

Understanding Generation Z's perception of authentic leadership and its implications for organisational success

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore how Generation Z (Gen Z) perceives authentic leadership and what they expect from today's leaders in organisational contexts within the Netherlands and Germany. Drawing upon the four dimensions of authentic leadership (ALQ) by Walumbwa et al. (2008) as a theoretical framework, and the insights of current academic literature on Gen Z, this study seeks to understand the aspects of Authentic Leadership (AL) that resonate with Gen Z employees. This research builds on six qualitative, semi-structured interviews with young professionals from both private and public sectors, providing an in-depth look of Gen Z's experiences with and expectations of current leaders. Authenticity is characterised by transparency, integrity, adaptivity, self-awareness, and ethical decision making. The findings reveal that Gen Z's intrinsic motivation is deeply rooted within these traits. Organisations can leverage these insights by designing leadership frameworks that support the four pillars of the ALQ.

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Key words: Authentic Leadership, Expectations, Generation Z (Gen Z), Organisation, Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ), Transparency

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During the preparation of this work, I used "Microsoft Word" as a writing tool, "Google Search" as a search engine, "Citationmachine" as a citation manager, "Transcribe", by "Routes Software SRL" to transcribe all interviews, and finally "Google Translate" to translate transcriptions into English. After using these tools/services, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome. No other artificial intelligence tools were used in preparation of this work.

1. INTRODUCTION

“We need leaders who lead with purpose, values, and integrity (...) leaders who build enduring organisations, motivate their employees to provide superior customer service, and create long-term value for shareholders.” (George, 2003, p.31). With this, authentic leadership (AL) has been identified as a crucial leadership approach that has emerged from the growing need for ethical, transparent and value-driven leadership in response to (1) corporate scandals, (2) organisational instability, and (3) increasing societal demands for accountability (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

For example, the scandals of Enron (Petrick & Scherer, 2003), Royal Ahold (de Jong et al., 2005), and Siemens (Blanc et al., 2017), all of which involved accounting fraud in the early 2000s, showcase the severe consequences of unethical corporate behaviour, including substantial fines, job losses and organisational reformation. These events served as a wake-up call for organisations, highlighting the need for ethical integrity, accountability and value-driven management.

While these scandals ignited a shift towards more ethical and authentic leadership frameworks, the true test of authenticity often finds place in times of external crisis (Brown, 2021). In the past years, global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and Gaza, and the growing polarization in both US and European politics have placed leaders in tense and uncomfortable situations. Leaders are often demanded to form quick yet morally compromising decisions by external pressures (Brown, 2021). These situations not only reveal what leaders do, but also who they are as a person when stakes are high.

Volodymyr Zelensky became a symbol of moral courage by staying in Kiev during the Russian invasion (2022), demonstrating consistency and commitment to his people. He exemplifies traits in line with the authentic leadership theory by Avolio and Gardner (2005). They describe leaders as authentic who align their values and actions consistently and express hope and optimism. In this limited sense, Donald Trump’s consistency in upholding his campaign promises and governmental policies sparked similar impressions of authenticity. There is certainly consistency in his message, and despite public criticism, he holds strong to the beliefs he asserts during the entirety of his presidential campaigns. However, Avolio and Gardner (2005) stress the ethical values of an authentic leader, and the commitment of morally grounded decision-making. This distinction is particularly relevant in light of Generation Z’s leadership expectations. Having grown up amid the global crisis, Gen Z tends to reject many forms of leadership (Bako, 2018). Instead, they hold value for leaders who inherent the same values and beliefs as themselves.

Avolio and Gardner (2005, p.329) state that authentic leaders are “anchored by their own deep sense of self; they know where they stand on important issues, values and beliefs”. In other words, authenticity means staying true to one’s real values and beliefs. This concept of value-driven and ethically rooted leadership aligns closely with what Generation Z (Gen Z) seeks in today’s leaders. Born during the peak of technological advances and connectivity, Gen Z tends to be highly informed, socially aware, and deeply value-oriented (Merriman & Oktem, 2022). A study conducted by Ernst and Young concluded that 92% of Gen Z participants value authenticity as extremely important, as they are over “an era of fake news and filtered photos” (Merriman & Oktem, 2022, p.1). It is explained that “for Gen Z, authenticity comes from transparency and openness” (Merriman & Oktem, 2022, p.1). This statement is supported in another publication by the World Economic Forum in which they “expect authentic leadership and human connection” (Swaminathan, 2022, p.1).

Gen Z is constantly online and heavily influenced by digital narratives (Chang & Chang, 2023). Social media and online news shape the view on what is right or wrong. As issues like climate change and social injustice gain visibility, Gen Z is pushing back against companies that put profit over people. Activist groups such as Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion have seen an unprecedented participation of young scholars and young adults (Saunders et al., 2023), showing that they care increasingly about global issues. Gen Z wants to be heard and seen and thus are in favour of leaders who commit to their efforts. Individuals in positions of power often fall into the narrative of having “sold your soul”, sacrificing moral principles in exchange for personal advancements. This narrative is increasingly voiced through public opinions, especially in Europe. Sasaki et al. (2019) examined that trust in people of power has been declining throughout Gen Z’s lives, highlighting a fragility. This suggests that there is a growing need for value-driven and authentic leadership, particularly in Europe.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

As Gen Z is expected to account for almost 30% of the global workforce by the end of 2025, understanding how their values align with current leadership approaches becomes crucial (Swaminathan, 2022). Furthermore, understanding how this huge workforce group perceives and defines “good” leadership can help shape better policies and work environments. This research aims to contribute to this conversation of more effective leadership practices that are sustainable for this generation and perhaps future leadership development.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the following question:

How does Generation Z perceive authentic leadership, and what do they expect from today’s leaders in organisations?

This research will examine how (a) authentic leadership is looked upon from Gen Z’s perspective and (b) if this framework aligns with their expectations for “a great leader”. The focal point of this study is to offer valuable and practically applicable insights for organisations to attract, engage and keep young talent. As leadership expectations continuously change, understanding these dynamics is essential in building future-proof organisations (Isaac Mostovicz et al., 2009).

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Conceptual Background of Authentic Leadership

The Authentic Leadership (AL) approach is a relatively new leadership approach which emerged as a reaction to the ethical dilemmas found in organisations of the early 2000s. This novel leadership approach has seen multiple iterations and adjustments. Luthans and Avolio (2003) were among the first to conduct research on AL, integrating positive organisational behaviour with earlier leadership studies. Avolio and Gardner (2005) further developed this research and describe AL as a “root construct” forming “the basis for what then constitutes other forms of positive leadership” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 328). They state that authentic leaders are “anchored by their own deep sense of self; they know where they stand on important issues, values and beliefs” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 329). To be more precise, being “authentic” means staying true to one’s own real values and beliefs. They and others drew inspiration for AL from earlier humanistic psychology by Rogers and Maslow from the late 50s until the early 70s (1959, 1963, 1968, 1971). These humanistic psychologists described *authenticity* as an aspect of

self-actualisation, self-awareness and expression. Self-actualising people are individuals who hold strong moral beliefs and ethical principles. They are “in tune with their basic nature and clearly and accurately see themselves and their lives” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 319).

Luthans and Avolio (2003) identify AL as a developmental process that relies on “positive psychological capacities” and a “highly developed organisational context”, leading to greater (a) self-awareness, (b) self-regulation, and (c) personal growth in both leaders and their employees (Luthans et al., 2003, p. 243). AL thus seeks to embrace the synergy between an individuals’ strength and a positive work environment. As a result, leaders and employees become more self-aware and act in inherently intentional ways. Walumbwa et al. (2008) embraced the results of these researchers. By means of simplifying the conceptual framework, the *Authentic Leadership Questionnaire* (ALQ) was created and designed to measure individual components of AL. Walumbwa et al. (2008) defined four key dimensions that authentic leaders exhibit, as outlined in the ALQ. The first is *self-awareness*, which involves understanding one’s own emotions. Having the capacity to critically reflect on one’s own behaviour and “seeking feedback to improve interactions with others” (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 121). Self-aware people are able to accurately recognize how others perceive their capabilities and use this insight to adjust their behaviour (London et al., 2023). The second dimension, *relational transparency*, refers to the extent to which an individual presents their own true thoughts as they are upon others (Walumbwa et al., 2008). A person with high relational transparency tends to voice their honest opinion in a clear and direct manner. Furthermore, they demonstrate integrity by admitting mistakes and taking responsibility for when they are made. Characterised by performing actions that deeply reflect an individual’s values and beliefs is the third dimension called *internalised moral perspective* (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Leaders with a high internalised moral perspective hold strongly onto their self-made principles. Their actions demonstrate what they stand for, rather than conforming to social expectations or external pressures. Finally, the fourth dimension, *balanced processing*, involves the ability for leaders to carefully listen and objectively analyse relevant information from different points of views before making a decision (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Here, leaders actively solicit “views that challenge his or her deeply held positions” (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 121), meaning they are open to critical feedback and demonstrate willingness to change their behaviour.

3.2 Authentic Leadership in Organisational Context

Europe’s modern organisational landscape is increasingly fond of leadership approaches that focus on purpose, transparency, and ethical responsibility (European Commission, 2010). Corporations are stimulated and regulated on European level to incorporate transparent and inclusive governance. For instance, the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) mandates European companies to report on their social, sustainable and environmental statistics (European Commission, 2024). This trickles down to countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, where there is a growing emphasis on leadership that is true to core values and morally grounded. This shift towards authenticity in leadership reflects a broader organisational need, not only for ethical integrity, but also for leaders who can foster adaptive and innovative teams (European Commission, 2010). Authenticity has been linked to measurable outcomes in employee behaviour and organisational success (Mücelidili et al., 2013). A multilevel study by Laguna et al. (2019) provided concrete evidence that authentic leaders create

an environment where employees are more engaged and show higher personal initiative. These findings support the view that AL boosts employees’ innovative behaviour. They become more engaging and purpose-driven (Laguna et al., 2019). Leadership theorists have long claimed that these traits of ambition and drive in the workplace positively correlate with creativity and innovativeness (Černe et al., 2013). Recent studies have examined this correlation even further, typically identifying positive links with the concepts of what is referred to as “constructive leadership”, which includes transformational, empowering and authentic leadership (Hughes et al., 2018).

While AL shares common traits with other leadership styles such as transformational leadership, it remains distinct in its emphasis on the four key dimensions of the ALQ. Transformational leaders, for example, aim to inspire and motivate followers through their vision and charisma (Ackoff, 1999). AL however prioritises the internalised moral perspective, where leaders stay true to themselves. Their influence does not stem from charisma but from genuineness. This makes AL particularly effective in situations where consistency, ethical groundedness and psychological safety are demanded (Brown, 2021). Situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that times of uncertainty in crisis require trust in leadership while leaders need to make moral and ethical decisions. The study by Brown (2021) and many others, found that AL was well-suited to the COVID-19 pandemic. While crisis as such are not relevant in the context of this study, the insights from Radhakrishna (n.d.) and Mao et al. (2023) prove the importance of AL in a fast-paced working environment with constant changes. According to Radhakrishna (n.d.), AL can be broken down into five critical principles: *mindfulness, vulnerability, empathy, crucibles of learning, and giving*. Though these principles are not central to this study and the ALQ model, they do signify a relevance of human-centred leadership practices. Notably, the art of giving emphasizes a leaders’ willingness to serve others. By giving attention, recognition and support, authentic leaders create a culture of psychological safety where individuals feel valued and motivated (Radhakrishnan, n.d.). Practices during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the responsibility of leaders in maintaining employee resilience. Established institutional structures can lay the foundation, however, leaders are the ones who shape the organisational climate and foster psychological safety. Under the conditions of the global pandemic, AL proved itself to be especially effective, building trust and employee resilience, reducing anxiety and maintaining productivity (Mao et al., 2023).

3.3 Gen Z and Leadership Expectations

As Gen Z enters the workforce, it becomes increasingly important to understand their mindset and behavioural patterns. Drawing from extensive research, this paper aims to explore the defining traits of Gen Z and how leaders are expected to behave from their perspective.

3.3.1 Defining Gen Z

Gen Z is the second-youngest generation among the four modern generations, defined as people born between 1995 and 2010. They were born between the millennials (between 1981 and 1995) and generation Alpha (between 2010 and 2024). As of 2023, there are about 3 million people of Gen Z living in the Netherlands (Barend, 2023). Molded by global uncertainty, climate change, COVID-19 and economic instability, Gen Z is resourceful and adaptable (Sumantri et al., 2024). As digital natives, they have grown up better prepared for a world in which technology drives daily life, from education to work to social interactions. Data on Gen Z have shown that their experiences in

the world have created a generation that is adaptive, digitally fluent, and conscious of worldwide challenges (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

3.3.2 Mindset and Values

A notable finding across several studies is the pragmatic mindset of Gen Z (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). In a study called the “Cassandra Report” (2015), 71% of Gen Z respondents expect to “experience significant failure before achieving success”, while viewing it “as an opportunity to try again” (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018, p. 47). This is confirmed in another paper, where Gen Z has been described as being pragmatic and investment-minded (Cogent Infotech, n.d.). This indicates a strong appreciation for education and lifelong learning in the context of a competitive workplace. Another notable body of research emphasizes that Gen Z values ethical conduct, fairness, and transparency. The Ernst and Young report (2016) surveyed 3200 Gen Z members. Their findings underline that Gen Z prioritises open communication, equal opportunity, and equal pay (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Being generally adaptive, Gen Z is not dependent on lifelong job security unlike their predecessors, but views a constantly changing work environment as the norm (Sumantri et al., 2024).

Gen Z is passionate about inclusion, social justice, and sustainability (Polydorou, 2023). They are unafraid to express themselves and demand transparency and accountability from companies (Coman et al., 2022). As a result, numerous organisations have begun to embrace these values by integrating them into their marketing and communications to purposefully present themselves as a purpose-led institution. However, sincerity plays a strong role for Gen Z when communicating (Barend, 2023). When a person’s or organisation’s communication feels dishonest, it is quickly dismissed as inauthentic or performative (Barend, 2023). Thus, authenticity needs to be understood as a value of maintaining Gen Z’s trust in an organisation.

3.3.3 Gen Z in the Workplace

Gen Z values stability. According to preliminary research, they gravitate more towards work that provides financial assurance, especially at large corporations (Mărginean, 2021). Furthermore, stability extends beyond income for Gen Z. Recent surveys by Deloitte (2025) suggest that they actively seek roles that offer stability in emotional well-being and growth opportunities. Mentoring and continuous improvements are central to their job approach as well. They value direction in the workplace and understand that lifelong learning is essential for career progression (Mărginean, 2021).

Flexibility plays a key role for Gen Z. In a workplace context, this means that a technology-enabled work environment, versatility and a balanced work-life relationship are factors that Gen Z look for in their job positions (Gomez et al., n.d.).

Research about motivational needs in the workplace reveals that psychological well-being and interpersonal trust are significantly valued among Gen Z (Hardin, 2020). Using the Self-Determination Theory as a framework, the study identified autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs. The findings of this research indicate that Gen Z seeks meaningful connections, supportive leadership and inclusive environments.

These implications can help employers strategize their approach towards the next wave of labourers. Gen Z is diverse, accounting for almost 30% of the world’s workforce (Swaminathan, 2022). According to an article by Deloitte, Gen Z has the power to disrupt and change entire industries by their workplace culture and their own consumer habits (Mawhinney, 2019).

3.3.4 Expectations in Leaders

Where autocratic and authoritarian leadership approaches were the norm in the first half of the 20th century (Wiatr, 2022), leadership has evolved into many different facets. The landscape of leadership styles has seen different shifts with each generation. Baby boomers were faced with different organisational structures and environments than younger generations (Lee, 2022). Naturally, leadership styles have varied throughout countries and industries. Key features for Baby boomers however were a more top-down approach, with a clear hierarchy (Andert et al., 2019). This system ensured efficiency and stability at the time, with employees expected to stay loyal and obedient to their leaders. Moving onto the present-day landscape, authoritarian or paternalistic approaches are generally viewed as outdated. The Dutch, for example, have widely implemented a transformational approach throughout the course of the last 20 years, as leadership theorists have referred to transformational leadership as an “ideal” style (Hansborough & Schyns, 2018). As identified earlier, it promotes creativity and innovation while encouraging team members to exceed expectations (Ackoff, 1999). A transformational leader’s objective is to lead in an “inspiring” manner. While an authentic leader can be inspiring, their primary focus is on staying true to their own values and beliefs and encouraging an open and trusting environment (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Transformational leadership supports a bottom-up approach with leaders usually putting themselves on the same organisational level as their “team member”. In the Netherlands, there is a widespread consensus of having this flat organisational structure in any institution, be it private, corporate, educational, or political (Thierry et al., 2007). However, where transformational leadership has long been viewed as the ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’ approach, leadership theorists claim that it still lacks certain dimensions from Gen Z’s point of view. As transformational leadership is focused on inspiration, it is less focused on inclusion. It tends to neglect the psychological needs that Gen Z holds most dear (Hardin, 2020). Servant or paternalistic leadership supports well-being more effectively, but then again, lacks the flat structure and clear expectations (Chou et al., 2015).

According to Leblanc (2025), Gen Z distances itself from organisations and leaders using the “outdated” leadership approaches. They seek the opposite, connecting with brands that have “human-centered, and “supportive leadership styles” (Catalano, 2025). These decisions, rooted in emotional intelligence and the well-being of their employees, remain thus more appealing, meaning that leadership has to be increasingly progressing into more inclusive-, transparent- and feedback-oriented styles. This shift aligns with Gen Z preferences, as recent statistics indicate that 72% of Gen Z employees would rather take action individually than accept positions in middle management (Falayi et al., 2024). This is a trend with some articles calling it “conscious unbossing” (Falayi et al., 2024). Management positions have a reputation for having high levels of stress and a low work-life balance, which Gen Z seeks (Gomez et al., n.d.). Gen Z prefers leaders who are honest, transparent and take action on issues that Gen Z cares about (Leblanc, 2025).

Cegid, a Dutch software company, conducted another study on preferred leadership among young adults aged between 18 and 26 years old. It found that “[Gen Z] finds it more important than other generations that their manager is patient, passionate and authentic” (FlexNieuws, 2023).

Drawing from earlier findings of the Ernst and Young report (2016), Gen Z respondents identified the most important attributes they seek in future employers to be “treating people with respect, ethical behaviour, fair compensation and promotion across all employees, open and transparent communication, and wise business decision-making” (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Summing up the literature, key adjectives that constitute “good”

leadership for Gen Z are: authenticity, adaptivity, and transparency. Being in line with the key dimensions of the ALQ, defined by Walumbwa et al. (2008), we will further explore how these qualities are perceived and experienced by Gen Z in practice.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

By examining the organisational and social context in which authentic leadership is practiced, this study provides further insights into generational expectations on leadership's authenticity. According to Kallio et al (2016), a well-designed qualitative and inductive case study based on semi-structured interviews constituted a solid choice for research of this scope. It enables an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of participants, as well as the consideration of contextual factors and nuances. An inductive approach is appropriate in this context, as the analysis is guided by the participants' responses, allowing a coding scheme to emerge directly from the data. This makes it an appropriate fit for the analysis of interview data, which by definition is a human-centered topic (Bryman et al., 1996).

This research design has drawbacks as well, according to Atieno (2009). The small sample size of interviewees creates the problem of limited generalizability. The research is also prone to researcher subjectivity and bias, which may influence the credibility of the findings. The possibility of social desirability bias could for instance influence participants' responses (Atieno, 2009). For this project however, the upsides of this design outweigh the potential challenges it could face.

4.2 Data Collection

The study utilised a purposive sampling technique to pick interview candidates. This means searching for specific candidates that fit in the general profile for the purpose of this study. In practice, this required that interview candidates must (a) at least be eighteen years of age, (b) born starting from 1995, and (c) have prior experience working with or under leaders. Ideally, a large number of Gen Z'ers would have to be interviewed to maximise the precision of the end results. However, as a result of the scope and the limited research time, a small and relatively homogeneous sample size of six individuals has been chosen. This allowed for a manageable in-depth analysis of all discussions. The six participants (table 1) have been contacted through mutual connections of the researcher. They are Gen Z individuals, either Dutch or German, working in either public or private organisations.

Participant	Gender	Age	Industry	Mode
P1	Male	24	Government	in-person
P2	Male	25	Fashion	in-person
P3	Male	26	Nutraceuticals	in-person
P4	Female	23	Government	in-person
P5	Female	26	Business Consulting	online
P6	Male	25	Fintech	online

Table 1. Participant demographic

4.3 Research Instrument

For the primary source, a semi-structured interview guide has been developed for this study, consisting of contextual open-ended questions to guide the 40-65-minute interviews. The use of this research instrument has provided an insightful source of data for research of qualitative nature (Kallio et al., 2016). Semi-

structured interviews allow for more organic and fluent conversations between interviewer and interviewee. This means that interviewers are allowed to deviate from the set list of questions in case a "conversation" might sway into a different, more insightful direction. The guide consisted of questions specifically targeted to participants prior experience with leadership and their opinion on all four dimensions of the ALQ. In forming the interviews, questions have been drawn from the conceptual frameworks of authentic leadership defined by Avolio and Gardner (2003) and Luthans and Avolio (2003). The predetermined questions have to accommodate (a) the general subjective perception of authentic leadership and (b) the participant's personal values and expectations on "ideal" leaders. By having open-ended questions based on the theoretical framework from our literature review, this research instrument will be well-aligned to capture Gen Z's perception and honest opinion on authentic leadership. The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

The length of the interviews both ensured the quality of data, and the freedom for interviewees to express their views in a conversational manner without pressure. Depending on the participants, interview sessions have been held one-to-one, in-person or through video conferencing (see table 1).

Participants have received an information letter explaining the purpose and confidentiality of this study. At the start of each interview, this letter has been read out loudly with the interviewer asking the interviewee to confirm their understanding of the data collection method. This protocol is to ensure the ethical standards of this study. Almost all interviews, with the exception of Interview 2, were held in the participants' native language, which was either Dutch or German. This ensured the legitimacy and quality of the conversation. As a result, interview transcriptions were later on translated to English using "Google Translate". All in all, the interviews were designed to provide qualitative input about Gen Z's perception and expectations from leadership overall. They share personal experiences and critical reflections on leadership practices they have personally experienced. These experiences provide valuable insights through which we will later assess and discuss the applicability of authentic leadership in practice, drawing from earlier findings in the theoretical section.

4.4 Data Analysis

The collected data has been transcribed verbatim and then analysed using a thematic analysis approach. This allowed for themes and patterns to be identified, which is important for understanding recurring perceptions of Gen Z's view on authentic leadership. Braun and Clarke (2006) and Gioia et al. (2012) both present methodological guidelines for conducting inductive research. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six-phase framework for carrying out a thematic analysis, where the central emphasis lies on phase 2 to 5, namely (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes and (5) defining and naming themes. This meant that firstly, initial codes were manually developed (2) by examining the interview transcriptions line-by-line. The highlighted segments of the transcriptions and formed the foundation for the analysis and were later clustered into broader themes (3). These themes were then reviewed (4), ensuring coherence among all themes, and finally defined in a way that is analytically relevant for this study (5). Gioia et al. (2012) follow a similar approach, starting with developing first-order concepts straight from the interviews. These were then grouped into larger second-order themes which finally form the overarching aggregate dimensions: (1) Importance of Authenticity, (2) ALQ, and (3) Criticism of Current Leadership. A detailed overview of the structured data is provided in Appendix B. By following these

methodological guidelines, the analysis aimed to produce results that are credible, qualitative and well-substantiated.

4.5 Ethical Considerations & Approval

The research of this study involved direct interaction with interview participants. To ensure the privacy and well-being of interviewees, this study complies with the academic ethical standards of the University of Twente. Participants have received an informed consent form explaining the purpose and confidentiality of this study. The data collection method is in compliance with GDPR standards. The transcription process involved the usage of an automated transcribing program called "Transcribe", by "Routes Software SRL", with no human involvement. Transcribe adheres to GDPR standards and all data was deleted immediately after the transcription processes were concluded. There were no significant risks or burdens identified for participants in the context of this study. This research has been granted ethical approval from the University of Twente.

5. RESULTS

This chapter presents the empirical findings and results of six semi-structured interviews, conducted with either Dutch or German young professionals from both private and public sectors (table 1). The research aims to answer the central question: "How does Gen Z perceive authentic leadership, and what do they expect from today's leaders in organisations?". This question addresses the evolving expectations of a new generation entering the workforce, the relevance of authenticity in the workplace and the alignment or misalignment between this leadership model and the values of these young professionals in modern organisations. The six interview candidates were all Gen Z labourers, working in either public (government ministries), or private sectors (fashion company, private consulting, nutraceutical company). P3 has even been a supply-chain/purchasing manager themselves. Upon analysing all six interview transcripts using the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Gioia et al. (2012), the themes "Self-Awareness", "Balanced Processing", "Relational Transparency", and "Internalised Moral Perspective" form the aggregate dimension ALQ (Authentic Leadership Questionnaire), as defined by Walumbwa et al. (2008). The ALQ serves as a red line throughout this research and is used to compare Gen Z's connection to these dimensions. Other aggregate dimensions identified were "Importance of Authenticity" and "Criticism of current leadership". These dimensions were reached using first-order concepts and second-order themes (Appendix B).

5.1 Importance of Authenticity

The interviews revolved around authenticity in leaders. As such, the importance of authenticity for Gen Z emerged as a dominant theme across all six interviews. It underscores Gen Z's strong preference for leaders who embody trust & consistency, genuineness, and ethical behaviour, aligning with Avolio and Gardner's (2005) view on authenticity.

For the interviewees, being authentic is not simply a desirable trait but rather a non-negotiable quality. P1 profoundly described *"Of course there are a number of basic principles that are very important to me but that is consensus in my opinion. Respectful way of communicating, honesty, transparency, honesty, respectful those are important values that for me [...]".* Similarly, P5 stated: *"Yes, I think it's super important to be authentic and have a kind of backbone".* P2 puts authenticity and *"being human"* on the same scale, explaining throughout the interview that their current leader, who embodies authentic traits and behaves as *"a human being"* in their eyes is an ideal leader. P2 also emphasized that leaders must have *"adaptability skills"*,

but should still *"acknowledge when they are wrong"*, and *"act on what is right"*, even during challenging times (P2). According to them, leaders must be self-aware and possess integrity. Several participants expressed the same sentiment. P6 added that *"someone who listens to you and also takes your feedback seriously (...) not necessarily someone who is very authoritarian and always knows everything better"* is considered to be a motivating leader.

To the question as to what aspect of their job is seen as motivating, almost all respondents talked about the *"why"*. For instance, P5 and P6 both explained that understanding the bigger picture of an organisation brings a sense of purpose: *"If someone tells you everyday to lay stones, you think: why am I laying stones? When someone tells you they want to build a house, then you understand the vision."* (P6). P1 and P4, both working in the public sector, underline that working is not just about financial gain, but more about *"(offering) people a better quality of life"* (P1). P4 explains: *"I could have done a traineeship at a private consultancy (...) and I think you earn more that way, but I don't want that, because I don't think that has integrity."* All participants link their work to the question *"why am I doing this?"*, focusing on the deeper sense of purpose and impact of their job.

Throughout all interviews, participants emphasized that leaders who remain true to themselves and stay consistent in their actions are more valued and respected. Sometimes, participants responded with strong feelings when questioning a leader's trust and consistency. For instance, P4 stated that *"False promises, giving hope and then making people happy with a dead bird"* would make a leader untrustable. This feeling was further supported with emphasis on integrity: *"I think integrity is very important. I cannot get it over my heart when there is a weaker target group in society. That people take advantage of that."* (P4). P4 stated that they would stop working altogether for a leader who reflects a completely different moral compass than they do. To the question if P4 would tolerate a leader as such, they answered: *"No, really not. Then you have no self-respect when you do that."* P5 extended this perspective: *"I think I could only work with someone for a very limited time if I knew they were somehow misanthropic (...) As soon as someone is misanthropic and somehow expresses that, I can't work with that person for long."* P5 admitted that they left an earlier position as they could not identify themselves with the company's vision any longer: *"the message of the company and the message of the two founders is simply not what I want to stand for. And that made me uncomfortable after a while"*. Here, the essential nature of moral integrity in a leader is highlighted. On the other hand, P1 and P3 shared both different, more nuanced opinions. P1 states: *"I think that you can't always be on the same page in terms of values."*, whereas P3 adds *"I think it makes it a bit easier, of course, but I don't think it's required."* P3 furthermore reflects on the potential power of different views and ideologies around the work floor, where a *"good manager"* might benefit from these viewpoints for a positive impact by *"[bundling] all those forces (...), then you also know all the ins and outs."* (P3). All in all, however, interviewees reflect positively on the importance of consistency and a shared moral compass in leaders.

The need for authenticity as in genuineness was highlighted by several participants. To the question as to which advice they would give to someone just starting a leadership role, P4 answered *"Stay yourself (...)"*, hinting at the genuine and consistent character of a leader. P1 described his own leader in a positive manner who is *"very concerned with what I learn and whether I learn well and whether I understand the different aspects"*, marking the genuine attribute of this leader as *"a very beautiful form of leadership"* as *"he does ensure that my personal development is central"*. Genuineness is here described

as a form of sincerity and concern for their employees. P3, having been a leader themselves, was very outspoken on their own form of leading, explaining that *"What I have done in any case and how I recognize myself as a manager in the past year is to talk a lot with your team members."* (P3). The overall emphasis with this interview lied on communication. P3 underlined that maintaining an open communication fosters trust and transparency on the work floor. *"To discuss the results together and also just give a real pat on the back when someone has done something well."*, P3 added. Participants overall assert positive feelings around a leader who is inherently interested in the progress and well-being of their employees. Overall, the interviews consistently revealed that Gen Z employees seek leaders who embody authentic values through trust & consistency, genuineness, and ethical behaviour.

5.2 ALQ

5.2.1 Self Awareness

The question whether a respondent thinks their leader is aware of their own strengths and weaknesses was asked across all interviews. P1, P2 and P6 described their leaders as unaware or partly unaware of their limitations. P1 notes that their current leader *"does not have time to do self-reflection"*, adding that *"I do think that he should be even more aware of the things that he can structurally change in his own behaviour to be a better leader"*. P6 mentioned that their leader seems to overlook the negative impact of his behaviour on others: *"I don't think he directly draws the connection with people leaving and his lack of leadership or good leadership."* P3 acknowledges their leader's self-awareness, saying that they even talked about this topic one-on-one. However, their leader chooses not to focus on self-reflection, but rather on achieving goals: *"I have talked about it with him (...) I think he knows that (...) But I think he just doesn't care that much. He's very down-to-earth about that. And it's all about achieving a goal"*. P4 highlights that a good leader *"is also looking at yourself when something doesn't go well"*, but also acknowledges that a leader is prone to making mistakes as well in the context of self-reflection: *"You can't expect [that], everyone is only human"* (P4). Later on, they share a personal experience with a current leader on this matter: *"I think I've had a conversation with [my leader] about that. For example, that he gets very nervous before a job interview. So that he knew he wasn't good at it. Even though he always came across as very self-assured. That I had to coach him, for example, how to start such a conversation."* This leader recognized his own nervousness and accepted coaching by the participant.

P5 actively praised a past leader who was honest and willing to admit mistakes, showing high level of self-awareness. P5 describes this leader as *"a model boss"*; *"I totally trust him too (...) He never pretended (...) he said quite openly, oh, guys, I've made a bit of a mess of it. We have to do better. We didn't achieve our goals there and he never pretended."*

5.2.2 Balanced Processing

A leader's ability to receive, interpret and handle critical feedback has been widely discussed across all interviews. When asked the question *"How does your leader handle feedback, both giving and receiving?"*, P1 noted that their leader *"does give [feedback] well, not structurally (...) he can also receive, but he often waves it away with a joke."*, leaving little room for constructive dialogue. *"He is often very busy and I do not often have the space to ask the counter-question or give feedback"* (P1). P4 expands on this notion, saying that a leader should always have an open attitude to receiving feedback. They add that *"Feedback is actually always: I grant you even more growth."* (P4). In Interview 5, the participant supports this argument, praising their leader who proactively schedules

feedback sessions with all employees. P5 showed great appreciation for this and, same as P4, argued that it creates an opportunity for growth. Accordingly, their leader welcomed feedback: *"the mentor from that first internship was really great. He put it into practice straight away and said, yes, he totally understands"* (P5). On the contrary, P2 described their leader as highly defensive when confronted with critical feedback: *"Because (...) she's defensive (...) she's going to defend herself (...) So in my case, I just like need to convince her show evidence and explain her why that's it's it's wrong."* Interestingly, P6 pointed out the inherent risk of giving feedback to leaders: *"I think the problem with leaders and feedback is always that when you give feedback to a leader, you immediately put yourself in the spotlight and you also run the risk of feedback falling badly."* P3 adds that giving feedback often demands courage: *"I don't think everyone dares to do that (...) I have always been like that, it has not always gone well. I have sometimes had really heated conversations where I also thought, well, this is going to cost me my job."*

All in all, participants all agree on the importance of being able to give feedback as an employee, but in the end, a leader's openness and support for critical feedback is the driving force for ensuring constructive dialogue.

5.2.3 Relational Transparency

Transparency, honesty and open communication are important for Gen Z respondents. For example, P1 says very profoundly that on the work floor, *"you should be able to look each other in the eye and that you should be able to say what's going on or what you think of that person"*. P2 asserts positive experiences with their current leader when talking about transparency. They mention that *"(...) and for the fact that she's so human that the emotion get transparent, like, from when she talks. (...) It is (important), actually. (...) Every time that I go to the office, I'm so happy."*

P2 also recalled previous experiences in which a manager delegated orders directly from above, with little respect or empathy. This resulted in low intrinsic motivation: *"I don't care if I'm going to perform or not based on how she's treating me. If she was treating me nice, then I would, like, work in a different way. But she didn't (...)"*

The question was asked whether a leader can be too transparent. According to P3, *"yes, some things have to be thought through carefully before you just do them (...)"*. P4 added. *"yes, yes, some things you don't always have to say what's going on", adding that "sometimes a little lie is the best for the whole group."*

Respondents indicated great appreciation when being involved in the decision-making process. P3 says *"what I've really always gotten from my former manager is that you're also asked for my opinion."* P3 shows appreciation for his leader recognizing him as a *"person with a different perspective (...) which actually gives you the feeling that my opinion also matters."*

P5 underscores the importance of a leaders' involvement in their work. They indicate that being transparent means to also receive feedback. From their experience, this is not always the case: *"(...) I don't get any feedback at all (...) I've been back since August, I haven't even had a feedback meeting"*. They reflect that *"that's not so nice and of course it's also unsettling"*, adding that they started questioning their own job performance.

P6 expressed a more critical view on the experience of transparency, explaining that there are certain frameworks and guidelines to what a leader should share: *"There are always certain things or things that have been just then more of management. And not necessarily with the general employees if I myself were then discussed"* (P6). In addition, the respondent indicated that only afterwards you truly know if someone was

really transparent: *“Because if someone says something then I only know afterwards if that is transparent if it turns out later that it was really true”* (P6). In addition, it was highlighted that making mistakes is a human attribute and acknowledging them is also a form of transparency: *“Everyone makes mistakes from time to time. And I think that's also part of being transparent. Is acknowledging that sometimes you could have done something better”* (P6).

5.2.4 Internalised Moral Perspective

Each participant expressed a high value for a moral compass in a leader. The overarching recurring themes include integrity, and ethical behaviour.

Each respondent's opinion was asked on the topic of a leader's ability to stay true to their own core beliefs and adapting to external influences. P1 stated: *“You do have to be flexible in that, but that you also have to serve as a gatekeeper for what comes in.”* Here, P1 defines the role of a “gatekeeper” as an organisational protector; someone who filters, assesses, and manages external inputs, deciding which ones are in the interest of the organisation. P3 supports this statement by saying that *“there has to be a certain structure. There has to be a certain regularity. If everything is allowed and everything is tolerated (...) that doesn't work.”*

P4 gives a critical view of leaders who change beliefs when it seems beneficial to themselves: *“You are human and that can change. But I don't think on such principled things that you can change on that, because it's just in you.”* P5 also feels that a leader must speak out when it comes to principled points such as human rights: *“when you restrict the freedoms of other people and somehow say, foreigners out, queer people out or whatever. Or it's against women, so it's all against disadvantaged people. I think you have to say something”* (P5).

Participants also mentioned the importance of adaptability. This is well highlighted in Interview 2: *“I think that a real leader must have the adaptability skills (...) if someone is coming to you and with evidence, (...), you have to be able to acknowledge that, and say, okay, I listened to you, and you are right (...)”*. According to P2, this is what defines *“a good leader. Someone who take accountability (...) A wrong leader is someone who stay loyal to himself even if his thoughts are not the correct one.”* (P2). P2 indicates that being able to adapt and change one's opinion is actually a form of strength, not a weakness. P6 further adds that *“sometimes you have to make choices that maybe you don't quite support yourself, but then that comes from above. At the end of the day, you are part of a bigger machine.”*, which supports the sentiment of adaptability.

Finally, respondents mentioned that a leader ultimately must be able to make choices one way or another. P4 says: *“You do have to chart a course. You cannot say: we are going to do this and suddenly we do something else (...)”*. In their eyes, someone not able to follow a straight line in decision making *“is not a leader”* (P4). P3 tells their side of having been a leader themselves: *“It is up to me as a manager in this case to make a decision to see what is the most efficient route and we will implement it (...)”*. To sum it up, respondents value decision making in itself as an important skill for leaders. Leaders have to make integer and morally responsible choices in the end, while also recognizing the need for adaptability when new information or outside circumstances arise.

5.2.5 Example Case: “Marloes”

Towards the end of each interview, participants were presented with an example case of “Marloes”, a fictional manager resembling the characteristics of a “perfect” authentic leader (Appendix A). Participants were asked to provide their perspectives on Marloes' leadership and identify the

characteristics they found most intriguing. The responses from all participants were of strong alignment with the attributes exemplified by the authentic leader. P1 exclaimed: *“But, Marloes sounds almost perfect!”*, adding that they have never experienced a leader like this before. P2 states: *“That's how it should be”*, praising the leaders' ability to involve other opinions in the decision-making process. P2 claims that Marloes exemplifies their current leader. Each participant either almost or fully agrees with her form of leading. However, P5 states to be *“a bit ambivalent about it”*, sending mixed feelings about Marloes. They *“generally largely agree”*, but then again, touch on the inherent risk of a manager being too transparent.

5.3 Criticism of Current Leadership

The third and last aggregate dimension is formed through several identified themes of critique. Most dimensions from the ALQ already tackle the shortcomings of leaders, such as lack of self-awareness, lack of consistency, or lack of transparency. However, questions about experiences around a participant's leader made some other notable negative experiences surface. From these negative experiences, several “lack of ...” themes were identified, such as lack of empathy. P1, P3, and P5 criticized that their leaders have prioritised results over people. P1 shared an incident where they were given work that was not in their field of expertise: *“I had no affinity with that report, (...) no background, no knowledge (...) within a week I had to delve into a report that was not mine at all and a study that I did not feel that long about. So I found that difficult.”* They added that they have had *“very result-oriented leaders who also did not have an eye for me as a person but more for the result that I delivered”* (P1). P1 exclaimed that they lose respect for leaders as such. P2 reported an incident where a leader enforced strict rules without flexibility and consultation from the employee, where the participant had to stay in the office while no one was at work, calling it a *“bad experience”*, and even adding *“I think they call it, like, power abuse.”* (P2). Finally, P4 criticized a leader who micromanages, which ultimately would lead to fragile trust and *“bad leadership”* (P4).

6. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

This study aimed to explore how (1) Gen Z perceives AL and (2) what they expect from today's leaders in organisations. Analysing the insights gathered from the six interviews of Dutch and German Gen Z professionals reveal that Gen Z and authenticity are deeply intertwined. Thus, the two key points of interest for this study, namely (1) how does Gen Z perceive AL, and (2) what do they expect from today's leaders will be discussed simultaneously in the following, where results from the interviews will be compared to earlier findings in the literature, as well as practical implications for organisations will be discussed.

6.1 Discussion

As presented earlier, being “authentic” is not simply a desirable trait for Gen Z, but rather a non-negotiable quality. Arguably, this is important for all generations. However, unlike earlier generations, the emphasis on authenticity is especially poignant for Gen Z. Drawing from the theoretical background, Gen Z grew up in the era of internet and is able to constantly access communication and information sources (Chang & Chang, 2023). They care deeply about societal problems such as climate change and social injustices as a result of being frequently exposed to societal problems (Polydorou, 2023). They grew up in the presence of global crisis and corporate scandals, and thus, have developed a heightened sensitivity to inauthentic and performative behaviour (Barend, 2023). This generations does

seek leaders who care about issues that Gen Z also cares deeply about. As Bako (2018) explained, they tend to reject those who do not align with their own intrinsic beliefs. All participants emphasised that leaders should embody trust, consistency, genuineness, and ethical behaviour. These insights align closely to the core dimensions of the ALQ. Thus for leaders, conforming to these can be considered as essential.

For (1) Self-Awareness, leaders are valued and thus expected to be aware and open about their strengths and weaknesses. As P5 described, a “model boss” is someone who admits their mistakes and demonstrates integrity. On the other hand, demonstrating defensiveness against criticism, as P2 reported, is depicted as bad leadership. Participants want leaders to be able to judge themselves. P1, P2, and P6 asserted negative sentiments when describing their leaders as unaware of their limitations. The literature does not provide any input related to this. As of now, these results must be viewed as they are, which is that in general, participants assert positive feelings when leaders do exert some form of self-awareness, however, neither participant expressed self-awareness as a strictly necessary attribute in leaders.

As for the second pillar (2) Balanced Processing, the leader’s ability to receive and handle critical feedback was discussed. Participants have described several experiences in which leaders react differently to feedback. P1’s leader was dismissive while P2’s leader even was defensive. On the other hand, P5’s leader responded openly and welcoming, which they claim adds to the positive work-environment, which participants actively seek. P4 and P5 view feedback as an opportunity for self-development, which reflects the developmental mindset of Gen Z (Mărginean, 2021). This would help leaders improve their capabilities, such as understanding the needs of their team. On the other hand, leaders who dismiss feedback create, as observed in the case of P1, an environment where constructive dialogue is worked against. This could potentially undermine trust between a leader and their subordinates, which in turn withholds opportunities for transparency and personal growth. Such leaders can create an environment where constructive criticism or feedback is not seen as a tool for improvement, but rather as a risky act. As P3 explained, “heated conversations” can seem threatening to some, and thus, leaders should remind employees that feedback is always welcome.

As for (3) Relational Transparency, findings from the Ernst and Young report (2016) and Coman et al. (2022) already suggest that Gen Z puts high value on transparency. These claims are confirmed across all interviews. Participants value leaders who manage in an honest and open manner. They assert fully positive emotions when talking about a leader who manages in a transparent manner, with P2 specifically praising their leader’s “human centred” approach. Leaders who involve employees (P2, P3) in decision-making processes are certainly appreciated and foster trust and transparency. However, P3 and P4’s both expressed concerns regarding excessive authenticity as leaders could be “too transparent”, mentioning that certain information should be thought through carefully before being shared. A critique posed by Alvesson and Einola (2019) resonates with this sentiment. They argue that authentic leadership may be romanticized in literature and warn that there is a threshold for excessive authenticity. Leaders who act unfiltered and in-line with their true self may undermine the organisational norms and responsibilities (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). For one, communication can be used to share sensitive information, that if shared, could lead to violating confidentiality clauses or other negative consequences. Another example could be the emotional impact of a leader’s communication, when sharing personal stories that might be inappropriate or even offensive to some employees. P6 adds to this that there are certain guidelines a leader must adhere to. Nonetheless, there is a shared consensus

among all participants that at least some level of transparency in an organisation is needed.

Participants have expressed high value for a leader’s moral compass and integrity. For the (4) Internalised Moral Perspective, results show that leaders who stay true to themselves and remain consistent in their actions are more valued and respected. The interviews suggest that participants want to be led by leaders who thrive under their own personal convictions and motivations. However, a leader’s moral compass can differ from that of the participant, which in that case, is not preferable for some. P4 and P5 have expressed deep concern when working under a leader who is differently opinionated. At least four out of six participants actively seek jobs that align with their own personal convictions, with P5 even admitting to having quit a job over a personal conflict of interest with the organisation. Arguably, the importance of ‘ethics’ here point to traits traditionally associated with another leadership approach, namely ethical leadership (or EL). As defined by Brown et al. (2005), it embodies the “demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (p.120). It integrates ethical handling into the root of its framework. Arguably, this approach fits within the spectrum of expectations for almost all participants, especially P4 and P5, who belief leaders should speak out on fundamental social issues. This raises the question to what extent AL overlaps with ethical leadership. Here, already existing research proposes that the frameworks of EL and AL may converge through the concept of *moral conscience* (Demont-Biaggi, 2019). Moral conscience, which is described as “an awareness of one’s ethical values” (Demont-Biaggi, 2019, p.16), basically conceptualises the pillars *Self-Awareness* and *Internalised Moral Perspective* of the ALQ into one. It is a trait that forms an overarching bridge between an authentic and an ethically responsible leader. Interestingly, the research by Demont-Biaggi (2019) further proposes that authenticity must include a leader’s adaptability to be open towards others, which participants P2 and P6 strongly highlighted as well. It is certain to say that EL does emerge as a natural extension of AL. Nonetheless, EL may not clearly encompass all critical dimensions of the ALQ (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Core focus of EL is to act on moral justification, following ethical norms, and not just one’s own values and beliefs.

Participants consistently emphasised the need to understand the “why” in their work. This is deeply nestled into the broader idea that Gen Z longs for meaningful work. As Polydorou (2023) claimed, Gen Z is passionate about many topics that advocate for social justice, inclusivity and sustainability. This is reflected throughout the interviews. P1 and P4 have explained that their job needs to create a net positive impact on society which loops back to the expectation for leaders to connect their work to purpose. If not, there is a chance that young professionals will ultimately quit. Leaders are expected to make integer and morally responsible choices, however, P1, P2 and P6 pointed to the adaptability of leaders. In their eyes, a strong leader is able to balance integrity and consistency in core beliefs and the ability to adapt to externalities. Leaders are undoubtedly allowed to remain open to new information and respond to external pressures. This indicates that Gen Z does not view leadership as a matter of black or white, instead, it is more nuanced. All interviews clearly indicate a preference for an environment characterised by openness and trust. According to Walumbwa et al. (2008), an authentic leader’s core focus is to encourage and foster this. Hardin’s (2020) research confirms the necessity of psychological well-being and trust in the workplace. In this context, the desires expressed by the participants resonate with the behaviours with that of an authentic leader.

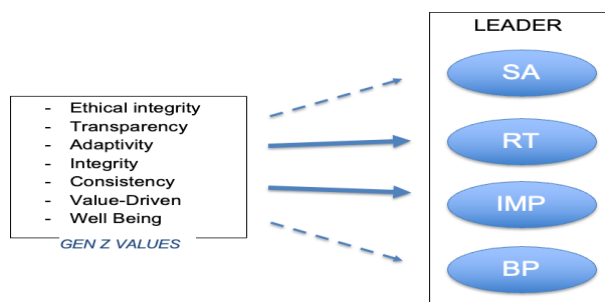


Figure 1: Gen Z Preference on ALQ Dimensions

Finally, “Marloes” has received overwhelmingly positive feedback by at least five out of six respondents, with the exception of P3. The results indicate that this generation closely aligns with the characteristics embodied by “Marloes”. All in all, it can be concluded that Gen Z holds a favourable view of AL, however, not all attributes of AL are preferred equally (Figure 1). *Relational Transparency* and *Internalised Moral Perspective* have a noteworthy stronger resonance with Gen Z’s leadership expectations than the other two. Participants were particularly engaged in the conversations when talking about these issues, which again, confirms the theoretical implications of Gen Z’s values as discussed in the beginning of this section.

6.2 Practical Implications

The operationalization of AL calls for structured and practical implications. For instance, organisations need to allow room in their inherent framework for transparency. This means building and nurturing a culture of open feedback, where employees feel free to ask questions and present feedback. Transparency practices do not have a one-size-fits-all approach (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2018). It is suggested that further research should be conducted, to understand what kind of transparency tools will serve Gen Z best. Nonetheless, *relational transparency* can be promoted through specific policies and initiatives. Implementing an “open-door” policy could nurture an open work environment. In addition, large-scale employee meetings could institutionalise an open and transparent culture. Having such meetings on a regular basis would not only increase transparency but furthermore encourage *balanced processing*, as these would serve as a tool to gather and analyse objectively relevant data from all stakeholders for the decision-making process.

Demont-Biaggi (2019) proposes his “3 Ways of implementing ethics in leadership practice” (p.21). He suggests that besides having a leader that inherently acts “morally (...) and in the best interest of all stakeholders” (p.22), it is as important to be able to understand the emotional implications of a leaders’ decision on others. This concept of *perspective-taking* should be a requirement for leaders, as it is “the psychologically most effective way of making us more impartial” (p.22). Again, we can identify an overlap between EL here and *self-awareness*. Thirdly, the author emphasises leaders should constantly learn from experiences and be willing to update their moral reasoning accordingly. Demont-Biaggi (2019) highlights that it is the sole responsibility of top managers to support development efforts and uphold leadership development programs. Appointing ethical ‘role models’ is key in reinforcing these principles, as well as using certain KPI’s to evaluate a leader’s ethical behaviour. Neider and Schriesheim (2011) developed the Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI) as a way to actively measure the performance of the four pillars of the ALQ in an organisation. Organisations need to regularly benchmark these indicators and adjust accordingly.

6.2 Limitations & Future Research

It is important to acknowledge several limitations in this study, considering the scope and time constraint for this research. While efforts were made to adhere to research standards, it is possible that certain subtleties in the interviews have been missed or misinterpreted altogether.

Secondly, the study’s qualitative nature makes it difficult to draw a definitive causality between leadership practices and Gen Z. Quantitative research should be introduced to explore and identify the proper relationship between Gen Z’s leadership expectations, AL and effectiveness of AL.

As Atieno (2008) mentioned, the generalisability of this research might be affected. The small sample size restricts the extent to which results can be applied to the broader Gen Z workforce. Furthermore, this research was conducted and based on either German or Dutch participants, while Gen Z in other countries might have completely different views depending on location and culture. Future research should therefore expand the sample size through the inclusion of quantitative methods to obtain more representative data. Introducing comparative analysis in the future between different countries and industries could extend the knowledge of Gen Z’s leadership expectations.

Results could also be prone to social desirability bias (Chung & Monroe, 2003). Interviewees could have discussed different opinions than they inherently have. By means of being viewed more favourable, they might have downplayed some negative aspects of their leaders. However, given the anonymity of the interviews and the mutual trust between the participant and the researcher, this bias can be dismissed.

Another limitation relates to language barriers. For one interviewee, P2, the interview was not held in their native tongue. The possibility remains that subtle nuances may have been lost in the conversation, as P2 might not have been able to fully express themselves as much as they wanted. Future research could address this issue, by ensuring interviews are always held in a participant’s native language.

Some practical implications have been recommended in the discussions section (6.2) of this thesis. Although the practical steps seem as a simple solution, the implementation of these may vary depending on the organisation itself. Future research should investigate what specific tools and strategies would best serve Gen Z’s needs across different industries. Furthermore, future research should deal with the effects and outcomes of the implementations of these recommendations to evaluate their effectiveness.

7. CONCLUSION

This research has aimed to deliver a generational view on authentic leadership: How Gen Z looks upon AL and what they expect from today’s leaders. Drawing from six semi-structured interviews with both Dutch and German Gen Z employees from different industries, this study has offered valuable insights into leadership expectations. Moreover, this study has confirmed several claims found in the existing literature regarding Gen Z’s mindset and values. In the eyes of Gen Z, “good leadership” is constituted by authenticity. What constitutes authenticity are transparency, integrity, adaptivity and self-awareness. These expectations align one-on-one with Walumbwa’s (2008) four dimensions. Leaders who embrace these expectations will advance their organisations in favourable positions for the new generation of workers. Organisations can benefit from these insights by designing leadership frameworks that support the four pillars of the ALQ. While this study provides a generational view of what is expected from today’s leaders, it also highlights the need for more expansive and comparative research. This would allow for more organisational implications to be found.

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10. APPENDIX

A. Interview Questions

Introduction (to be asked before the formal questions)

Read out loud the information sheet and the participants' rights.

- Have you read and do you understand the information sheet?
- Do you give permission for this interview to be recorded and transcribed?
- Have you ever worked with or under a leader? Or have you ever held a leadership position yourself?

Main Interview*

Part I (personal experiences and opinion-based questions)

- *Can you describe a situation where you had a notable experience with a leader in your workplace or community? What was particularly memorable?*
- *What are key aspects of their leadership style that stood out to you?*
- *In your opinion, what are the general typical characteristics or qualities of a leader in your area?*
- *In your opinion, what qualities make someone a "good" and a "bad" leader?*
- *Do you feel that leaders in your work generally reflect values that are important to you?*
- *What values matter most to you in the workplace? What are you passionate about in the workplace?*

Part II (theoretical based questions)

- *Think about a leader in your environment. Would you say they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses?*
- *How does this leader handle feedback?*

- *Have you ever felt motivated by a leader who was particularly honest and transparent? What effect did that have on you?*
- *Some leaders adapt their behavior to external pressures, others stay put and hold on to their decisions and beliefs. What is your opinion on this?*
- *What do you believe your generation looks for in leadership that might differ from older generations?*

Present an example of an ideal authentic leader that displays self-awareness, relational transparency, internalised moral perspective and balanced processing) (do not name these dimensions specifically).

"Imagine: you work at a government agency, such as the "Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland" (RVO), and your manager is Marloes. She is a team manager of a department that focuses on sustainability projects. Marloes communicates openly about her choices, involves different perspectives in decision-making and also indicates when she does not have the answer to something. She openly discusses mistakes or difficult situations and takes responsibility for decisions that are made. In her work, she tries to stay true to her personal values, even when there is external pressure or conflicting interests."

- *How do you see this leader?*
- *What do you think of these qualities in a leader?*
- *Have you experienced a leader like this in the past?*

*the context of the each interview may have varied and thus other contextual relevant questions might have been asked

B. Structured Results

