of the way I approach it.

Samantha shared her story:

For me the most rewarding thing is helping people reach their goals and be the best version of themselves. And, I think that is true of employees. And, it's true of students and it's something I had, people working for me, so I do try to pay it forward. I love to see people talk about, whether it's an employee or a student, what it is that they want to accomplish in life and helping them along the way. It is so rewarding to see people not only reach their goals but feel good about themselves, you know, there are just a lot of people out there who question their own worth, question their own value, their own abilities, especially in this world. I remember being that way, I still do it sometimes. Heck, every day I do it. I love to help people see themselves in that way that I can see them, it is extremely rewarding to me.

Renee discussed her journey of leading people through difficult conversations:

You have a chance to create your own path, that's a neat thing to reflect upon and something you can pass onto people. What keeps me in it is there is a process when people don't do what they're supposed to do. I don't care where you work, in a unionized environment or not. The processes are crystal clear, they are laid out in the contract and you need to be courageous enough to follow the contract and tell people when they're not doing what they're supposed to do and lead from a place of love. I'm here because I want you to do better and I'm going to tell you what you are not doing well. We can work together to make sure you do well. I stayed with it because I like it, it can be kind of a pain, but I do like it. The most rewarding thing for me is trying to help everyone have a voice. I try to be that voice for them at a higher level. That helps me but the other side of it is to help lead people to change, helping to lead people to think

about things differently, see things differently, do things differently and connect those two outcomes. That's really the reason we are here, to move people along the spectrum, improving and doing better for students is something I really enjoy.

Zoey talked about what keeps her connected in her leadership journey:

The other thing that draws me to being in administration is the potential to have a broad impact on students. And, not just benefiting those students in my class, which is absolutely critical in higher ed, but for me I enjoy the idea of how do I help influence the institution so that it leads to more students having a better experience or more students being successful.

Roy shared his "why" story:

I like the team aspect and leading a team, you know? It's really fun to take a group of people and work with them as a group and find a way for that group to accomplish some goals, whether it's a baseball game or starting a new program or achieving some kind of sales goals like we might have had in customized training. I literally, at my core, believe what we are doing can change people's lives. So, I'm an evangelist, in that sense, I will get up in peoples' business about going to college because I believe in it, especially with young kids. That is my favorite thing to do is contact high school kids and ask what they are going to do. We want to give kids the opportunity to pursue that welding program or nursing program, whatever it is. We are not going to let them fail. I just know we've got something that can help them. I get super passionate about that because I just believe in it, and I've seen firsthand within my own experiences.

Missy shared her thoughts:

I like the systematic part of it and knowing that in leadership is really where the decisions are being made. And yes, we do everything for the students but primarily you're doing it because you want to have system changes, you want to have institutional changes and that really can't happen without someone being in leadership. So, when I began to see how things were done, who was calling the shots and I saw if folks are ready to buy into what you're saying and you're not necessarily at the top what could happen if I keep going up. So that's honestly what really drew me just to keep going.

Nick talked about the impact created with a large group of people in his leadership journey:

I think what's most rewarding is that if you can tie the work that you're doing directly back to creating the conditions that optimize student learning and then help them be successful is part of what attracted me to doing more organizational leadership. I recognized that as a faculty member I could have an intense effect on about 125 students this semester but if I worked for the organization, I can work on the conditions under which all students are learning. Then you know there's an opportunity to do more expansive work and that's what attracted me to it, that really gets me excited. The reality is that you're dealing with people, and so, how do you understand some of the most complex things to study and how do you help people learn to work more effectively together and to keep focus on students and communities we serve. To me, that's the more fascinating mystery to try to wrap my head around than anything I would study from history or literature or whatever.

Nathan shared his perspective:

I like being in the leadership role. I like relating to people and I like finding and seeing how I can help people find their strengths. I didn't know this about myself somebody actually pointed it out to me. The owner of the store I worked at early in my career before working in higher ed told me to fire somebody in the store. I thought that person would be better suited doing something else in the store so I put that person in another position rather than firing them. The owner told me that he was consistently surprised in my ability to find the best in people. I never had thought of that being a strength of mine because I'd never taken leadership classes or things like that, but it was something I liked because that is the way I wanted to be treated. The other thing that is rewarding to me is goal setting. I like it when my supervisors set forth goals, it might be an academic plan or a strategic plan. I like having a bar, a target to hit. That is very motivating to me, and I like to get other people on board. I like to get people moving in the same direction I'm going and get a whole group of people looking at the same thing and aiming at the same target. It's motivating to me to be able to hit that target.

Kim offers a great synopsis of thought to the why leadership question:

I tell people this, and it may sound odd, but that I fell in love with the mission of public two-year institutions and community/technical colleges. They're open access, their mission, and the students' we serve, those students that walk through our doors every day and the challenges that they come with but also the opportunities and the successes and the triumphs and the frustrations that they have. What I thought was so interesting was that because I had seen these frustrations when the opportunity of being a dean arose, I saw a chance for bigger impact. I saw it as a positive step towards making a bigger

difference and the things that I could see happening in the classroom and from a faculty perspective. That was the defining moment for me because I remember thinking to myself, if I go back and teach, I can make a difference in the classroom every single day. But, if I stay in this dean role, I can make a difference in a different way on a bigger and broader scale. I think that the steps I've taken in my career I ask myself, where can I make a bigger difference in the big scheme of things? That difference could be in the classroom with the individual student versus at the college level. When I got the chance to work at the system office that job allowed me to make that difference at a systems level across all of our institutions.

These stories were some of the most impactful parts of the study, there was a lot of pride and passion shared by the participants around why they enjoy leadership and the fulfillment it brings.

Challenges of Leadership

Leadership contains layers of challenges and the participants outlined some of the challenges that they faced. Missy shared her experiences in relation to working with different groups of employees within her institution and system:

I would say the most challenging thing in higher education, I'll speak more specifically relating to the system I work in, is changing policies. It is hard for us to change policies because we work in a very heavy union driven environment. So, that does make it challenging because you have to make sure you're mitigating this particular union or that unit. And specifically, faculty unions, they are tough and there's a lot of changes you have to get consensus and buy in for from the faculty. You work in partnership, and you

work alongside faculty and where it begins to be a larger challenge is when you try to go out on a limb on your own and work, what I call cylinders of excellence – i.e., silos.

Wayne shared some similar thoughts in relation to system level challenges:

There are varying degrees of differences between places with which the centralized component of a system expresses its involvement in of the campuses and so that can be frustrating at times. When you are trying to make headway at a local level, like here's what we need to do; we need to find the best way to do this. Then, you are being prescribed from somebody pretty far away, whose hands off, saying you need to be doing things this way or your attention needs to be going here. At times, it's tough to reconcile, it's super tough helping staff see that, especially as it drives their work and what they need to be focused on. It can feel like it's out of left field for them. It is super hard as a leader trying to convey the importance of something that is the agenda of somebody who's not at our location. That is probably the most persistent challenge and it's been true every place I've worked but there are some places where it's more consistent, we have those challenges.

Samantha shared her challenge in balancing strengths and weaknesses:

So I'm a super people person and once I had a mentor who said your greatest strength is your greatest weakness. We kind of joked about what a weird saying that was but so many times I've seen that it's true. My greatest strength, I think, is that I'm a people person that I'm really about relationships and people and helping them to achieve. But, it is also an Achilles heel for me because I really like people and I really like to be liked. So when I have to make difficult decisions, which you know we do all the time, I

internalize it. I know I'm messing with people's lives. We've had to go through layoffs in the past, not a lot, thankfully. These decisions weigh heavily on me. I probably could use a much thicker skin. I wouldn't lead in the same way that I do so I'm glad I don't have that thick skin. But, man, it weighs on me, it really does. I take it seriously, it's a privilege.

Renee talked about leading through change, specifically the factors related to COVID-19:

With the pandemic my role as a leader hasn't changed, nor have necessarily my job functions. But, leading people through change has been a new experience through a major change and getting people onboard with and comfortable with remote work, in relation to the pandemic. Or, having to come to work because we are a hands on college and classes have rolled since last June in person. We've been one of the institutions that have been open so navigating that experience has been challenging.

Another challenge is being the voice of so many people. There is so much work to do, so many things to consider when you're at this level. You hear it, your colleague talking about something they're going to roll out, and I have to think through every single place, that will probably impact student affairs and that is very hard. It can disappoint people if you didn't think of something from their specific perspective. The other challenge is people, people take time. So, if you want to be a good supervisor it's going to require time. It's part of your job so it's hard to take that much time on people. But you have to, you have to meet with them regularly, you have to be available if they need you, you have to help them when they need you to help them.

Roy shared his challenges:

I have high expectations for myself, but I also do for other people and I think I've seen that in a little bit of a moral sense and that I just believe that people have gifts, and everybody has skills and they're just different and some are higher than others. People know things I just won't be good at and there's things I'm good at the other people won't be good at. For me, the challenge is being measured in the sense that my passion or my goals might be turned up to ten, you know, just because it's just my disposition, and theirs might be a six. I think challenges along the way in leadership is that there are team members, you know, come with different levels of engagement and in recognizing that and still meeting those high expectations that we've set for ourselves.

Nathan talked about the challenge of building trust and recognition:

I like knowing that people trust me and that is also one of the more challenging things I'd say I've learned, especially in this role working in unionized environments, it can be very challenging in an administrative position to get faculty to trust management. That's been challenging, so I've spent a lot of time learning how to try to build trust with the people I work with, especially when I feel like there is a kind of pre-existing culture of us versus them, faculty versus management. I think one of the other most challenging things about being a leader is letting other people shine, but sometimes I do like to have some recognition too. You are pulling all the levers and laying the groundwork for people to thrive and shine and sometimes it doesn't always get recognized and sometimes I crave that, you know, you want to be recognized for the work you do and when it doesn't get noticed sometimes it's challenging, it's just human nature. You want to be recognized for the hard work you do.

Nick highlighted what he learned from a previous leader and how it helps him meet challenges now:

I reported to VP who was incredibly risk averse, and here my whole reason for being was to push the organization to do things better and different. So, I had to learn how to constantly downplay the potential challenge, threat, or what you would perceive as a threat to status quo the work that I was doing in order to get it to be accepted. So one of the challenges I wrestle with now is that I want people's leadership to be a natural expression of how they are wired and you're trying to build on their strengths. The challenge, of course, is that those strengths may or may not work well within the values of the organization. The hardest challenge is trying to figure out how do you help someone as an individual flourish, and how do you help them work within a team. There are strong personalities and it can be a challenge getting them to move in the same direction.

Kim shared challenges on giving her staff enough time and attention:

I think the most challenging part about being a dean was that I think I oversaw a number of liberal arts and science programs. I had about 20 different departments and I had about 150 faculty. It was really hard to give thoughtful and meaningful attention to every single faculty. What really burnt me out was just all the politicalness of the job and trying to manage the politics of issues and people.

Leadership: What's Next?

Participants discussed what is next for them and where they see their leaderships paths going as they advance in their careers. Nathan discussed next steps with his president:

I've been talking with the president about when I get my EdD and if I stay at this college there is definitely a chance of taking on a provost like role at one of our campuses. We have one of our campuses that he said really needs a provost who can actually run the day to day operations of the campus and that is something that would interest me.

Nick shared his thoughts about life after leading in higher education, "Where I'm currently serving, I'd love to leave them in a position of strength, like they're doing well. Then, I'd like to retire at about 56 and then I'd love to write a novel, that'd be fantastic."

Renee shared her thoughts on where her track might take her:

I see myself trying to become a vice president of academic and student affairs next. If I am in the two-year world so that somehow, I get to do both would be ideal. Student affairs is my jam, that is my background. But now, this academic side, I mean I've just taught a couple of classes at a university and I co taught another at a different institution. I'm not thinking I'm the greatest at it, but I'd like to be better, and it gives me the experience of what it feels like to be in the classroom, it's great perspective.

Wayne shared some thoughts on what natural next steps might look like for him:

There are two natural pathways for me at this point in time. In the last two years at my last institution, I was really looking at vice president or vice chancellor roles in similar sized institutions and that was the pathway I was on. During that time I took inventory and what I was seeing was in those openings they weren't hiring people from those institutions at the number two level like I was they were hiring standing VP for midsize public. I see the writing on the wall and said, ok, if I want to go there I need to do this first so that's what drew me to this current role. You know, good sized, mid-sized public

institution with a good reputation. That had a trajectory to be very positive and that was the plan. That plan has been a little disrupted, however, in that through professional encouragement I've been asked to consider presidential level roles. At this point my focus is a little bit more on that though I'm not closed off to a VP role at a larger research one again. My future may be as a president in a small mid-sized public university.

Samantha talked about what she sees ahead in her current role and possible legacy to help others:

I will always be in leadership. I expect to be a president, I hope, for another 10 years.

But what I really hope happens is that as I make mistakes and learn in this role, I hope that I can be part of training others down the road to be part of their professional development. I consider the most important thing I do is work on culture. I've made a lot of mistakes and we've made a lot of advancements. In my perfect world, one day when I can't be president anymore, I can help other people kind of get through the culture building, it's super important to what we do, whether we're college or business.

Summary

There were two research questions developed for this study to create understanding around the experiences of Gen X leaders in a public higher education setting. Blumer's (1969) symbolic interaction theory was used as a theoretical framework for this study. Blumer (1969) provided more detail by saying, "symbolic interactionism sees meaning as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (p. 5). These interactions in relation to leadership and interpersonal relationships are the connection points created within the data in this research study. The first research question was: What patterns and influences brought these leaders into and have kept them in a leadership role? There

were common themes that emerged from the data. The participants spoke to role models and mentors encouraging them to try something they did not see as possibilities in themselves. The participants also talked about getting a start in either teaching or student affairs and then aspiring to lead from the seat of a more influential role. Others got their start outside of higher education but were drawn to service in higher education. They also spoke to the draw of having more positive influence over the entire college or system they work within by influencing from a position of leadership. Finally, key interactions with leaders, other faculty, students, and colleagues helped shape the participants leadership journeys.

The second research question was: What interactions and experiences with Millennials and Baby Boomers impacted their leadership journeys? Most participants spoke to examples of Baby Boomer leaders who had taught them key lessons in leadership that prepared them for their future roles. As they have evolved in their leadership journeys, they spoke of lessons learned in respecting and listening to the experiences of Baby Boomers they are now managing. They also talked about the need to gather the intellectual property Baby Boomers possess to ensure strong succession planning for departments and individual positions. Influence on their leadership journeys related to managing Millennials included observations around instilling confidence in those workers, being very clear about expectations, and letting them know that their voice is important in the decision-making process at the institution. Participants also mentioned connecting relevance in their work to the value Millennials can bring to technology advances in the workplace.

The purpose of this study was to gain insights in the leadership journeys of Gen X leaders in a public college system setting. Within the analysis of the data collected through the

interviews there are four themes that emerged from the data, three of which are related to the research questions. The final theme is related to the intrinsic motivations around leading people in general, and what lies ahead for the leadership journeys of the participants. The following chapter will cover conclusions, discussions, limitations, and implications for future research, theory, and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative study examined the leadership journeys of Gen X leaders in a public higher education system. The study examined their journeys in relation to the factors that influenced their leadership journeys and the experiences they've had working with and leading both Baby Boomers and Millennials. Blumer (1969) and Daiute (2014) provided methodology and a theoretical framework to frame the study. The literature developed in relation to generational studies, tendencies of the various generations, and leadership traits helped to frame the research in this study.

Ten Gen X leaders working in a public higher education system setting served as study participants. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data. Of particular focus was the participants' entry into higher education and then subsequently their advancement into leadership roles. As that journey was explored, participants were asked to describe how these journeys were influenced by their regular interactions with both Baby Boomer colleagues / direct reports as well as Millennial direct reports. The previous chapter analyzed the data gathered from the 10 participants and this led to identification of the following themes: factors influencing the leadership journey, influence of managing baby boomers, influence of managing millennials, and thoughts on leaders.

This chapter includes a discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions, themes, and literature review to synchronize conclusions. Limitations of the study are discussed, and recommendations for future research and implications are suggested for consideration to conclude the study.

Discussion

As outlined in Chapter 2, Gen X leaders are taking charge of organizations; and specifically in relation to this study, institutions of higher education; at a pivotal time (Mulrennan, 2015). With the challenges of the COVID pandemic and the dynamics of higher education institutions the findings of this study supports that observation. As Baby Boomers enter the final years of their careers, they possess valuable intellectual property for the institutions they work for (Cekada, 2012). Meanwhile, Millennials are bringing different skills sets in the way of technology, different work life balance outlooks, and a need to be heard in the decision-making process (Gentry et al., 2011). Gen X leaders bring with them a unique set of circumstances that shaped their leadership journeys in the way of social, educational, and “getting noticed” type of factors. Mulrennan (2015) noted there has been more attention paid to the other generations surrounding Gen X and recognizing their journeys will be important for them as they ascend and work in key leadership roles. This study and its findings help to shed light on these relationships and dynamics and deserves further consideration.

The first research question addressed factors that formed the leadership journey of the study participants. The majority of the participants (seven) started their careers in higher education and have never left. The other three participants worked for some time in other fields and then were drawn into higher education through professional connections or mentors. For those who started in higher education, the two tracks to leadership consisted of working as a faculty member or working in student affairs. The faculty track often included a stint of graduate research and teaching. These individuals found value in the impact they were having as instructors and saw opportunity to have a larger influence on students and the general education

system by elevating themselves to leadership roles. Two of the participants used the analogy of saying it is great to impact 2-3 classes of students a semester, but by leading they can influence a whole department or even a whole college population of students. The three participants who started in private industry all had examples of connecting with mentors who had ties to higher education and encouraged them to consider the career track. The draw to serve and influence tomorrow's workers and leaders was strong in the data. This finding coincides with the research mentioned by Fitch and Van Brunt (2015) on servant leadership. There was a theme in all participants around the larger purpose of working in higher education (serving and influencing) that has guided them on their leadership journeys.

For the participants who started in higher education there was often a leadership opportunity that arose that they were encouraged to apply for. This was either a department chair related role or a role in leading some aspects of students affairs. These steppingstone roles came with support from mentors or trusted colleges. The mentoring piece was strong in the research. Grubb (2017) mentioned mentoring opportunities and how that can connect Millennials, Baby Boomers, and Gen X leaders in the workplace. This was a consistent experience for the participants. Other participants worked in private industry first and then were drawn into higher education leadership. One participant worked in private industry and came into higher education through college to business training programming, another worked in sales and then entered higher education through a proprietary school, and another helped run a grocery store and learned management in that field before entering higher education. These unique experiences had consistencies around strong connections with older mentors and receiving help from others in realizing leadership potential.

As the participants entered leadership roles, they talked about how what they learned from Baby Boomers influenced their leadership style and approach. Themes mentioned in this space were work ethic, building trust, and gaining respect from co-workers and direct reports. This was done by building strong skills in listening and learning to mediate disagreements and difficult interpersonal situations. Gentry et al. (2011) spoke to the work ethic element in the research. The elements of listening and team building were also mentioned cited in the research. Sirias et al. (2007) spoke to Baby Boomers being more in tune to create group consensus and focusing more on the group than the individual. This was a strong element seen in the responses of these Gen X leaders that they picked up from Baby Boomers in their leadership journeys.

As described in the previous chapter, the participants were leading from various levels within the organizations making up the public college system where they work. Three of the participants are current presidents, there are five vice presidents/provosts in the participant group, and there are two dean level participants in the group. There were not any significant differences in the feedback when cross-referencing their level of leadership and their responses to the questions. There were slight variations that seem obvious, as the presidents tended to have longer leadership tenures and more leadership experience to draw from as they described their answers. Some of the participants who had not elevated to presidencies yet spoke about the type of work they currently did and wanting to maintain that work versus doing the type of work a president does. That theme was related to the sphere of influence and some of the political elements that exist at each level of leadership within higher education.

Baby Boomer traits influenced the participants leadership journeys. There was consistent feedback from participants around finding success by valuing the institutional knowledge and

background of the Baby Boomers they were leading. There was a correlation noticed between listening to input and building support around the work and initiatives laid out as a leader. Getting the Baby Boomers “on your side” was mentioned consistently. The participants also mentioned stability and steadiness as traits their Baby Boomer staff appreciated. There were challenges mentioned around expectations with communication and working to keep multiple generations of staff on the same page. Fitch and Van Brunt (2016) spoke to this concept of active listening and clear communication with Baby Boomers in their research.

The challenges in leading Baby Boomers show some consistency in the research. Multiple participants talked about technology challenges and how they drove some of their Baby Boomer employees to either retire or pursue other opportunities. Other participants noticed challenges in building trust, especially if there had been leadership turnover in the department or division they were tasked with leading. The prevailing attitude with some seemed to be “this to shall pass” as in if I subscribe to what this person is saying it will be all for naught as they’ll be a new person a year from now. The Gen X leaders found some difficulty in breaking through with some of their Baby Boomer employees. Additionally, the system these leaders work within is a unionized system which provides strong protections for long tenured employees, particularly faculty. This dynamic proved challenging for building trust and moving initiatives along for some participants. The general theme was some resistance to change and being skeptical of a new regime or change. Fitch and Van Brunt (2015) spoke to the difficulty in those interactions considering longevity and position of power dynamics.

There are also advantages in managing Baby Boomers that the participants cited in the research. Calling on the wide-ranging experiences the Baby Boomers have was lifted up as a

key theme. There was also mention of the maturity factor and how that can bring balance to a conversation that involves multiple generations. The Baby Boomers also bring an historical perspective that cannot be replicated with younger generations. That historical perspective is a big key when decisions are being discussed and consideration of history is a factor. The longevity and stability many Baby Boomers have in their organizations was also cited as an advantage. Some participants mentioned using their commitment to the organization can help bring others along in important discussions. The idea of role models and mentoring also came up during this part of the interactions. There was strong value found in setting up mentoring experiences between Baby Boomers and Millennials or other Gen X employees. This theme was strong in the data. There is a lot of value in utilizing Baby Boomer employees strengths as a Gen X leader when overseeing a diverse and complex team.

Millennials' traits were cited in the research as well. They were lifted up as being ambitious and willing to take on new tasks. They tend to have a forward thinking, entrepreneurial edge. Others shared their creativity was of great use and finding ways and situations in which they can be creative helps teams work through challenges. Other Gen X leaders said it is very important to create an environment where the Millennial voices can be heard. It's important for the organization and for the development of the Millennial employee. There was also synergy in the feedback about Millennials being purpose driven and working to align that motivation to the desired outcomes of the organization. Higher education institutions and purpose driven employees make a good match. Reisenwitz and Iyer (2009), Johnson and Johnson (2010), and Boyd (2009) mentioned that connection in their research. Another observation in this research was the ease with which Millennials integrate technology into their

work and the advantages that brings to the higher education setting. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where many colleges and many of the study participants had their staff transition to work done off site or at home. This was an easy transition for the Millennial employees, and not for other employees. One other observation not seen in the literature was the Millennials lack of fear in asking for more pay or work enhancements. They are not afraid to ask for what they want in the way of pay, working conditions, or benefits.

Challenges in managing Millennials was in finding balance in work ethic, work life balance questions, and longevity on the job. Two participants specifically mentioned the challenges they noticed in Millennials' balance of work and life outside work. These examples included those workers bringing work and life outside of work together too often and not being able to effectively separate the two. That then causes spill over to the quality of work and maintaining a consistent work schedule. Related to that, other participants noted the desired work flexibility some Millennials desire and how that is challenging in a higher education environment, as there are rules and protocols that must be followed in working within systems and with students. This was highlighted with two participants who found difficulty finding balance between the need for the organization of higher education to be maintained and the desired freelance style of some Millennial workers. One other prominent theme was holding onto to good Millennial talent and the difficulty that is presented when people move from job to job quickly. There is struggle in building team continuity and consistency. They desire the next promotion, the next big thing, the next technology which creates problems in maintaining stability in the work and for the teams they work on. Finally, participants also mentioned

working to find strategies that allow the Millennials voice to be heard and also sensitivities they have when their work or methods are questioned.

There are also many advantages participants lifted up in the study. One example in the responses was a participant called up a Millennial supervisor to ensure equitable access to forms and information at the college. This effort brought a renewed focus that helped the college advance. Another respondent mentioned her admiration for her Millennial employees commitment to social justice and equity. Putting them in charge of these initiatives gives them voice and allows their best traits to shine in college improvement efforts. Another key advantage cited in the data was adaptability. Another respondent talked about noticing their adaptiveness and how that made the Millennials easier to manage. A combination of these traits and their positive outcomes was shared in a story by Roy and a recruiter he worked with. He let him work the way he wanted to work, and the results were very positive in the recruiting role the Millennial was filling. This way of letting their ideas flow and putting them into positions where they can be innovative was a common theme in the data.

I did ask the participants about their experiences with Generation Z employees and the feedback was fairly limited. At this point in their professional career progression there are mostly congruent findings with what was seen with Millennials. They are quick studies, want genuine feedback, are not afraid to ask for things, and see social justice as being very important.

One of the most interesting parts of this work for me was to hear the stories from participants about why they lead and why they stick with the work. I received very consistent data related to helping systems succeed and specifically helping student realize their goals. There was a lot of feedback about helping people; whether it be faculty, staff, or students; realize

their full potential and that was the key to keeping these leaders in their roles and why they come to work every day. One participant did mention that they sometimes struggle with management when the other person does not show the same level of motivation and dedication he has. That reciprocal relationship was important to him. For another participant it was likening the journey to a continuum of progress and helping people stay engaged and successful on that continuum. Missy shared a similar story liking the systemic change aspect of leadership. Multiple participants mentioned the importance of impacting students and how that was a primary motivator for them. Kim talked about being motivated by the mission of her open access two-year college institution. Nathan brought this thought process full circle by citing his ability to help people find their strengths, the way someone did for him early in his career. These “full circle” stories were a common thread in the data when participants talked about why they are in leadership and why they stay in leadership positions.

Challenges in leadership were cited in the data as well. As previously mentioned, the system the participants work within is a public college system with both university and two-year colleges making up the system. In all cases, the leaders work in unionized environments. Because of this, creating dynamic change or even just changing a policy can be a heavy lift. This is very pervasive when working with faculty groups. Participants talked about the importance of building rapport and relationships with faculty in order to advance initiatives and create cohesion within the institution. Working in a large system was also cited as a challenge. As the leader, you are responsible for conveying messaging and changes that might come from the system level. There is a need for leaders to explain the why in those initiatives or changes and also align them with local efforts or initiatives at the college / campus level. The dynamic of leading

through change was also noted as a challenge. This came in relation to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges it presented. The majority of participants wove that dynamic into their feedback on leadership challenges. Other common themes in challenges included building trust and consensus, which was a common theme in the generational work as well. I most enjoyed the discussions about why we lead and the challenges around leadership.

Limitations

There are three limitations to this study that should be addressed. The first limitation is that I talked to 10 Gen X leaders within one public higher education system. While they provided very valuable data, it is possible I might have gathered better data with an expanded search or more participants. I am very grateful to have spoken with the great leaders who agreed to be interviewed, but it's possible I could have gotten richer data from a different study population.

The second limitation is my limited skills in being a researcher and my bias. I learned a lot about my topic, and I became more comfortable with every interview I conducted, but my skills in this area are limited. I am left to wonder if I may have been able to gather richer data if my research skills were functioning at a higher level. I live as a Gen X leader of people so the bias I have from my own experiences could be considered a limitation as I processed the data. I know I will be better prepared if in the future I conduct additional interviews and research.

The third limitation is the nature of generational studies in general. Some ask whether or not generational dynamics actually exist or whether the dynamics observed are simply a product of the "season of life" the participant is in. I believe a healthy debate could be had around this but because some believe generational dynamics are mostly based in life cycles vs. lived

experience impacts, it may be harder to digest this data for those people. It is likely more dialogue around this dynamic is needed.

Implications for Theory

Applying Blumer's (1969) symbolic interaction theory to my approach helped me gather rich and informative data from the participants of my study. The theory's tenets around group life and conduct in lived situations was an effective frame to use as I interacted with the participants. Although this theory has been in existence for decades, I found it to be very useful in framing my discussions with the study participants. Exploring leadership within the framework of human groups and their interactions could be useful as a theory for other leadership related studies. Blumer mentioned functionality of an organization being based on people's decision making in certain situations versus it being dependent on systems or "dynamics". I think it is possible the interactions examined in this study could be used as an example to look at symbolic interaction theory in other leadership-based studies.

Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to document the experiences of Gen X leaders in higher education as they navigate their leadership journey managing Baby Boomers and Millennials. The experiences of the participants will likely resonant with other Generations X leaders in higher education and likely in other areas of work.

One primary area of feedback that would be useful to others is the tactics the participants used to navigate their leadership with these other groups. For example, there were consistent responses related to working with Baby Boomer employees and how the participants worked to keep them engaged and respected their experiences as ways to help their organizations stay

healthy and move forward. By combining the research on this topic along with the real-world application described by the participants, other leaders or practitioners could use these examples to improve their own leadership practice and work environments.

Another example for Gen X leaders could be to use this data to inform their strategies and interactions with Millennial employees. The participants shared numerous strategies they implement when working with and managing Millennial employees. The data noted about how to include the input and voice of Millennials in the decision-making processes of the organization was impactful. Additionally, the examples of mentoring opportunities that were outlined are strategies that could be learned from and used in practice.

There is room to build around the aforementioned ideas. Specifically, the concept of how Gen X leaders make decisions and how their Millennial and Baby Boomer colleagues might or might not influence those decisions. I think that the creation of a guide or decision tree training document in relation to generational differences would be very useful. There could be elements of identifying team members, their generational affiliation, and tendencies/desires they have in being a part of the decision-making process. This sort of management tool would be an excellent resource for Gen X leaders to help in navigating hard decisions and creating an inclusive working environment.

Mentoring was also mentioned. My findings supported the research that there are opportunities to set up productive cross-mentoring opportunities between Millennials and Baby Boomers. As a Gen X manager, setting up these mentoring relationships would have a strong influence on team building and trust. This study and the research suggest that there are many

ways that Baby Boomers and Millennials can learn from each other, and Gen X leaders have a chance to capitalize on leading efforts to set these systems up for success.

From a leadership success perspective, this research sheds light on the need for better onboarding opportunities for leaders, regardless of generational affiliation. There was little to no mention of a formalized onboarding/training process for leaders that are a part of this system. This exists in an organic way only and could be so much better if there was a more systemized approach. A few ideas for practice might include a system wide onboarding process for all people leaders, a leadership mentoring program, and formalized job-specific core group meetings that might be multi campus or multi college in structure. These strategies can be set up for low to no cost and would result in better leadership outcomes and reduced stress and burnout.

Finally, trust was a key theme in the results. This system and others like it would be well served to use previously suggested strategies and formalized processes in order to build better campus and team trust. There could be team trainings around generational tendencies and preferences that would help new leaders and current team members understand better what people expect and how they best function and learn. This intentionality would go a long way in creating better team dynamics and work environments at these higher education institutions.

Implications for Research

There is not an overabundance of research on Gen X leaders in current literature, specifically in higher education. Further research could provide deeper insights into the experiences of these leaders and help Gen X professionals who are desiring or destined to lead navigate their journeys in more specific ways.

One specific suggestion would be a focus on a gender specific Gen X study. In this study five men and five women were interviewed, but there could be opportunity to dig deeper into their leadership journeys in a gender specific way. This type of research could deepen the exploration of their respective experiences and uncover additional strategies and tactics for leading organizations.

Another suggestion for future research would be to study the experiences of Baby Boomers as they are exiting the workforce. There are opportunities to gather information about how they perceive their value in an organization and how they are tapped to pass it along or share it. Their feedback could inform future leaders how to navigate these transitions better and better plan how to execute when Gen X and future generations leave the workforce.

A related study to the previous suggestion relates to the research previously discussed about mentoring programs. There was mention of mentoring between Baby Boomers and Gen X workers as well as mentoring between Baby Boomers and Millennials. A study on this topic could help inform mentoring strategies and help highlight effective ways to pass information through organizations and better manage succession planning.

A final suggestion would be to study a topic mentioned in the limitations of the research related to generational categories and how applicable they are to impacting leadership. More specifically, are generational aspects a proper lens to study leadership development through? Or, are leadership traits and challenges consistent enough from generation to generation that the generational categories aren't relevant or substantial? This might be a complex study but might help bring clarity to the impact of generational differences.

Summary

This qualitative study examined the experiences of 10 Gen X leaders working in a public higher education system. The data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. The research revealed Gen X leaders overseeing the work of Baby Boomers and Millennials have complex jobs and utilize multiple strategies to lead their organizations in effective ways. These leaders are dedicated to their organizations and the people who work for them. They are also highly motivated by the purpose of higher education and that motivation drives them to work towards great outcomes for their staff, faculty partners, and most importantly, the students who attend their institutions. The findings of this study are important to higher education leaders, and those staff and faculty who aspire to lead others someday.

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Appendix A – Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the current leadership position you hold at your current institution?
2. How did you get started in your career in higher education?
3. What drew you into a leadership role?
4. What things are most rewarding about leading people in a higher education setting, what things are most challenging?
5. How do you see the rest of your leadership journey playing out, where will it take you?
6. Tell me about what you learned from your first baby boomer manager? How did that impact your leadership style?
7. Are you managing baby boomers? If so, talk about how you work with them, keep them motivated, and channel their best attributes to good outcomes.
8. Talk about the two best and two most challenging aspects of managing baby boomers.
9. What have you learned from Millennials? Talk about how you work with them, keep them motivated, and channel their best attributes to good outcomes.
10. Talk about the two best and two most challenging aspects of managing Millennials.
11. Are you currently managing any Generation Z employees? If so, talk about that experience.

Appendix B – Informed Consent

Leading from the Middle – How Generation X Leaders are Navigating Their Leadership Consent to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study about Generation x leaders in higher education and how they are navigating their leadership journey. This is qualitative research study of Generation x leaders working in leadership positions with a public higher education setting.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in a one on one, recorded, interview with the principal researcher about your experience as a Generation x leader in higher education.

Benefits of the research would include creating a deeper understanding of the rewards and challenges experienced by Generation X leaders in higher education. This understanding could help others in these leadership roles who may be interested in learning how to better navigate their own leadership experiences.

Risks and discomforts – there are not any anticipated risks and discomforts of the study. Participants may be asked to reflect on personal experiences which could call upon some emotions, no other risks or discomforts seem relevant.

Data collected will remain confidential. The data will be presented in aggregate form or with no more than two descriptors presented together. All responses will be kept strictly confidential. At no time will your identity be disclosed nor will identified direct quotes be used. During the interview you may refuse to answer any questions. At the completion of the interview process, you will receive your transcribed interview responses.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Paul Drange, PI, at qh5573gt@go.stcloudstate.edu or 218-371-5113 or faculty advisor Dr. Steven McCullar at smccullar@stcloudstate.edu . Results of the study can be requested from the researcher or upon completion of the study will be published in the St. Cloud State University Repository.

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, you have read the information provided above, and you have consent to participate.

Signature

Date

Appendix C – Invitation to Participate

Greetings,

My name is Paul Drange and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration Program at St. Cloud State University. I am conducting research through interviews to study my chosen topic of **Leading from the Middle – How Generation X Leaders are Navigating Their Leadership**. I am looking for participants who currently are in leadership roles in xxxx xxxxx institutions, have been managing staff for at least 3 years, and were born between 1965 and 1979. If you match these criteria and are interested in participating, please respond to me at your earliest convenience. If you know of someone who matches these criteria, please send me their name and contact information. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Paul Drange - Doctoral Student - St. Cloud State University

Appendix D – IRB Approval Form



Institutional Review Board (IRB)

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

Name: Paul Drange
Email: drpa1301@go.stcloudstate.edu

IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION: Exempt Review

Project Title: Leading from the Middle - How Generation X Leaders are Navigating Their Leadership

Advisor Steven McCullar

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

-Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

IRB Chair:

Dr. Mili Mathew
Chair and Graduate Director
Assistant Professor
Communication Sciences and Disorders

IRB Institutional Official:

OFFICE USE ONLY

SCSU IRB# 1948 - 2590

1st Year Approval Date: 11/12/2020

1st Year Expiration Date:

Type: Exempt Review

2nd Year Approval Date:

2nd Year Expiration Date:

Today's Date: 11/16/2020

3rd Year Approval Date:

3rd Year Expiration Date: