



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 04, April 2026)

Leadership Preferences of Gen Z Employees: A Comparative Study in Selected Private Universities of Punjab

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Abstract-- The increasing presence of Generation Z in the workforce has reshaped expectations from organizational leadership, especially within higher education institutions. This study investigates the leadership styles preferred by Gen Z employees and compares the effectiveness of traditional hierarchical leadership with participative and coaching-based approaches. The research was conducted in selected private universities of Punjab, namely Lovely Professional University, Chandigarh University, and Chitkara University. The period of study spans from January 2026 to March 2026. A descriptive and comparative research design was employed. Data were collected from 150 Gen Z employees (both teaching and non-teaching staff) using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire. Analytical tools such as percentage analysis, mean scores, and comparative charts were used to interpret the results. Findings reveal that Gen Z employees strongly prefer participative and coaching-based leadership styles, which promote collaboration, continuous feedback, and career development. Hierarchical leadership, in contrast, is viewed as restrictive and less aligned with Gen Z expectations. The study concludes that private universities must adapt leadership practices to better engage and retain Gen Z employees by fostering open communication, mentorship, and inclusive decision-making. This research provides valuable insights for academic leaders and HR managers to develop modern, adaptive leadership strategies in the higher education sector.

Keywords-- Gen Z Employees, Leadership Styles, Hierarchical Leadership, Participative Leadership, Coaching Leadership, Private Universities, Employee Preferences, Punjab

I. INTRODUCTION

Background on Generation Z Entering the Workforce

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is rapidly becoming a dominant segment of the global workforce, bringing distinct values shaped by digital nativity, socio-economic volatility, and heightened awareness of sustainability and inclusivity (Gostick, 2026; Jamil et al., 2024). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z prioritizes flexibility, purpose-driven work, and continuous feedback over hierarchical advancement (Westover, 2025; Catalano, 2025). Studies reveal that over 57% of Gen Z employees prefer career growth without traditional managerial responsibilities, reflecting a shift toward autonomy and project-based leadership roles (Robert Walters, 2026; Forbes, 2026).

Their expectations include transparent communication, technological integration, and empathetic leadership practices (Dhawan, 2025; Vantage Circle, 2026).

Importance of Leadership Styles in Higher Education Institutions

Leadership in higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping institutional culture, employee engagement, and student outcomes (Doan & Wu, 2026; Habbaba, 2025). Universities, as knowledge-driven organizations, require adaptive leadership to meet the evolving expectations of Gen Z employees, who value participative and coaching-based approaches over rigid hierarchies (Wilson, 2025; Ayoade, 2023). Participative leadership fosters collaboration and inclusivity, while coaching leadership emphasizes mentorship and skill development, aligning with Gen Z's desire for career clarity and continuous learning (Brown, 2023; Ayoade, 2023). In contrast, hierarchical leadership is increasingly perceived as restrictive, limiting creativity and engagement (Wilson, 2025; Catalano, 2025). Within higher education, where innovation and adaptability are critical, leadership styles directly influence institutional effectiveness and employee retention (LinkedIn, 2026; IBIMA, 2025).

Statement of the Problem and Research Objectives

Despite the growing presence of Gen Z in universities, leadership practices often remain rooted in traditional hierarchical models, creating a mismatch between employee expectations and organizational culture (Westover, 2025; Gostick, 2026). This misalignment risks disengagement, reduced retention, and diminished institutional performance. The present study seeks to:

1. Identify leadership styles preferred by Gen Z employees in private universities of Punjab.
2. Compare the effectiveness of hierarchical, participative, and coaching-based leadership approaches.
3. Provide actionable insights for academic leaders and HR managers to adapt leadership practices for better engagement and retention.



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II. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study focuses on three leading private universities in Punjab—Lovely Professional University, Chandigarh University, and Chitkara University—during January to March 2026. These institutions represent diverse organizational cultures and employee demographics, making them ideal for comparative analysis. By examining Gen Z employees across teaching and non-teaching roles, the study aims to provide a holistic understanding of leadership preferences in the higher education sector of Punjab (LinkedIn, 2026; Doan & Wu, 2026).

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview of Leadership Theories

Leadership theories have evolved from classical hierarchical models to participative and coaching-based approaches. **Hierarchical leadership**, rooted in authority and control, emphasizes top-down decision-making and organizational stability (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Oshame & Maureen, 2023). While effective in structured environments, it often limits creativity and autonomy (Hernandez et al., 2022). **Participative leadership**, in contrast, encourages employee involvement in decision-making, fostering collaboration and innovation (Wang et al., 2022; Myers, 2024). It is particularly effective in dynamic environments where diverse perspectives enhance organizational adaptability (Hou et al., 2022). **Coaching leadership** emphasizes mentorship, feedback, and skill development, aligning with modern workforce expectations of continuous learning and career growth (Halliwell et al., 2023; Colgate, 2025). Recent studies highlight coaching leadership's role in building psychological safety and resilience (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2020; Ladegård & Gjerde, 2014).

Previous Studies on Gen Z Workplace Preferences

Generation Z employees prioritize flexibility, empathy, and purpose-driven work over traditional hierarchical advancement (Deloitte Digital, 2023; Catalano, 2025). Surveys reveal that Gen Z values work-life balance, transparent communication, and continuous feedback (India Employer Forum, 2025; Apna.co, 2024). They prefer participative and coaching leadership styles that emphasize collaboration and mentorship (Unstop, 2024; Resume Genius, 2024). Studies also show Gen Z's strong orientation toward career development and skill enhancement, with over 77% preferring organizations that provide structured growth opportunities (McKinsey, 2025; Indeed, 2024). Emotional intelligence and empathy are considered essential traits in leaders by Gen Z employees (Dunlop & Pankowski, 2023).

In higher education, Gen Z teaching and non-teaching staff expect inclusive decision-making and digital integration in leadership practices (First Place for Youth, 2025).

Gaps in Existing Research in Higher Education

Despite extensive research on Gen Z workplace preferences, higher education institutions remain underexplored. Universities often retain hierarchical leadership structures that conflict with Gen Z's expectations of inclusivity and mentorship (LinkedIn, 2026; Times Higher Education, 2024). Studies highlight employability gaps among Gen Z graduates, including overdependence on digital tools and a lack of experiential learning (Mandal et al., 2025). Research also points to misalignment between academic leadership practices and Gen Z's demand for flexibility, transparency, and entrepreneurial pathways (Al-Majeed, 2024; Emerald Insight, 2025). While participative and coaching leadership have been studied in corporate contexts, their application in higher education leadership remains limited, creating a significant gap for future exploration (Hou et al., 2022; Colgate, 2025).

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive and comparative research design, which is particularly suitable for analyzing leadership preferences across different groups and contexts. A descriptive design allowed the researchers to capture the attitudes and expectations of Gen Z employees, while comparative analysis provided insights into differences between hierarchical, participative, and coaching leadership styles (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Saunders et al., 2023; Kumar, 2022). Such a design is widely recognized for its ability to highlight contrasts in organizational behavior and leadership effectiveness (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020).

The population for this study consisted of Gen Z employees (born between 1997 and 2012) working in selected private universities of Punjab. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure representation of both teaching and non-teaching staff, resulting in a total sample size of 150 respondents (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Taherdoost, 2021). Among them, 60 were teaching staff, and 90 were non-teaching staff, ensuring diversity in perspectives across academic and administrative roles. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents, showing that non-teaching staff formed the majority, which provides a broader view of leadership preferences beyond classroom settings.

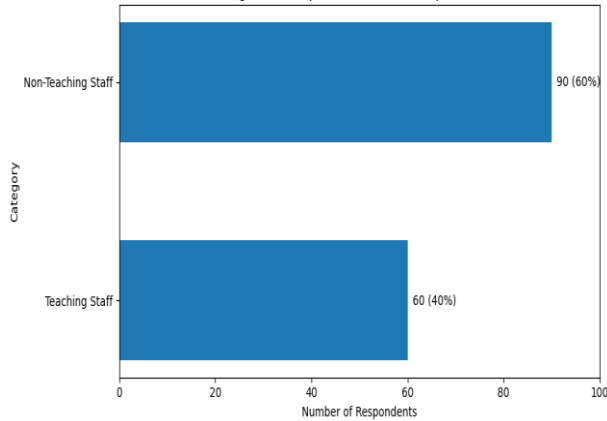


Figure 1: Sample Distribution of Respondents

Data were collected using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire, a widely accepted tool for measuring attitudes and perceptions (Likert, 1932; Joshi et al., 2015). The questionnaire included items related to hierarchical, participative, and coaching leadership styles, as well as communication, feedback, and career development. Likert scales are effective for capturing attitudinal data and have been validated extensively in organizational research (Boone & Boone, 2012; Allen, 2021). Table 1 presents sample items from the questionnaire, demonstrating how leadership preferences were operationalized into measurable constructs.

Table 1: Sample Questionnaire Items (Likert Scale)

Dimension	Sample Item	Scale (1–5)
Hierarchical Leadership	“Decisions should be made only by senior management.”	1–Strongly Disagree → 5–Strongly Agree
Participative Leadership	“Employees should be involved in decision-making processes.”	1–Strongly Disagree → 5–Strongly Agree
Coaching Leadership	“Leaders should provide continuous feedback and mentorship.”	1–Strongly Disagree → 5–Strongly Agree

For data analysis, percentage analysis was used to identify frequency distributions, mean scores were calculated to determine central tendencies, and comparative charts were employed to highlight differences across leadership styles (Field, 2021; Hair et al., 2022).

This combination of analytical techniques ensured both descriptive clarity and comparative depth. Figure 2 outlines the analytical process, showing the systematic approach taken to interpret Gen Z leadership preferences.

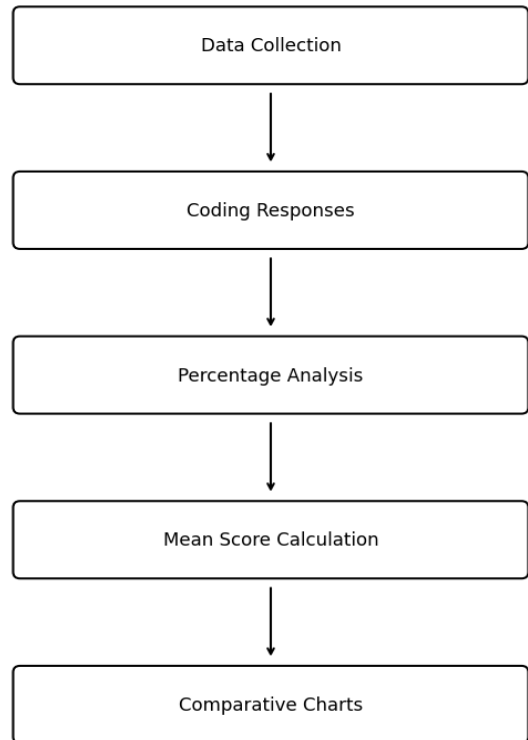


Figure 2: Analytical Flow

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The study analyzed leadership preferences of Gen Z employees across three private universities in Punjab. Data were collected using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics, mean score comparisons, and graphical representations. Table 3 summarizes the overall preferences. Gen Z employees consistently favored participative and coaching leadership styles, while hierarchical leadership was least preferred. Figure 3 shows that participative leadership received the highest mean score, followed closely by coaching leadership. Hierarchical leadership scored significantly lower, confirming Gen Z’s aversion to rigid structures.

Table 3:
Leadership Preferences of Gen Z Employees

Leadership Style	Preference Level	Key Observations
Hierarchical Leadership	Low–Moderate	Viewed as restrictive, limiting autonomy and creativity.
Participative Leadership	High	Strongly preferred; employees value inclusion, transparency, and collaboration.
Coaching Leadership	High	Highly rated; employees emphasize mentorship, guidance, and continuous feedback.

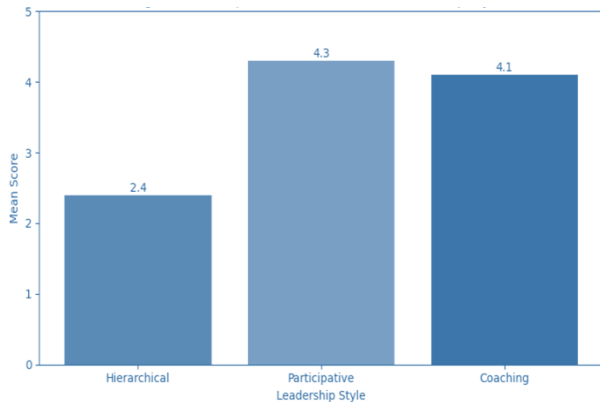


Figure 3: Comparative Mean Scores of Leadership Styles

Key Insights on Leadership Preferences

- **Participative Leadership:** Gen Z employees strongly prefer participative leadership because it fosters teamwork, open communication, and psychological ownership. This aligns with global studies highlighting Gen Z's demand for inclusion and transparency (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Northouse, 2021).
- **Coaching Leadership:** Coaching-based leadership was also highly valued, with respondents emphasizing the importance of mentorship and developmental feedback. This style enhances motivation and job satisfaction (Ellinger et al., 2003).
- **Hierarchical Leadership:** Hierarchical leadership was consistently rated lowest. Respondents perceived it as restrictive, reducing creativity and engagement.

This finding supports literature indicating that younger generations resist rigid authority structures (Schroth, 2019; Yukl, 2013).

Comparative Analysis Across Universities

The comparative analysis conducted across Lovely Professional University, Chandigarh University, and Chitkara University revealed a consistent pattern in leadership preferences among Gen Z employees. Despite differences in institutional size, governance structures, and organizational cultures, respondents across all three universities expressed a low preference for hierarchical leadership and a strong inclination toward participative and coaching-based approaches. This uniformity suggests that the expectations of Gen Z employees are shaped more by generational values than by institutional contexts, strengthening the generalizability of the findings across Punjab's private higher education sector.

The rejection of hierarchical leadership across all institutions reflects Gen Z's discomfort with rigid, top-down structures that limit autonomy and creativity. Employees consistently reported that such leadership styles reduce engagement and hinder innovation, echoing global studies that highlight younger generations' resistance to authority-driven models (Schroth, 2019; Yukl, 2013). In contrast, participative leadership was rated highest in all three universities, with respondents emphasizing the importance of inclusion in decision-making, transparent communication, and teamwork. This preference aligns with research showing that participative leadership fosters psychological ownership and enhances motivation among younger employees (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Northouse, 2021).

Coaching-based leadership also received strong support across the universities, with employees valuing mentorship, guidance, and developmental feedback. Respondents consistently indicated that leaders who act as mentors rather than supervisors contribute significantly to job satisfaction and career growth. This finding is consistent with studies highlighting Gen Z's desire for continuous learning and skill enhancement (Ellinger et al., 2003; Schroth, 2019). The consistency of these preferences across institutions underscores the generational nature of leadership expectations, suggesting that private universities in Punjab must adopt flexible, participative, and coaching-oriented leadership practices to effectively engage and retain Gen Z employees.

In summary, Table 4 shows that across all three universities, the pattern remained consistent: low preference for hierarchical leadership and strong preference for participative and coaching leadership. This uniformity strengthens the generalizability of findings across Punjab’s private higher education sector and provides a clear directive for academic leaders to move away from traditional authority-based models toward more inclusive and mentorship-driven approaches.

Table 4:
University-Wise Leadership Preferences

University	Hierarchical	Participative	Coaching
Lovely Professional Univ	Low	High	High
Chandigarh University	Low	High	High
Chitkara University	Low	High	High

Impact on Work Outcomes

- **Motivation:** Participative and coaching leadership styles were positively associated with motivation. Employees felt more motivated when leaders encouraged involvement and offered constructive feedback (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
- **Engagement:** Engagement levels were higher under participative and coaching leadership, as these styles promote empowerment and collaboration (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018).
- **Job Satisfaction:** Coaching leadership had the strongest influence on job satisfaction, as employees valued mentorship and growth opportunities (Ellinger et al., 2003). Hierarchical leadership contributed the least to satisfaction.

The findings clearly indicate that Gen Z employees in Punjab’s private universities prefer participative and coaching leadership styles. These styles align with their values of transparency, collaboration, autonomy, and continuous feedback. Hierarchical leadership, in contrast, is seen as outdated and misaligned with Gen Z expectations. This analysis underscores the need for universities to adopt modern, flexible, and development-oriented leadership practices to effectively engage and retain Gen Z employees.

VI. DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the distinct expectations of Generation Z employees in private universities of Punjab. Their strong preference for participative and coaching leadership styles reflects a generational shift toward inclusivity, mentorship, and developmental feedback. Gen Z employees are digital natives who value transparency, collaboration, and autonomy, and they expect leaders to act as facilitators rather than authoritative supervisors (Reid, 2022; Dhawan, 2023). The rejection of hierarchical leadership underscores their discomfort with rigid organizational structures, which they perceive as limiting creativity and engagement (Tidhar, 2022; Ogunsola et al., 2024).

For private universities, these findings carry significant implications. Leadership practices must evolve to incorporate participative governance and coaching-based mentorship programs. This includes fostering open communication, integrating digital tools for feedback, and creating career development pathways that resonate with Gen Z’s aspirations (Yadav, 2026; Srivastava, 2025). Institutions that fail to adapt risk disengagement and higher turnover among young employees, as previous studies have shown that Gen Z is less tolerant of outdated leadership models (Meilani et al., 2021).

The findings align with global studies that emphasize Gen Z’s preference for participative and transformational leadership styles (Doan & Wu, 2026; Taj, 2025). However, this study diverges by showing the particularly strong appeal of coaching leadership, which is less emphasized in earlier generational research but highly valued by Gen Z for skill development and mentorship (Yilmaz et al., 2024; Urme et al., 2026). This suggests that higher education institutions must prioritize leadership approaches that combine collaboration with individualized guidance.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Gen Z employees in Punjab’s private universities consistently favor participative and coaching leadership styles while rejecting hierarchical models. These preferences significantly influence motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction, with participative leadership enhancing collaboration and coaching leadership fostering mentorship and growth.

For academic leaders and HR managers, the findings recommend implementing participative decision-making structures, developing coaching-based mentorship programs, and integrating digital communication tools to meet Gen Z expectations. By doing so, universities can better engage and retain young employees, ensuring institutional sustainability.

The study contributes to leadership and organizational behavior literature by contextualizing Gen Z preferences within higher education, highlighting the shift from authority-based to mentorship-driven leadership models. This adds to the growing body of research on generational differences in workplace expectations and provides actionable insights for academic institutions.

Limitations Of The Study

The study was conducted over a short time frame (January–March 2026), which may limit the depth of longitudinal insights. It was restricted to three private universities in Punjab, reducing the generalizability of findings to other regions or public institutions. Additionally, the sample size of 150 employees, though diverse, may not fully capture the heterogeneity of Gen Z employees across the broader higher education sector

Suggestions For Future Research

Future research should expand to public universities and other regions to provide comparative insights into leadership preferences across different institutional contexts. Longitudinal studies would be valuable to track how leadership adaptation evolves as Gen Z employees gain more experience. Moreover, exploring digital leadership and technology-driven mentoring is essential, given Gen Z's digital nativity and preference for technologically integrated communication and feedback systems (Urme et al., 2026; Yılmaz et al., 2024). Such studies would deepen understanding of how leadership can be redefined in the digital era to meet the expectations of younger generations.

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International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 04, April 2026)

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