

## **Leading Gen Z with Purpose: Why Servant Leadership is Key to Workplace Engagement**

Research indicates that only one-third of Gen Z employees feel engaged at work. That's not just a statistic—it's a wake-up call.

In this piece, I share why servant leadership may be the key to unlocking Gen Z's potential—and how companies like Starbucks and Marriott are already leading the way.

If you're ready to lead with purpose, this is for you.

Across boardrooms and break rooms, one question continues to echo: How do we truly engage Generation Z at work? Born between 1995 and 2012, Gen Z is entering the workforce in record numbers, bringing with them fresh perspectives, digital fluency, and a deep desire for authenticity. Yet despite their potential, workplace engagement among Gen Z remains alarmingly low—posing a challenge for leaders across industries.

Recent data shows that only about one-third of Gen Z employees feel meaningfully engaged at work. Many report high levels of stress, disconnection, and a lack of purpose in their roles. For organizations, this isn't just a generational quirk—it's a strategic concern. Disengaged employees contribute less, innovate less, and are more likely to leave. The stakes are high, and the solution may lie not in perks or policies, but in leadership itself.

### **The Leadership Challenge**

Traditional management styles often fall short with Gen Z. This cohort isn't motivated by hierarchy or titles—they're looking for leaders who listen, empower, and lead with integrity. They want to be seen, heard, and supported in ways that go beyond performance metrics. That's where servant leadership comes in.

Servant leadership, first introduced by Robert Greenleaf, flips the traditional power dynamic. Instead of leading from the top down, servant leaders prioritize the growth and well-being of their teams. They lead by serving—focusing on empathy, ethical behavior, and community impact. In today's workplace, this approach isn't just noble—it's necessary. This isn't just a theoretical shift—several companies have embraced servant leadership and are thriving because of it. Organizations like Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Marriott International, and The Container Store have built cultures rooted in empathy, empowerment, and ethical leadership. Their success stories demonstrate that when leaders prioritize people, performance follows. These companies have built cultures rooted in empathy, empowerment, and ethical leadership—values that resonate deeply with Gen Z.

### **What My Research Revealed**

To explore this further, I conducted a quantitative study with 166 full-time Gen Z employees working in various industries in Florida, USA. The goal was to determine whether specific servant leadership characteristics influenced their workplace engagement. Using Robert Greenleaf's seven key dimensions of Servant Leadership, I examined:

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- Emotional healing
- Creating value for the community
- Conceptual skills
- Empowering others
- Helping subordinates grow and succeed
- Putting subordinates first
- Behaving ethically

Using correlation and multiple regression analysis, the results were clear: servant leadership positively impacts Gen Z engagement. But even more compelling was the discovery that three dimensions stood out as especially significant:

1. **Emotional healing:** Leaders who recognize and respond to emotional needs foster trust and loyalty.
2. **Conceptual skills:** Strategic thinking and clarity help Gen Z employees feel grounded and inspired.
3. **Helping others grow and succeed:** When leaders invest in personal and professional development, Gen Z responds with commitment and enthusiasm.

These findings suggest that Gen Z isn't just looking for a pay check—they're looking for purpose. And they're more likely to engage when they feel supported, understood, and empowered by their leaders.

### Why This Matters Now

By 2030, Gen Z will dominate entry-level roles across the United States, the Caribbean, and many organizations worldwide. Their expectations will shape workplace culture, leadership norms, and organizational success. Leaders who fail to adapt risk losing not just talent, but relevance.

Servant leadership offers a roadmap for navigating this shift. It aligns with Gen Z's values—authenticity, ethical behavior, and community impact—and creates a culture where engagement can thrive. More than a management style, it's a mindset that transforms relationships, teams, and outcomes.

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## The Ripple Effect

Beyond the workplace, the implications are profound. When leaders build trust and foster growth, the benefits will likely extend to families, communities, and society at large. Servant leadership cultivates a sense of belonging and purpose that transcends job descriptions. It creates environments where people feel safe to contribute, innovate, and lead from wherever they stand.

In a time marked by rapid change and generational shifts, this approach isn't just effective—it's transformative.

## Practical Steps for Private and Public Sector Leaders

If you're a leader wondering how to apply these insights, consider starting here:

- **Listen deeply:** Make space for emotional check-ins. Gen Z values leaders who care about their well-being.
- **Invest in growth:** Offer mentorship, training, and clear pathways for development.
- **Lead with clarity:** Use conceptual skills to communicate vision and strategy in ways that inspire.
- **Model integrity:** Ethical behavior isn't optional—it's foundational.
- **Empower others:** Shift from control to collaboration. Let Gen Z lead in areas where they shine.

These aren't just tactics—they're expressions of servant leadership in action.

## A Call to Lead Differently

Gen Z is not a problem to be solved—they're a generation to be understood, empowered, and inspired. They're asking leaders to show up differently: **with empathy, vision, and a genuine commitment to their growth**. Servant leadership answers that call.

As we look to the future of work, the question isn't whether Gen Z will engage—it's whether we'll lead in ways that invite them to. The opportunity is here. The research is clear. And the time to lead with purpose is now.

## About the Author

Dr. Maria Morrison is a seasoned management consultant, leadership coach, and public speaker with over 25 years of executive experience across finance, hospitality, and education. She holds a Ph.D. in Management with a focus on Leadership and Organizational Strategy, and her research explores the intersection of servant leadership and generational workplace engagement. A passionate mentor and cultural bridge-builder, Dr. Morrison is committed to helping leaders foster inclusive, emotionally intelligent workplaces that drive performance and purpose.