

GENERATIONAL INSIGHTS | WORKPLACE LEADERSHIP

What Does Gen Z Want at Work?

A Practical Guide for Employers

By Cam Marston

25+ Years of Generational Research

Source: cammarston.com/gen-z-workplace.html

The organizations that win with Gen Z will not be the ones that lower the bar.

They will be the ones that make the bar clear.

Generational Insights Workplace Leadership By Cam Marston - 25+ Years of Generational Research

What Does Gen Z Want at Work?

A Practical Guide for Employers

Gen Z employees are not simply younger Millennials. They are a distinct generation shaped by digital immersion, Gen X parenting, economic anxiety, and COVID-era disruption. Here is what 25 years of generational research shows about leading them well.

Gen Z employees, born between 1997 and 2012, are entering the workforce with a fundamentally different view of work, authority, communication, technology, and trust. For employers, the question is not whether Gen Z is willing to work. The better question is whether managers are prepared to lead a generation that expects clarity, transparency, frequent feedback, digital efficiency, emotional awareness, and a clear explanation of why the work matters.

On This Page

[Who is Gen Z?](#) | [10 mistakes organizations make](#) | [How to lead Gen Z](#) | [How to motivate Gen Z](#) | [Frequently asked questions](#) | [The bottom line](#)

Who Is Gen Z?

Generation Z is the generation born between 1997 and 2012. The oldest members are now well into the workforce, beginning careers, building skills, evaluating employers, and deciding what kind of relationship they want with work.

Cam Marston's framing of Gen Z begins with parenting. Baby Boomers generally raised Millennials. Generation X generally raised Gen Z. That matters because Gen X parents brought their own "figure it out" childhood into a very different parenting environment. Many Gen X parents were latchkey kids who learned independence because no one was there to solve every problem.

But as parents, they had new tools - smartphones, tracking apps, digital calendars, school portals, text threads, online gradebooks, and location-sharing apps.

Cam calls this the shift from helicopter parenting to drone parenting. Helicopter parents hovered nearby. Drone parents track, monitor, and intervene from a distance. That kind of upbringing has direct workplace consequences. Many Gen Z employees grew up with adults who could see trouble coming and step in before the mistake happened. When they enter a workplace where expectations are vague, training is thin, and the manager says "figure it out," they may not interpret that as empowerment.

They may interpret it as abandonment.

What shaped Gen Z's worldview?

COVID-19 disruption

COVID-19 disrupted their education, social development, and early work expectations. Many Gen Z employees came of age during remote school, canceled milestones, social isolation, and uncertainty. They learned that stability can disappear quickly.

Digital life as environment

Digital life is not a tool they adopted - it is the environment they grew up in. They have never known a world without instant search, social platforms, mobile video, and online reviews. When they do not know something, their first move is usually to search, ask a chatbot, watch a short video, or check what peers say online.

Economic uncertainty

Economic uncertainty made them practical. Gen Z watched Millennials struggle with student debt, saw parents navigate recessions, and experienced the COVID economy. Many are cautious, anxious about money, and interested in stability even when they present themselves as entrepreneurial or independent.

What are Gen Z's core workplace traits?

Digital-first, not digital-only

Gen Z expects workplace technology to be fast, mobile, and intuitive, but still wants human guidance when a decision is important or emotionally complex.

Skeptical until trust is earned

They grew up surrounded by ads, influencers, and misinformation. They tend to fact-check claims and trust peers or authentic voices more than polished institutional messaging.

Transparent by default

Hidden rules, unclear pay structures, and unexplained decisions create distrust. They want to know what is expected, how success is measured, and how decisions get made.

They learn by duplicating wins

Older managers often learned by reviewing mistakes. Gen Z often responds better when managers first identify what worked, then show how to repeat and build from it.

Future-focused when persuaded well

A Boomer may be persuaded by history and reputation. Gen Z leans in when the message explains how a decision affects their future, options, and identity.

Authentic over performative

They do not need leaders to sound young or use slang. They need leaders to be clear, honest, direct, and human. Authenticity outperforms corporate polish every time.

What Organizations Are Getting Wrong About Gen Z

Most organizations do not have a Gen Z problem. They have a management strategy built for a different generation that has not been updated. Here are the ten most common mistakes Cam Marston sees in organizations managing Gen Z employees.

1 Treating Gen Z like younger Millennials

Many organizations built their young-worker strategies around Millennials and applied the same playbook to Gen Z. Millennials were shaped by Boomer optimism and "special and unique" parenting. Gen Z adds a different layer: constant monitoring, instant answers, online reputation, and a stronger expectation that systems should be clear and searchable. A Millennial management strategy emphasizes inclusion, collaboration, and purpose. Gen Z still values those things - but also needs clarity, transparency, fast information access, specific expectations, and practical coaching.

2 Saying "figure it out" and calling it development

For many Gen X leaders, "figure it out" sounds like the gift of independence. To Gen Z, it can sound like, "I am not going to help you." Better leadership does not mean doing the work for them. It means defining the outcome, explaining the boundaries, showing an example, identifying the first step, and then letting them work with enough guardrails to learn.

3 Waiting until the annual review to give feedback

Gen Z has grown up in a real-time feedback environment. A once-a-year performance review feels too slow, too formal, and too disconnected from the actual work. Managers should not confuse frequent feedback with constant praise - correction is essential, but it needs to come quickly and with context.

4 Leading with criticism before building confidence

Many older leaders believe the fastest path to improvement is pointing out what went wrong. That works with experienced employees who value direct correction. Younger employees often hear a mistake-first review as, "You only see what I did wrong." Cam's guidance: celebrate the positive first, then focus on what needs to be fixed. That does not weaken the feedback - it makes the employee more able to hear it.

5 Assuming technology replaces management

Gen Z is comfortable with dashboards, apps, AI tools, and digital workflows. But technology does not replace leadership. In fact, the more digital the workplace becomes, the more important clear human leadership becomes. A training portal can show a process. A manager still needs to explain judgment, priorities, tone, and what "good" looks like.

6 Confusing flexibility with lack of commitment

Gen Z often questions traditional work structures. Some managers hear this as disrespect. Often, it is a request for logic. Gen Z is more likely to accept a rule when they understand the reason behind it. "Because that's how we do it here" is not a strong answer.

7 Over-polishing the employer brand

Gen Z is suspicious of corporate theater. If the recruiting page says the company is "like a family" but the reviews say managers do not communicate, Gen Z will believe the reviews. Authenticity beats polish. Show real employees. Explain real expectations. Acknowledge hard parts of the job.

8 Hiding the career path

Gen Z wants to know what comes next. They do not need a guaranteed promotion in six months, but they do need to understand how growth works. When the path is invisible, Gen Z will assume opportunity is limited and begin looking elsewhere.

9 Ignoring anxiety and mental load

Gen Z talks more openly about stress, anxiety, and burnout than older generations did at the same age. Some managers interpret this as fragility - that is usually the wrong read. A practical manager does not need to become a therapist, but does need to reduce unnecessary ambiguity, define priorities, and check whether workload expectations are realistic.

10 Thinking Gen Z wants managers to act like Gen Z

Gen Z does not need older managers to use their slang or mimic their humor. They can spot forced relevance quickly. They want managers to be real - current enough to understand their world, but confident enough to remain themselves.

Want this covered in a live presentation?

Cam's keynotes on generational workplace dynamics - including Five Generations in the Workplace and Recruiting & Retaining Across the Generations - incorporate this Gen Z research as part of a broader multigenerational framework.

How Should Managers Lead Gen Z Employees?

Gen Z needs clarity, coaching, transparency, purpose, flexibility, and proof that the organization's words match its behavior. The best Gen Z managers are not permissive - they are clear. They are not trendy - they are authentic. They do not avoid correction; they deliver it in a way that builds confidence and shows the employee how to improve.

Define the outcome before assigning the task. Tell them what finished, successful work looks like.

Explain the "why" behind the work. Gen Z is more motivated when they understand the purpose and impact.

Give examples. Show a sample, template, or previous win they can study and duplicate.

Replace "figure it out" with "start here." Give them the first step, the boundaries, and the decisions they own.

Give feedback quickly. Do not save small coaching points for a formal review months later.

Start feedback with what worked. Identify the win first, then explain what needs to improve.

Be transparent about pay, promotion, and expectations. Vague systems create suspicion.

Put instructions in writing. A short recap after a conversation prevents confusion and gives them a reference point.

Show the career path. Explain what skills, habits, and results lead to more responsibility.

Connect work to future identity. Show how today's task builds tomorrow's confidence, income, or reputation.

Teach professional norms directly. Do not assume they know unwritten rules about email tone, client interaction, or escalation.

Correct privately and specifically. Public embarrassment damages trust quickly.

How Do You Motivate Gen Z Employees?

Motivating Gen Z begins with showing them how the work affects their future. They want to know what skill they are building, what opportunity it creates, and how the task connects to something larger than simply keeping busy. Gen Z is not allergic to hard work. They are allergic to work that appears pointless, poorly explained, or disconnected from growth.

Language that works with Gen Z:

- "This project will teach you how our clients think."
- "If you can get good at this, you will be ready for more visible work."
- "Here is the part you did well. Let's make sure you can repeat that."
- "This skill will separate you from others your age."
- "Here is how this work affects the team, the client, and your future options."

Frequently Asked Questions About Gen Z at Work

How is Gen Z different from Millennials at work?

Gen Z is more digitally native, more skeptical, and often more practical than Millennials were at the same age. Millennials came of age during the expansion of social media and digital tools. Gen Z has no memory of life before those tools. Millennials often responded strongly to collaboration, inclusion, and purpose. Gen Z still values those things, but also expects fast information, transparent systems, frequent feedback, and proof that the organization is what it says it is. One of the biggest differences is trust: Millennials often wanted to belong. Gen Z wants to verify.

Why do Gen Z employees quit so quickly?

Gen Z employees often leave when they do not see a future, do not trust the manager, or do not understand how to succeed. They are also more willing to compare opportunities because job information, salary ranges, and employee reviews are easy to find. Retention improves significantly when managers provide clarity, coaching, visible growth, and honest communication.

What does Gen Z want from a manager?

Gen Z wants a manager who is clear, accessible, honest, and willing to coach. They do not need a best friend, and they do not need someone pretending to be young. They need someone who will explain expectations, give feedback quickly, show them what good work looks like, and help them understand how today's effort affects tomorrow's opportunity. The best Gen Z managers combine structure with respect. They set standards and explain how to meet them.

How do you give feedback to Gen Z?

Give feedback soon after the work happens. Begin by naming what went right, then explain what needs to change and why. A useful structure: "What worked was this - and here is why it worked." "Here is what needs to improve." "Here is what I want you to do next time." This approach does not avoid correction. It makes correction easier to hear and more likely to be applied.

Why does Gen Z ask so many questions?

Gen Z asks questions because they are used to searchable information, immediate answers, and visible explanations. They are less likely to accept "because I said so" or "because that's how we've always done it." Managers should not treat every question as defiance - often, the question is a request for context. When the reason is sound, explain it. When the reason is weak, that is useful information too.

Does Gen Z have a poor work ethic?

Not necessarily. Gen Z's work ethic often looks different from older generations because they question time-based measures of productivity, expect better technology, and want to know why work matters. A manager may see hesitation where Gen Z feels unclear. A manager may see entitlement where Gen Z is asking for transparency. The solution is not lower standards - it is clearer standards.

What kind of workplace culture attracts Gen Z?

Gen Z is attracted to workplaces that are authentic, transparent, flexible, and serious about development. Culture cannot simply be advertised to Gen Z - it must be demonstrated. They will check reviews, ask peers, compare claims, and notice gaps between stated values and actual behavior quickly.

What should employers stop doing with Gen Z?

Stop assuming Gen Z will decode unwritten rules on their own. Stop using vague assignments as a test of initiative. Stop waiting months to provide feedback. Stop relying on polished culture statements that do not match daily management behavior. Stop treating questions as resistance. Most of all, stop trying to make Gen Z become Gen X, Millennials, or Boomers. The better goal is to help them become capable, confident, and accountable young professionals.

The Bottom Line on Gen Z

Gen Z is not a workplace problem to be solved. They are a generation to be understood, coached, and led. They bring digital instincts, skepticism, practicality, and a strong desire for clarity into the workplace. They may need more explanation than older managers expect and ask more questions than older managers are used to.

But when managers give them clear expectations, authentic communication, practical coaching, and a picture of how today's work shapes tomorrow's future, Gen Z can become focused, loyal, and deeply valuable employees.

**"The organizations that win with Gen Z will not be the ones that lower the bar.
They will be the ones that make the bar clear."**

Want This Covered at Your Next Event?

This Gen Z research is woven into Cam's broader keynotes on generational dynamics in the workplace - built for audiences managing multiple generations, not just one. Visit CamMarston.com to view speaking topics or check availability.

Contact

Helen Broder, Business Manager

Ph / Txt: 703.757.1204

info@CamMarston.com

CamMarston.com