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# Effective leadership: Prior research vs. the millennials

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EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP: PRIOR RESEARCH VS. THE MILLENNIALS

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
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University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa  
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EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

This Study by: Marissa Heinzerling

Entitled: Effective Leadership: Prior Research vs. The Millennials

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation  
University Honors

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### **Abstract**

When the phrase “effective leadership” is heard, the first things most people think of are the leader’s traits and behaviors. However, most fail to consider the role that followers play in leadership. Leaders must adapt to their followers' needs, which do not always remain the same between generations and genders. As leaders throughout organizations strive to remain successful, they must understand how millennials differ in terms of what they consider to be an example of effective leadership. The existing research regarding leadership effectiveness has yet to consider the followers in the millennial generation. The following paper contains a literature review and a study to determine what millennials see as effective leadership traits and behaviors across generations as well as gender differences in these perceptions. Implications and recommendations are also discussed.

### **Effective Leadership: Prior Research vs. The Millennials**

While it is not often considered, “leadership must be seen for what it is: part of a duality or a relationship. There can be no leaders without followers” (Goffee & Gareth, 2001, para. 1). The followers are also a significant part of leadership as they determine what makes a leader successful by choosing to follow them with loyalty. It is just as important to understand the type of followers. According to Goleman (2000), “the most effective leaders switch flexibly among the leadership styles as needed” by their followers (p.13). As Generation X begins to exit the workforce, organizations must prepare for the entrance of a new type of workforce: the millennials. Although there is current research on effective leaders, there is little (if any) research on leaders and followers in the millennial generation. Research is also limited on what millennials believe makes an effective leader and the gender differences between these millennial perspectives. This research will attempt to fill that gap by comparing the existing research findings regarding effective leadership traits to the beliefs of millennials.

#### **Problem**

Currently, there is a plethora of research on leadership (e.g., Bedi, Alpaslan, & Green, 2016; Want, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014; Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woeher, 2014), especially in regards to what makes a leader effective. There are many studies that have been completed in which effective leaders were observed and their traits were analyzed. These studies have been intensive, resulting in a long list of traits. Organizations want answers on how to develop effective leaders, as the success of business leaders is directly related to organizational success. If weak leadership and weak followership exist, consequences such as “organizational confusion and poor performance” can occur (McCallum, 2013, para. 7). This type of research

becomes even more important as millennials enter the workforce because it may take a different type of leader to lead them to success.

Despite the current research on effective leadership, a research gap exists. Most of the current research is focused on characteristics and behaviors of leaders that have not yet interacted with millennials just now beginning to enter the workforce. Because the follower base is also important, leaders need to understand how to adapt to this new generation of followers as there may be considerable age or gender differences. This begins with understanding the millennial generation as a whole and the expectations they have of leaders from both the male and female perspectives.

While research on effective leadership is useful for any environment, it may especially be of use for businesses and current managers. Furthermore, those who aspire to be leaders in their careers and want to be successful would be particularly interested in this topic. Having a cohesive team consisting of dedicated followers and a successful leader typically results in a team that completes their tasks well. Everyone, especially managers, can benefit if the current conceptual research gap pertaining to millennial followership is filled.

### **Purpose & Significance**

Because many millennials are just beginning their careers in the business world, there is little research about what they desire in leaders and what they believe makes these leaders effective. After all, the followers are an integral part of the leader's success, as followers are typically the ones who execute the work. More importantly, the relationship between leaders and followers is important because "organizations stand or fall partly on the basis of how well their followers follow" as well as how well the leaders are able to lead (Kelley, 1988, p. 1). The leaders will need to understand the millennial perspective and what they deem to be successful

characteristics in leaders. That being said, the purpose of this thesis is to determine the millennial perspective of what makes a leader effective as compared to the prior research on leadership effectiveness in previous generations.

I have attempted to fill the research gap by reviewing the current research and performing new analyses. First, I have determined what current research states about effective leaders. Then, I surveyed a variety of business students that belong in the millennial generation. The survey consisted of questions based on the existing research definition of effective leadership. This allowed me to determine whether the followers agree or disagree with the current findings regarding leadership effectiveness. By following this procedure, I was able to make conclusions to help address the research gap based on research and direct surveys.

### **Literature Review**

Based on existing research, there is an extensive list of traits that characterize what makes someone an effective leader; however, there are five personality traits that effective leaders are likely to share, at least to some extent (Lussier et al., 2016). These traits are called the Big Five personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability (Lussier et al., 2016). Because these personality traits are fairly broad, there are even more specific (narrow) traits under each that correlate to the Big Five respectively: intelligence and internal locus of control, integrity, determination and charisma, sociability, and confidence (Northouse, 2015).

#### **Openness to Experience, Intelligence, & Internal Locus of Control**

The first of the five major personality traits is openness to experience. Openness to experience is portrayed as an individual who remains curious, flexible, and enjoys having a wide variety of interests (Nieb & Zacher, 2015). Intelligence can be considered part of the openness to

experience personality trait. In this context, it is not solely a person's IQ score, but rather "good language skills, perceptual skills, and reasoning ability" to contribute to openness to experience (Northouse, 2015, p. 22). Most leaders that are considered intelligent are capable of being aware of their surroundings and adapting to ensure the job gets done. By being intelligent, a leader is able to determine what information he or she needs in order to become more knowledgeable (Northouse, 2015).

Another trait that is part of openness to experience is an internal locus of control. Leaders who have an internal locus of control believe that the fate of their future is directly dependent upon their performance, over which they have full control (Lussier, Achua & Daft, 2016). In other words, they take full responsibility for what happens. Because leaders are often humble, they may attribute major successes to a factor other than themselves, such as luck (Collins, 2001). However, if they experience failure, leaders will often blame themselves for any failure that may occur instead of blaming other people or situations (Collins, 2001). The basis of this theory is the trait of internal locus of control.

### **Conscientiousness & Integrity**

The second Big Five personality trait is conscientiousness. Leaders that desire to be successful will be dependable and trustworthy (Lussier et al., 2016). In order to be considered to have the conscientiousness trait, a leader's team must believe that they will get their job done. Furthermore, conscientious leaders are honest with their team. Having integrity leads to being trustworthy. Conscientiousness and integrity open many doors for leaders that enable them to be successful, such as creating a loyal team of followers. Furthermore, followers will reciprocate the openness, honesty, and trust by treating them as an insider.



With the purpose of determining what characteristics were associated with effective leaders, Alexander and colleagues (Alexander, Zakocs, Earp, & French, 2006) performed a study of community directors. Of six common characteristics, it was found that the leaders were more effective if they were trusted and were treated as “insiders.” If followers feel as though they can trust their leader, they are more likely to work closely and be honest with them. This demonstrates integrity because of the relationship they built. To a follower, an honest and trustworthy leader represents a person they believe in and are loyal to (Northouse, 2015). In addition, it is “a central aspect of a leader’s ability to influence” (Northouse, 2015, p. 27). This builds a leader’s team because the followers trust in them.

### **Extraversion, Determination & Charisma**

Extraversion is a third Big Five personality trait of effective leaders. Those who have high levels of extraversion are more likely to be noticed because they “are outgoing, like to meet new people, are assertive and willing to confront others,” which opens doors of opportunities (Lussier et al., 2016, p. 37). This makes them more noticeable and memorable, which explains why they are often chosen for leadership positions (Lussier et al., 2016). Effective leaders are more likely to be known because they are extraverted.

Determination, another effective leadership trait, aligns with extraversion because a leader will go to extremes to get the job done. For instance, “people with determination are willing to assert themselves” and even “show dominance at times, especially in situations where others need direction” (Northouse, 2015, p. 25). This is a trait that is noticeable and visually separates the successful leaders from the unsuccessful because it demonstrates that they are willing to persevere and strive through obstacles in order to achieve their goals (Lussier et al.,

2016). Leaders who are determined are focused on completing the task no matter how much perseverance it will take.

To demonstrate this trait, many effective leaders have the ability to create and share a vision with their team. With a vision in mind, leaders that were able to inspire action and commitment to achieve the vision were found to be important ingredients to success (Alexander et al., 2006). For example, Google employees agree that an important habit of an effective leader is to “have a clear vision and strategy for the team” (Schneider, 2017, para. 4). When a leader is able to have a shared vision about future goals and to provide direction on how to get there, the followers experience greater success. A successful leader cares about where the team is going and constantly influences them to strive to achieve their mission.

Another trait that belongs in the extraversion category is charisma. Max Weber, a German sociologist, first popularized the word charisma and defined it as “a really strong, powerful, emotional bond between leaders and followers” (Green, 2009, para. 5). Leaders who were coined as charismatic attract followers to their team. Furthermore, “charismatic leadership implies the power of the follower every bit as much as it does the power of the leader” (Green, 2009, para. 8). For example, Barack Obama, who can be described as very charismatic, was elected and then re-elected because of the support from his many followers; people genuinely liked him. Another item followers wanted from their leader is “excitement, challenge, and edge in their lives;” they found that “followers will sooner feel leadership from someone who is extraverted and energetic than someone who isn’t,” thus further demonstrating the importance of charisma (Goffee & Gareth, 2001, para. 5).

### **Agreeableness & Sociability**

Agreeableness is the fourth Big Five personality trait of effective leaders. According to Lussier et al. (2016), those high in the agreeableness trait are “friendly, courteous, easy to get along with and diplomatic,” no matter the type of follower that is interacting with them (p. 37). Overall, these leaders are easy to work with. Sociability is considered a trait that is part of agreeableness. According to Northouse (2015), it is “a leader’s capacity to establish pleasant social relationships” with not only their direct team of followers, but also other people (p. 26). These leaders are able to communicate well with others and to bring a positive energy to the environment. Followers want to be around them. Similar to agreeableness, leaders who are sociable are more likely get along with many types of people.

One way leaders demonstrate sociability is by actively involving their team of followers through cooperative relationships (Northouse, 2015). When leaders actively involve other team members, otherwise known as shared leadership, they experience more successful leadership outcomes (Alexander et al., 2006). These leaders collaborate with their peers, instead of having all of the control. In other words, it is beneficial to “engage others in collective-problem solving, rather than making unilateral and decisive actions independently,” in order to be on the same page (Alexander et al., 2006, p. 209). Ben Franklin once portrayed this idea well with a quote: “tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn” (Schneider, 2017, para. 8). Followers want a collaborative environment so they feel like part of the solution. Only then do they believe they have a successful leader.

Additionally, successful leaders demonstrate sociability by taking an interest in their followers’ lives and caring about what happens to them (Northouse, 2015). It is as though the top manager is a “Super Boss,” acting as a great manager and friend at the same time; they have the

capability to “earn respect, engagement, and outstanding effort from their staff” as well as “gain the trust, loyalty, and appreciation of those they work with” (Schneider, 2017, para. 10). A follower that has this type of leader will go to extreme lengths to help them. In a career setting, it means observing and understanding each of their strengths and weaknesses, then using those to help them be successful. Buckingham (2005) stated that true leaders “discover what is unique about each person and then capitalize on it,” which taps into their talent in order to obtain high performance (p. 72). Similarly, they will help them improve their weaknesses at a slower pace (Buckingham, 2005). Knowing those pieces of information, a successful leader will acknowledge the follower’s learning style (Buckingham, 2005). These three items show that leaders care about the success of the followers. After all, the first thing Goffee and Jones (2001) found was that followers wanted “a feeling of significance” from their leaders (para. 3). In return, followers will give their loyalty to the leader, which creates the basis of a successful leader-follower relationship (Goffee & Gareth, 2001).

### **Emotional Stability & Confidence**

The final Big Five personality trait of effective leaders is having a high level of emotional stability (also known as leaders who demonstrate low levels of neuroticism). Lussier et al. (2016) stated that effective leaders are able to handle pressure, hostility, and criticism. This is especially important in leader-follower interactions. If leaders are emotionally stable, their team is more likely to remain calm as well; they trust that their leader has things under control and can handle problems effectively.

Confidence is another trait that effective leaders have that is associated with high levels of emotional stability. This means that effective leaders are more certain about their skills and ability to succeed in a variety of situations by understanding what needs to be done (Northouse,

2015). Effective leaders express assurance that they are able to lead a team to success.

Confidence is similar to emotional stability because a leader needs to consistently feel secure that they are able to complete their job without being emotionally unstable.

### **Ranking for Personality Traits**

While there is some debate on which traits are more important in determining effective leadership, there is research to support a certain order. The common order is extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, emotional stability, and agreeableness (Lebowitz, 2016). In other words, extraversion is the strongest predictor of leadership effectiveness (but even more so with leader emergence) while agreeableness is the weakest predictor. Extraversion is the “most consistent correlate of leadership effectiveness” because they “tend to be sociable and dominant” (Parr et al., 2016). Those who have this characteristic are more likely to create an identity for themselves as leaders that others buy into. Openness to experience is near the top as well because of the ability to make effective decisions only after listening to various perspectives (Parr et al, 2016). While agreeableness was rated last, it does not reduce its value. In fact, it is most important once a leader is at the top level (Lebowitz, 2016). When a leader is just beginning, agreeableness only leads to passive actions instead of taking risks and standing out. For prior generations, the value of these traits is mostly agreed upon; however, this may not be the case for millennials.

### **Millennials**

The age range of millennials is still debated today. It is generally agreed upon that millennials are born between the 1980s and the 1990s. After much consideration, a finalized range was determined; millennials were born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2018). In other words, millennials range from age 21 to 37. However, I expand that range in the current study to

include students as young as 18 years of age for a few reasons. One reason I include them is because they are in college. They are surrounded by millennials; they are familiar with and similar to these millennials in and out of the classroom.

Furthermore, these traits that make leaders effective are not unknown to millennials, as they observe them in the workforce and learn about them in classes. However, millennials may not see these traits with the same level of significance because of the differences between the generations. According to Anderson (2016), millennials “are more commitment-phobic than previous generations,” especially if the commitment would last more than a week in time (p. 26). The reason for this is because they have been told ““You should do this because it’s the smart, responsible thing to do.”” (Anderson, 2016, p. 26). When they are constantly told that for everything, they become skeptical. More specifically, they are skeptical as to whether or not the commitment is smart and responsible. This has the same effect as the boy who cried wolf; they cannot verify whether it is the smart thing to do, especially if they are told that every time. In addition, they are known to have no loyalty “because they lived through an economy that made it difficult for companies to be loyal to their employees” (VanHulle, 2017, p. 14). Millennials do not necessarily have faith in the economy and thus companies have a difficult time retaining millennials.

However, not everything about millennials is negative. They are perceived as optimistic, creative, and technologically savvy (Anderson, 2016; VanHulle, 2017). Their values are very different as well, which millennial workers are beginning to understand first-hand. When it comes to values, both family and career are very important to them (Anderson, 2016). Millennials put a lot of pressure on themselves in order to thrive at work and at home by maintaining a work-life balance through a favorable flexible schedule (Anderson, 2016;

VanHulle, 2017). In the office, millennials prefer collaboration and desire to feel valued more than previous generations; they care more about openness and equality and less about hierarchy (VanHulle, 2017). While some differences are positive, most seem negative simply because it is different than what prior generations have dealt with for so long. Plus, change is difficult to accept and adapt to.

Not surprisingly, millennial gender differences have also yet to be studied. However, the research on gender differences in previous generations is available. Overall, men and women are seen as equally effective leaders (Wang, 2015). However, there are certain aspects in which one is perceived to be better than the other. For example, females are seen as better leaders when it comes to resolving and working out compromises (Wang, 2015). This stems from the common stereotype of females being more compassionate than males. In addition, females are seen as more effective leaders than males in settings where persuasion is highly important (Wang, 2015). According to other common stereotypes, females are more likely to stand up for what they believe in, therefore persuading others to believe the same. However, while men and women are viewed as equally effective leaders, “many feel businesses are not ready to hire women for top executive positions” (Wang, 2015, para. 43). Because the traits and behaviors of effective executives are more characteristic of males, there is less confidence that females can be effective. Despite these perspectives, the concept of female leaders is familiar, especially for millennials. In fact, female millennials are often encouraged to be leaders. Because they are entering the workforce, it has yet to be determined whether or not differences exist between male and female followers in the millennial generation and between their perspectives on effective leadership.

### **Research Questions**

This research is intended to answer a few questions to bridge the existing research gap. For example, do millennials have a different definition of effective leadership than described in the existing research? Knowing that millennials are different from prior generations, such as in terms of the values they hold and their idea of the work day, it must be understood whether or not they have different ideas of a successful leader. If they believe the traits that make a leader successful are different from older generations, it would be beneficial for managers to know.

Also, are there gender differences within the millennial generation? As a millennial follower, it is understood that greater gender differences of the perspectives of leadership may result in increased conflict. As a leader, it is important to know whether or not there are differences in followers and how they perceive you. For instance, a leader may have a certain leadership style for a group consisting of mostly females that may differ greatly from a style for a mostly male group. If there are differences between the genders, a leader will be able to alter their leadership styles for each.

### **Research Methodology**

Before I could begin my survey, I needed to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board. To do so, I was required to send them my survey and answer several questions. Some of these included the purpose of the research, the criteria of the appropriate participants, the recruitment process, the potential risks and benefits of the study, and the confidentiality. In addition, I received approval for my preface of the survey and the statement of informed consent that each participant would see as part of the survey.

The survey consisted of five overall questions. Basic demographic questions regarding gender and age were asked first. Then, I asked the respondents to choose a leader they consider



to be effective and list what industry the chosen leader worked in. The purpose of this question was to identify the various industries this leadership effectiveness could pertain to. The next question I asked was what capacity they know their chosen leader from: work, teacher/professor, peer, religion, politics, or other. With that specific leader in mind, I asked them to rate the extent to which their chosen leader demonstrates the characteristics described subsequently on the basis of the following scale: not at all (1), rarely (2), a little (3), neutral (4), somewhat (5), for the most part (6), or definitely (7). These include openness to experience, intelligence, internal locus of control, conscientiousness, integrity, extraversion, determination, charisma, agreeableness, sociability, emotional stability, and confidence. Finally, I asked them to list any other traits not included in the list that they would define as an important characteristic of their specific leader. These questions allowed me to determine the difference between the leader and follower perspectives of not only the traits and behaviors necessary for effective leadership, but also the significance of each trait.

The surveys were sent to students in the College of Business Administration at the University of Northern Iowa, as the vast majority of these students are millennials. The main source of distribution was through email. I sent the email to a variety of professors within the College of Business Administration, who forwarded it to their students. In addition, I asked the presidents of student organizations to forward it to their student members. I also increased awareness of the survey through word-of-mouth. The survey was active for the duration of two weeks.

After two weeks, I received a total of 132 responses. The results were aggregated and averages were found. Of the total participants, 54.55% were female and 45.45% were male. The majority of participants were between the ages of 18-22, with 31.06% being 21. The overall

range was from 18-47. A few ages would be considered non-traditional students; these ages were 24, 25, 27, 31, 40, and 47<sup>1</sup>.

Many of the participants (40.91%) stated their leader was from a work capacity. The other major capacities were professors and peers, with percentages of 24.24% and 18.18%, respectively. Additionally, 4.55% of leaders were from a religious capacity and 2.27% were in politics. While 9.85% stated their leader originated from other capacities, there were nine different open-ended fields, each having either one or two responses. These responses include family member, coach, family friend, musician, and a social activist.

### **Findings**

There were a variety of interesting themes discovered from survey responses. Interestingly, there was no overarching trait or sub-traits that stood out as the top predictor. Instead, some sub-traits were ranked higher than the overall Big Five trait. However, there are some consistencies when compared to previous research. The order of importance that is believed by the participants is shown in Table 1 using the averages found from the aggregated results.

Over 50% of participants scored their leader as definitely (survey scale ranking of 7) demonstrating the following four traits: determination (55.30%), integrity (53.79%), intelligence (53.03%), and confidence (52.27%). Sociability closely followed with a 47.73% of participants ranking it as a 7. If these were matched with their corresponding Big Five personality traits, they

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<sup>1</sup> The two oldest people, one male (40) and one female (47), did not fit the definition of a millennial. However, their results were similar for the most part. The major differences existed in the categories of emotional stability and agreeableness. The female believed their leader did not demonstrate emotional stability at all (1) whereas the male's leader somewhat (5) did. Additionally, the female's leader somewhat (5) represented agreeableness while the male's rarely (2) did.

would match their ranking of the Big Five: extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, emotional stability, and agreeableness.

**Table 1:**

<b>Ranking (highest to lowest)</b>	<b>Trait (Average rating)</b>
1	Determination (6.33)
2	Intelligence (6.27)
3	Confidence (6.26)
4	Integrity (6.26)
5	Sociability (5.98)
6	Openness to Experience (5.59)
7	Charisma (5.50)
8	Conscientiousness (5.37)
9	Internal Locus of Control (5.34)
10	Extraversion (5.32)
11	Agreeableness (5.04)
12	Emotional Stability (4.24)

When filtered solely for the Big Five traits, the order of importance changes a bit. Openness to experience becomes first with 34.09% of participants indicating their leader definitely (survey scale ranking of 7) represented the trait. Next was conscientiousness. A majority of participants (36.36%) stated that their leader demonstrated this trait for the most part (survey scale ranking of 6), compared to only 28.03% stating their leader definitely represented the trait. Extraversion was ranked third, with 29.55% of participants agreeing their leader, for the most part, had characteristics of extraversion; only 21.97% responded with a ranking of 7. For agreeableness, 27.27% indicated they believed their leader somewhat (survey scale ranking of 5)

showed this trait while only 18.18% believed their leaders definitely represented this trait. Finally, 22.22% indicated their leader rarely (survey scale ranking of 2) exhibited traits of emotional stability. The averages of the participants' rankings show the same order: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability.

The millennials' ranking of the Big Five traits differs from that of prior generations. To reiterate, the prior research states the order of importance from most to least is extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, emotional stability, and agreeableness. The millennials believe the order should be as follows: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability. The major differences are the different valuations for extraversion and openness to experience.

If we look at the rankings of the average scores between males and females, we can see some variations. Table 2 depicts these rankings side by side, ranked from first to last. On the one hand, the traits are viewed relatively as having the same level of importance in the determination of effective leaders. As seen in the table, agreeableness and emotional stability are believed to be the least important traits related to leadership effectiveness. Charisma is also ranked the same.

While the traits are similar in ranking, there are a few notable differences. For example, those that are ranked in the top four vary the most. In order, the top four traits for males are determination, integrity, intelligence, and confidence. For females, it is intelligence, confidence, determination and integrity. The same top four traits that define the main differences between the males and females are also the top four compared to the overall average, as seen in Table 1. Based on the scores, the maximum difference in scores for the top four traits is six hundredths of a point. The other differences were of minimal significance by only one level of ranking difference.

**Table 2:**

<b>Ranking (most important to least important)</b>	<b>Males (Avg. Score)</b>	<b>Females (Avg. Score)</b>
1	Determination (6.38)	Intelligence (6.31)
2	Integrity (6.28)	Confidence (6.31)
3	Intelligence (6.22)	Determination (6.28)
4	Confidence (6.20)	Integrity (6.24)
5	Sociability (5.88)	Sociability (6.07)
6	Conscientiousness (5.80)	Openness to Experience (5.63)
7	Openness to Experience (5.55)	Conscientiousness (5.63)
8	Charisma (5.50)	Charisma (5.5)
9	Internal Locus of Control (5.30)	Extraversion (5.49)
10	Extraversion (5.12)	Internal Locus of Control (5.38)
11	Agreeableness (4.95)	Agreeableness (5.11)
12	Emotional Stability (4.27)	Emotional Stability (4.22)

As seen from the responses to the final question of the survey, there were a fair amount of other responses participants believed make leaders effective in addition to the above traits that were provided on the survey. Of the responses, there were a few common themes. One common theme is the ability and willingness of a leader to help others. The ability to listen and understand, build others up to become leaders, encourage followers, and genuinely care for others are all responses that pertain to a helpful leader. Another common theme is communication. According to the participants, this can be explained by a leader that can

converse effectively with purpose, be relatable, is easy to get along with, and both asks and answers questions<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the order of importance, it is obvious that these traits are all significant traits of effective leaders according to millennials. Considering almost all of the scores are fairly high, indicating effective leaders mostly represent the traits, it is safe to determine that these are important characteristics.

### **Discussion**

The high scores demonstrate that these traits are viewed as effective by millennials, which are also the same traits prior research has demonstrated to be effective. The research I included in this paper is highly representative of the plethora of research that exists in regards to the prior generations of leaders, which indicates that these traits are reliable. That being said, it does not surprise me that the millennials agree. After all, millennials grew up surrounded by and learning from previous generations; it is common for previous generations to project their beliefs. Another reason they may have similar views is because the millennials' leaders belong to prior generations who exhibit these traits. The millennials may see their leaders as role models. In attempts to be just like them, they will mimic their styles and characteristics. Millennials and prior generations agree that these traits are important; however, the order of importance does vary.

I believe the order varies with the prior generations because of different experiences. For example, millennials may believe extraversion is not as important because it may represent an individual that simply is outgoing and charismatic yet ineffective as a leader. They may value

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<sup>2</sup> There were several other traits listed, which prove that individual followers may view a variety of traits as being examples of leadership regardless of the generation they belong to. Some of these responses include traits such as caring, encouraging, willingness to help, and ability to listen.

openness to experience first because they have been taught the importance of continuous learning and diversifying skills. In addition, a possible explanation as to why millennials value agreeableness over emotional stability is the idea that they want someone that is easy to work with more than a leader who can remain calm. They may not necessarily care about someone who has emotional stability because it may be perceived as passionate instead of emotionally unstable. Regardless of these differences, it must be noted that the first five subcategories of millennials matches the Big Five order for prior generations.

After separating results between male and female millennials, I realize there are a few possible explanations for the major differences. I believe females value confidence more than males because they may need a leader to help them gain that trait. Because males are viewed as more dominant in today's society, females may need more confidence in themselves; they may hope to learn by example from these leaders. Additionally, they may value it more than men because they understand it is an important trait for women to have.

As the results show, males value determination first over intelligence while females are the exact opposite. Males may believe they can prove their skills through hard work. On the other hand, women may believe they need to prove their skills with their intelligence. Furthermore, they may enjoy following one type over the other. Females may prefer to look up to a leader who is intelligent that uses it to essentially write their own path. Males may prefer a leader who is a driven go-getter.

### **Recommendations**

I would recommend the millennial generation and previous generations spend time gaining an understanding of each other. This would result in better understanding the similarities

they have with each other. More specifically, they will realize they have similar perceptions on effective leadership. It also may result in a closer group of followers.

Furthermore, I would address anyone who considers themselves a leader or desires to be a leader. Regardless of the generation they belong to, I would advise them to focus on their followers. They should continuously think about their followers because they are the ones that provide the opportunity to function as a leader; there would be no leaders without followers. With this comes the common stereotypes that must be addressed. Prior generations view millennials as entitled, more concerned about social affiliation than achieving goals, and lazy, among many other things. While these may or may not be true, it may explain the differences in leadership styles. For instance, millennials need to be shown appreciation for their work while prior generations may value intellectual feedback on their work more. In addition, leadership styles should represent the followers. Leaders should understand what their followers are most receptive to.

That being said, these leaders should alter their leadership styles to reflect the results of this study and the previous research. When they have followers that belong to the millennial generation, it is beneficial to not only understand the common characteristics of their generation, but also what they believe makes a leader most effective. This allows the leader to know what to focus on in order to create the most effective, loyal follower. Leaders can do the same for followers that belong in previous generations. However, it is important to understand that a leader may have various generations in their follower groups; this is when they should consider the similarities and differences to create a learning style that either addresses each generation individually or finds an optimal balance of traits to be effective.



### **Expanded Discussion of Significance**

As previously explained, there is a gap in the leadership research in terms of the millennial generation perspective and the gender differences among them. With this thesis, I attempted to bridge that gap by understanding generational and gender opinions on effective leadership and the traits required. It is important to have a good leader-follower relationship because “how well the followers follow is probably just as important to enterprise success as how well the leaders lead” (McCallum, 2013, para. 5). On the one hand, leaders need to be able to effectively direct their followers no matter the generation of the follower. On the other hand, the followers also play a role in how the relationship is maintained. As such, it is important for organizations to understand how leaders need to lead for followers to be effective followers, especially as millennials enter the workforce. Companies are always looking for talented leaders that are capable of directing a team to success. Not only do they need to know what traits to search for in candidates to fit the needs of the followers, but also what traits they will need to effectively lead millennials of all genders.

That being said, people are one of the most important assets in a business. The followers, who would be considered the typical employees in an organization, are the “bread and butter” that get projects done. As important assets, companies want to retain them and avoid dealing with turnover. Understanding their followers’ needs for an effective leader and a positive work environment are crucial. In general, it is common sense to want to make the employees satisfied, thus feeling as though their needs are being fulfilled.

For me personally, the findings will be particularly interesting and useful. With Organizational Leadership being one of my majors, I have learned a great deal about the aspects of leaders and how they can best influence their followers and build a loyal team to lead to

success. The more in-depth learning that took place, the more I realized that successful leadership includes adapting to the followers. As a member of the millennial generation, I wanted to understand how different we were. I know I will be interacting with several generations and different genders in the workforce. For this reason and for my general care of people, I wanted to understand what each generation seeks in a leader, especially with my intentions to hold a leadership role in the future.

After understanding not only the prior research, but also the participants' responses, it is clear that there is no "one size fits all" approach to leadership. The main reason for this is because of the variety of followers which makes it more important to find the proper combinations and balance of traits. While the millennial and previous generations' answers were similar, there were still differences, which indicate that the generations will not always agree on what makes a leader effective or who is the best leader to follow. Even further, the opinions will vary on an individual level. That being said, leaders must demonstrate each trait and have the ability to combine and shift between them. This allows them to be flexible and responsive to the needs of their followers. In other words, the more of these traits a leader has, the more effective they should be.

From the opposite perspective, these findings provide the opportunity to determine who has the potential to be a good leader. These results provide a set of guidelines as to what can make a leader effective according to a variety of generational perspectives. If an individual demonstrates some or many of these characteristics, they are more likely to be an effective leader. This would be beneficial from a human resource perspective in terms of interviewing for managers.

Additionally, it can be useful in terms of identifying potential leaders. For potential leaders, these results provide insights on how to train and develop in order to prepare themselves to be effective. Individuals that desire to be leaders can view these results and begin analyzing first for what traits they do and do not have. Then, they are able to recognize what areas can be further improved. It is similar from a hiring perspective. When finding potential leaders, an organization can develop an employee with the hopes of creating a fully effective leader in the future. Overall, these results provide the ability to determine current and potential leadership effectiveness for different generations.

### **Limitations**

While the results led to interesting findings, there were a few limitations of the study to consider. The first limitation is the survey questionnaire that was developed. The main question I asked was whether or not their leader demonstrated the traits I was studying; however, I did not include definitions. This may have skewed my results. While most definitions are self-explanatory and universal, there may be some traits that are interpreted differently by individual participants. This was especially noticeable with the neuroticism trait. The responses seemed to possibly indicate that participants were unsure what this meant based on the somewhat equal percentage of responses for each ranking. Had I explained the term, perhaps the results would have aligned with what I had expected to find based on previous research.

Additionally, some of the responses may not have been well thought out. In other words, some participants may have selected answers to simply get through the survey. It is also a possibility that they did not understand certain aspects and therefore may have filled out random answers or exited the survey. Perhaps individual interviews may have been better to not only get richer data, but also to ensure the same level of understanding in regards to the traits.

Finally, I could have extended the survey to millennials that were either not business students or not in college at all. For the ease of administration, I sent the survey to the millennials that also attended the University of Northern Iowa College of Business Administration; I had previous contacts and networks that made distribution wide spread, quick, and simple. By doing so, I was confident that they all had a similar understanding of the traits and their definitions. However, I may have received a more representative sample had I sent the survey to other millennial groups as well.

### **Conclusion**

An abundance of research exists in regards to the topic of leadership. However, there is not much research on millennials because many of them are still preparing to enter the workforce. In order to help fill this gap and thus the purpose of my study, I attempted to determine whether or not millennials agree with the prior generations on what makes a leader effective. When I compared the current research on prior generations and the results from the survey I sent to millennials, I found that there were not many differences. However, this does not mean that the differences that were there should be ignored. For an effective leader, it is important to note and adapt to their variety of followers. Plus, the results may change in future decades when the post-millennials begin to enter the workforce. The findings also helped demonstrate how to identify what an effective leader is for different generations across gender. Regardless of the differences in stereotypes and generic behaviors of the generations, individuals in each generation can relate to the types of leaders they follow. While the leader plays an integral role, the followers also play a large role. Therefore, it is beneficial, as an individual who desires to be a leader, to understand what followers believe makes a leader effective.

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