

Exploring Intra-generational Differences Among Young Millennial Leaders on the Perceived Required Leadership Competencies for the 21st Century

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Abstract: With more millennials in the workforce today, a dominant body of literature tends to present them as a homogenous generation that share the same view on leadership. So far, very little studies are questioning if this generation is in fact, not more diverse and heterogeneous than shown. This paper addresses the currently accepted generalization of millennials' views and expectations of leadership. This paper intends to study intra-generational differences on the perceived required leadership competencies for the 21st century among millennials. This qualitative phenomenological study is based on semi-structured interviews and compares two groups of millennial leaders. To meet the requirements of the lifespan approach for the age-related transition phase of graduate school-to-early professional life, one group is composed of young millennials leaders still in graduate school and the other group of young millennials leaders who have just entered the workforce. The results of the research reveal that there are differences among millennials on the perceived required leadership competencies for the 21st century and that some differences are based on the level of work experience. The research also tells that there is no consensus on how a generation perceived a phenomenon. This paper calls for more work on leadership based on the lifespan approach and it can be applied when conducting postmillennial and future millennials research on leadership. The findings of the research will help practitioners consider the differences among millennials, to adapt development programs and leadership approaches accordingly and to focus more on an inclusion and diversity management and not on single generation. The insights also call practitioners and leaders in academia to develop more training and learning opportunities for millennials on: customer centric approaches, digital transformation, sustainability business models, crisis management and financialization principles and applications.

Keywords: Leadership, 21st Century, Generations, Millennials, Leadership Competencies

1. Introduction

With more millennials entering the workforce, there is a growing number of scholars advocating organizations to adapt the practice of leadership so as to fit the expectations of this new dominant group "the millennials" [1]. A dominant body of literature asserts that millennials as a generation have experienced similar life events and therefore share similar perspective on leadership [2] for the 21st century. However, the studies on the required leadership competencies often developed with the opinions of more senior practitioners lacks consensus. Furthermore, approaching the leadership from a

generation perspective poses several problems first, the concept of generations is said to be socially constructed [3] and there is, up to now, no agreement on the range of age that should be included [4].

Bennis and Thomas [5] argued that individuals in the same generation can react in different ways to similar situations. Therefore, making generalization over an entire group problematic.

To address the problem posed by a generation approach to study leadership, a growing number of scholars are suggesting to take a lifespan approach as an alternative to better understand millennials' opinion on leadership [6]. The

lifespan perspective considers differences among individuals within the same groups, assuming they can react differently to the same event [7].

So far, despite a growing call for more intra-generational differences studies on leadership with the lifespan approach, not much studies have been done.

The objective of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore whether there are differences in the perception of required leadership competencies for the 21st century among millennials. To do so, the lifespan approach is used looking at the age-related transition phase from graduate school-to-professional life. For this study, competencies are defined as knowledge, skills, personal characteristics, self-concepts, traits and motives [8, 9].

2. The Concept of Generation

The concept of generation, rooted in the science of sociology [10], is often used to refer to a group of people that share the same age range, a common location and similar life experiences [11]. Walker [7] asserts that it leads to cohort determinism, because it assumes that as people from the same generation share similar experiences, they have similar behaviors and opinion on a phenomenon. In the leadership literature, scholars often relied on the generation concept to argued that different generations have different perception on leadership [2]. In the research on leadership the generations that are often opposed are the millennials born after 1980 [12] and the other older generations represented by the baby boomers born between 1943 and 1960, and the Xers born between 1961 and 1979 [13]. There is a general agreement among scholars, that millennials have different values and different approach to work than the older generations and this shapes their perspective on leadership [14].

3. Millennials' View on Leadership

As the number of millennials in the workforce grows, a new set of leadership literature focusing on the perspective of this generation emerges. The extant of the literature on younger people's leadership claims that the majority of published researches on leadership to date is based on the accounts of senior managers associated to the older generations and therefore do not express the view of the millennials [15, 16] and is not adapted to work with them [12]. From the millennials' leadership literature, it appears that the younger generation expect a leadership that shows a strong concern for people, praising interpersonal skills, meaningful relationships and more display of empathy [17]. Millennials are said to be more driven toward team-work, more work-life balance, less hierarchy and more collaborative work [18]. In addition, Millennials expect to be respected and better considered as human beings [19] and have assignments that are fulfilling. They want to receive more coaching and instant feedback [20]. Their ability with new communication technologies has led some scholars to claim that they are better suited than older generations for leadership position for the 21st century [21].

These are some of the characteristics that led millennials to have their own view and expectations of leadership [2-20].

From the millennials' generation perspective, leaders should demonstrate a strong ability to listen to others and to use new information communication technologies to communicate. They also expect leaders to provide structure by setting direction, meaningful objectives, clear roles, a clear vision and coaching [22]. Millennials praise leaders that are value driven, trustworthy, authentic, honest and socially responsible [23]. They rather favor leaders that have more of a collaborative leadership style [24] with strong cognitive abilities such as strategic thinking and analytics skills [19]. Furthermore, leaders are expected to be ready to keep learning and to be self-aware [17]. Scholars argue that millennials should be led differently than older generations [25].

4. The Problem with the Generation Approach

Despite the high volume of publications about millennials' view on and about generational differences in leadership, a growing number of scholars are claiming that there is no such thing as generational difference as far as leadership is concerned [26]. These scholars assert that there are more similarities than differences between millennials and older generations on their perception and expectations of leadership [27, 28]. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that there is no consensus on the different age range used to define the millennials [29, 30]. In addition, more researchers are expressing concerns with the generational approach [4]. They believe it leads to misleading conclusions as they, not only assume that what is true for an entire group is valid for each individual within the group but also that what is true for one individual is true for the entire group [31]. The critics of the generation concept calls for a new approach that considers individual differences within a group of people based on personal and individual life experience and the lifespan approach is said to be the solution [4].

The lifespan approach finds its origin in the field of psychological development. It is based on the idea that people develop themselves by going through several life stages [32]. The lifespan considers different stages such as age-related transition [33] and socio-cultural conditions [34]. A growing number of scholars are claiming that the way individuals react to these life stages, regardless of their ages, influences their perception of leadership and their leadership development. Scholars are calling for more research that will consider leadership from a lifespan perspective [4].

5. The Required Leadership Competencies for the 21st Century

As we enter the 21st century, a new strand of leadership literature that addresses the required leadership competencies for the 21st century has been emerging. Scholars agree that as the world is getting more and more global and influenced by

information communication technology [35], leadership competencies retrieved in traditional leadership literature no longer meet the needs of the 21st century and new competencies are required [36, 37]. Despite this agreement, there is a lack of consensus on the number, and the type of required skills. Furthermore, the terminology used to present different skills varies from authors to authors. Indeed, Chow et al. [38] suggested 9 leadership competencies that are different from the 4 competencies recommended by Chalkiadaki [35] and from the more than 11 competencies presented by Chung-Herrera et al. [39] and Hudak et al. [40]. Among the commonly cited competencies, there are the digital literacy and the ability to master new technologies such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence, mobile devices, internet of things all related to the 4th industrial revolution [36-42]. Additional new required competencies are the interpersonal skills, listening and communication skills, the ability to navigate within systems [43], the ability to work with a flatter hierarchy and apply mostly a collaborative leadership style [44] and to feel at ease with virtual teams [45, 46]. The 21st century leader is also expected to show more concern for people and focus on people's well-being, provide regular feedback [47], and to have a high level of self-awareness,

self-regulation, self-reflection [48] and continuous learning [37]. Leadership in the 21st century is also said to be driven by strong cognitive ability such as strategic thinking and analytical capabilities [49], adaptability and flexibility [50], problem solving, creativity and innovation [21-35]. Scholars also stress the importance of values such as: honesty, authenticity, courage and humility for leadership in the new era [21-52]. Ngayo Fotso [53] conducted an extensive review, researching current existing reviews on the leadership competencies for the 21st century and assessing the leadership literature from the 19th century to the most recent studies. The review led to shed light on 18 required leadership competencies for the 21st century. However, reviewed literature does not provide a clear set of required competencies derived from accounts of young millennial leaders.

The purpose of this study is to investigate to what extent there are intra-generational differences in the perception of the required leadership competencies for the 21st century among young millennials leaders using the lifespan approach of age-related transition. To do so, the 18 set of the 21st century leadership competencies compiled by Ngayo Fotso [53] is used.

Table 1. The required leadership competencies for the 21st century [53].

Leadership Competencies	Description
Adaptability and Flexibility	Being able to constantly adapt and to rapidly change the course of actions.
Values	Lead by demonstrating adherence to key values such as: curiosity, authenticity, optimism, and moral virtue.
Cognitive Skills	Able to effectively deal with a high amount of information, formulate strategies and demonstrate an entrepreneurial mindset.
Transformational Ability	Able to initiate and implement change. Inspire others and have some charisma
Self-awareness	Able to show self-reflection, self-regulation, a high tolerance to stress, have a purpose and be motivated.
Social Skills	Able to connect and feel at ease with everyone. Showing interpersonal skills and being close to people
Communication Skills	Able to clearly communicate regularly also by using new digital tools and social medias.
Human Orientation	Consideration for people and their well-being should be a priority.
Organizational Skills	Providing structure to people and to teams in the digital and non-digital world and by also using digital tools.
Ability to Handle Complexity	Able to cope with complexity and to navigate networks and systems.
Knowledge	Show expertise in his field. Able to capture analyze and disseminate information. Value continuous learning.
Global Leadership	Being able to handle international assignments. Able to adapt to different cultures and people.
Collaborative Leadership Style	Make collaborative leadership the main leadership style. Being open and embrace contribution from all team members.
Customer Centric Skills	Able to focus on customers satisfaction and on interaction with them.
Digital Competence	Being able to integrate digital technologies in business problem solving, strategy formulation and execution and in business models.
Competence for Financialization	Being able to maximize profit through financial strategies. Able to apply a top-down centralized approach and to make unpopular decisions.
Sustainability Competence	Able to implement the triple bottom line approach in decision making and to integrate sustainability in business models.
Crisis management Competence	Able to handle crisis and understand the 5 stages of crisis management. Being flexible, transparent and able to rely on collaboration.

6. Methodology

This semi-structured interview, qualitative phenomenological study aims to explore whether there are differences in the perception of required leadership competencies for the 21st century among millennials. To do so, the lifespan approach is used looking at the age-related transition phase from graduate school-to-professional life. The study focuses on millennials who already have some leadership experience, so as to have in-depth accounts based on practice and lessons learned.

6.1. Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

A purposeful sampling strategy was used. All respondents were to have leadership experience in volunteer organizations, but only half of them should also have work experience (maximum of two years and not yet at managerial level). Therefore, it was essential to have a sample of young leaders still enrolled in graduate school (referred to for the study as non-experienced young leaders) and young leaders who recently entered the workforce within the last two years (called for this study experienced young leaders). Potential

participants for the research were provided through lists shared by the student associations of several graduate level institutions in Europe. Professional networks such as LinkedIn and alumni associations, as well as referrals from acquaintances, were also used.

Participants were formally informed about the research and give their consent to participate voluntarily. Participants were informed that anonymous quotations may be used for the research. Participants were free to decline and cease

participating at any time during the interview process. They were also informed that the discussion would be tape-recorded.

6.2. Sample Size

A total of 22 participants took part in the study, of which 12 were non-experienced young leaders and 10 experienced young leaders. This sample size was sufficient to reach data saturation.

Table 2. Study Sample Population.

Sample population (N=22)	Non-experienced young leaders (N=12)	Experienced young leaders (N=10)
Female (N=12)	7	5
Male (N=10)	5	5

6.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or via skype. Interviews were recorded with an electronic voice recording device and transferred onto a laptop in MP3 format. The discussions were then transcribed verbatim. All the transcripts were checked by the researcher and also by participants, to ensure the interviews had been transcribed their entirety. The transcripts were saved on a computer and labeled to ensure anonymity.

All verified transcripts were transferred into MAXQDA 2018, a qualitative data analysis software. To analyze the qualitative data rigorously, I developed a codebook using the 18 set of required leadership competencies provided by Ngayo Fotso [53].

Quotations in the findings are here to illustrate themes that emerged from the interviews. Quotes are identified by participants number (p1, p2, etc.) and with the mention if the young leader has some work experience or not (NEY: non-experienced young leader, EY: experienced young leader).

7. Findings

The research shows that young millennials leaders as a generation agreed on 14 of the 18 required leadership competencies for the 21st century listed by Ngayo Fotso [53]. Both experienced young leaders and unexperienced young leaders did not mention 4 leadership competencies present the list: Customer Centric Skills, Digital Competence, Competence for Financialization and crisis management.

Table 3. Required leadership competencies as perceived by non-experienced and experienced young Leaders.

Adaptability and Flexibility	Human Orientation
Values	Organizational Skills
Cognitive Skills	Ability to Handle Complexity
Transformational Ability	Knowledge
Self-awareness	Global Leadership
Social Skills	Collaborative Leadership Style
Communication Skills	Sustainability Competence

Source: fieldwork (2020).

7.1. Similarities on the Required 21st Century Leadership Competencies as Perceived by Experienced Young Leaders and Non-Experienced Young

The two groups of participants have a similar opinion on 8 of the identified leadership competencies for the 21st century: Adaptability and Flexibility, Transformational Ability, Social Skills, Human Orientation, Organization Skills, Global Competence, Collaborative Leadership Style and Sustainability Competence.

7.1.1. Adaptability and Flexibility

All young leaders claimed that leaders in the future should have adaptability and flexibility capabilities. They should demonstrate that when they interact with people with different expertise, experiences and backgrounds. They also should be able to handle, with efficiency, a constantly changing context and technology. Future leaders should also be able to adapt their leadership style when the context requires.

“To tailor things according to specific situation, like the reaction to the situation” (P1, NEY).

7.1.2. Transformational Ability

Young leaders believe that leaders in the future should have some form of charisma and be inspirational and stimulate them and help them express themselves fully.

“Also being able to be around people and spark that initiative that you have in yourself and others, being able to inspire.” (P12, NEY).

7.1.3. Social Skills

Both non-experienced young leaders and experienced young leaders stressed the importance of Interpersonal skills for leaders in the future.

“A 21st century leader must really know his public and maybe even know their names/aims, focus on people’s emotions, lives, be friends with them and get closer to people.” (P15, NEY)

Another social skill that the two groups believe to be important for leadership in the 21st century is Emotional Intelligence. The two groups have expressed the ability of the leaders of the 21st century to be able to control their negative emotions like sadness and anger, and they expect leaders to always appear balanced and enthusiastic. In addition, they

expect leaders in the future to also be able to pay attention to other people's emotions and feelings so as not to hurt them.

"Today when you go shopping or in other place it is not rare to see employees being shout at or bulleyed in front of other people. I believe that in the future this kind of attitude from the boss will not be accepted." (P20, NEY).

7.1.4. Human Orientation

Participants in this study believe that leadership for the 21st century should show more concern for people, taking care of them, ensuring they have a work-life balance and feel good at the workplace. Furthermore, it appears to be important to pay more attention to personal development of team members.

"Taking responsibility for the lively hoods of their employees - more so than just giving them a job, but actually paying them, and giving them the environment to still be able to succeed, and have a life outside of the office" (P5, EY)

7.1.5. Organizational Skills

Young leaders all agree on the need to still demonstrate basic organizational skills in leadership for the 21st century such as: planning, distributing work, following up on progress, making decisions, providing direction, handling people, providing feedback and delivering results.

"People need and wait for directive" (P3, EY).

"How to build, how to structure a team and how to divide the work within the team" (P4, EY).

7.1.6. Global Leadership

Non-experienced young leaders agreed on the necessity to have a global competence by mentioning the need to have an international background, some international experience for leadership in the future, and to adapt to different cultures.

"a big thing that is important is having international background." (P9, NEY)

7.1.7. Collaborative Leadership Style

Young leaders expect collaboration style to be the main leadership styles in the future. They don't believe a hierarchical structure is needed. Leaders in the future should provide room for everyone to have a say and to listen to everyone's opinion.

"Open - just completely open to different perspectives and ideas, and on how to do things. I think that's the biggest one, in my opinion, you know, it kinda goes with this relationship and respecting people and employees and their ideas, and allowing them to express their ideas, and listening to the ideas - not always choosing them but listening to them" (P5, EY).

7.1.8. Sustainability Competence

Young leaders expect leaders in the future to pay more attention to the more socially responsible, caring for the environment and people.

"I hope the Leaders of tomorrow, will pay more attention to environment and to people in general" (P6, EY)

7.2. Differences on the Required 21st Century Leadership Competencies as Perceived by Experienced Young Leaders and Non-Experienced Young

On the following 6 required competencies, although the two groups of participants perceived them as important, they have differences on how they define these competences: Values, Cognitive skills, Self-awareness, Communication skills, Knowledge, and the ability to handle complexity.

7.2.1. Values

The two groups have different perspectives on values and motives. There is a clear difference in how they interpret Trustworthy, Humility and Transparency & Accountability. For non-experienced leaders Trustworthy is more connected to the leader him or herself, whereas for experienced young leaders, it is about the leader not taking credit for somebody else's work. Humility, for non-experienced young leaders, is about being heard and having the feeling that someone more experienced will give them value for what they know and can bring. For experienced young leaders, it is about being given more room and credit that they can add value, even with less experience or knowledge. Non-experienced young leaders see Transparency & Authenticity as speaking without barriers nor filters and say things just as they come. For experienced young leaders, it is about speaking the truth as a precaution, as it could be revealed one way or another. Experienced young leaders distinguish themselves by adding other characteristics such as: active and dynamic, and risk taking.

"Despite his credential in high education or in past professional achievement, the leader of the 21st Century should be able to listen to people with lower education level or work experience but have a better idea than him." (P10, EY)

"I think speaking from the heart." (P12, NEY)

7.2.2. Cognitive Skills

Experienced young leaders diverge from non-experienced young leaders by considering additional cognitive abilities, such as handling a large amount of information and having analytical and strategic thinking abilities.

"The strategy is big, being able to think outside of the box, understanding what challenges you are facing - because some people don't understand that they have challenges - and being able to see the ones that are coming, and then the whole idea to openness, and bringing people to the table, and finding ways to mitigate those challenges. So yeah, the strategy, I think that is a huge competence." (P5, EY)

7.2.3. Self-awareness

Experienced young leaders differ from non-experienced young leaders by mentioning self-assessment as part of a process of personal growth.

"It is important to say I have tried and I have failed." (P11, EY)

Non-experienced young leaders on the other hand believed that leaders should know their own limits so as to avoid burn-outs. This perspective may come from their direct and still current experience of leading voluntary organizations in parallel to their studies.

“Knowing your limits, because a lot of leaders push themselves until a breaking point and they have to know when they need to focus on their well-being so that they continue to grow as leaders.” (P9, NEY)

7.2.4. Communication Skills

Experienced young leaders differ from non-experienced young leaders by stressing the importance of public speaking ability and call for leaders to have a transparent and regular communication. Non-experienced young leaders put more emphasis on the ability of future leaders to master new media technologies.

“It has to be someone that masters very well the communication via social media and new media technologies” (P8, NEY)

Non-experienced young leaders also expect leaders to communicate in a way that does not hurt people’s feelings.

“They should have very good communication skills because delivering the right message in the wrong way without expressing the right words might hurt some people” (P9, NEY)

7.2.5. Ability to Handling Complexity

Experienced young leaders talk more about the ability to navigate within systems.

“a logical cognitive person who has a good understanding of systems and how they change” (P4, EY)

By contrast, non-experienced young leaders focus on the ability to handle uncertainty and ambiguity.

“In an absolute chaos that is happening and when externally it is a mess and it’s not going well, if someone is able to match that kind of chaos with being calm and centered. I think that’s essential” (P12, NEY)

7.2.6. Knowledge

Experienced young leaders, contrary to non-experienced young leaders, also identified functional skills, cross functional competence and industry knowledge as additional required competencies. Indeed, they said that having a specific expertise in a field helps to establish credibility. They also claimed that the ability to regularly change functions in the organization for career development and to work with different departments in several projects is essential for success.

“It is not important to have a strong expertise in every field, but to have a good knowledge and be able to adapt to other functions.” (P10, EY)

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The research shows that as expected, there are similarities among millennials on the perceived required leadership competencies for the 21st century. However, surprisingly, here are also significant differences on how they view some competencies. This finding contradicts scholars who claimed that millennials, as a generation, have similar perception on leadership and provides more evidence that approaching leadership from the generation

perspective could lead to the fallacy of cohort determinism [7]. Therefore, it is not optimal to generalize a leadership characteristic to entire group. In addition, the study confirms that with the lifespan approach, intra-generations differences can be found [33].

The perceived difference on the required leadership competencies between young experienced and young non-experienced millennials leaders can be related to the fact that one group is already involved in the world of work and the other one is still in graduate school. Indeed, young experienced leaders provided arguments connected to the professional life such as: cross-functional capabilities, strategic thinking, dealing with systems, learning from failure, arguments also found in leadership studies based on the accounts of senior professionals [21]. Non-experienced young leaders’ opinion is related to themselves, their emotions, how they feel and their own experience as graduate students involved in extra-curricular and voluntary-based organizations [54].

The outcomes of the study reveals that several factors can influence differences of perception of individuals within a group [55]. In this study the time period, the transition between graduate school-to-professional life, played a role in influencing the perception of leadership competencies for the future within a group of young millennials leaders. This reinforces the point of view of scholar that are advocating for the lifespan approach in further research on leadership [56].

It is worth noticing that some competencies identified by Ngayo Fotso [53] as required for leadership in the 21st century were not mentioned by participants: customer centric, digital competence associated to digital transformation, sustainability competence associated to executing the bottom line, crisis management and financialization. These competencies are often discussed in the leadership studies that are based on interviews with a sample of senior managers. The limited level of work experience and exposure of participants to issues related to these competencies could explain why they were not addressed.

9. Research Contribution

9.1. Contribution to the Field of Leadership

This research brings additional knowledge in the field of leadership by showing that relying solely on a generation approach could lead to misleading conclusions on leadership. This study provides empirical evidence that taking into consideration age-related development stage, differences on perceived leadership requirements can be found among individuals within the same group. The study invites further researchers to integrate more the lifespan approach to future research on leadership and more so for future generations and it can start with studies on the generation Z.

9.2. Managerial Implications

The findings of the current research will help practitioners avoid falling into the trap of considering that the young

people generation does share the same ideas and expectations on leadership. In order to optimize the leadership potential of young people, practitioners should recognize the importance of age-related transition phase in young people's development. For example, they could develop leadership training programs that would consider what have been developed by young employees within an age-related transition phase and what still needs to be developed. Practitioners and leaders in academia should reinforce learning and training for younger generations on important future leadership competencies such as: digital transformation, sustainability business models, financialization, crisis management and customer centric.

10. Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it relies on the accounts of graduate students from developed countries. It is possible that young leaders with lower education level have a different view on leadership. Also, young leaders in developing countries can have a different opinion on leadership and on the required leadership competencies for the 21st century. This research did not look at young people leadership from a gender perspective. One could infer that gender still plays a role in shaping young peoples' views on leadership. Another limitation is that young people, knowing that they were participating in a research on leadership, could have exaggerated some of their statements in order to impress the interviewer. It is possible that some more research on the topic has been published, but related articles could not be found.

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