

Leading Through Generations: Crafting Adaptive Leadership Styles for Modern Enterprises

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Abstract: This contribution examines the evolution of leadership styles over time. It explores the ways in which these styles have adapted to changing economic environments and generational shifts, also highlighting the intricate interplay between leadership and cultural nuances. The research applies a longitudinal lens to the development of leadership styles, focusing on their adaptability across the lifecycle stages of two universities in Austria and Ukraine. The findings stress the importance of leadership adaptability to organizational and generational changes and emphasize the influence of cultural factors on leadership styles. The investigation employs two case studies, enabling an exploration of the interplay between leadership, lifecycle, culture, and generational nuances. The findings reveal differences in leadership styles, underscoring the impact of cultural, lifecycle and generational factors on leadership genesis. The study concludes that leadership must be adaptive and evolve in tandem with the lifecycle stages of an organization. It also stresses generational differences in leadership and the crucial role of culture in shaping leadership styles. This contribution augments the discourse on leadership adaptability, offering insights for future research and practical implications for leadership and governance in varying cultural and generational settings.

Keywords: Leadership Styles, Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Generational Transition, Culture, Lifecycle Leadership.

1. Introduction and Theoretical Background

Leadership is widely recognized as a dynamic aspect of organizational management, continually evolving in response to shifting contexts, circumstances, and cultural influences (Northouse, 2019). Research has been conducted on the issues of leadership and the classification of leadership styles (Harrison, 2018). Factors such as generational shifts, cultural nuances, and organizational lifecycle transformations play critical roles in the understanding of leadership dynamics and effectiveness. Research has explored these elements individually.

1.1 Generational Shifts

Lyons et al. (2021) examine how generational shifts impact leadership preferences and effectiveness, contrasting Baby Boomers and Millennials. Their research identifies generational differences across several workplace factors related to leadership challenges, including personality traits, work values, attitudes, career expectations and experiences, teamwork dynamics. Zehetner et al. (2022) report about a cross-national study on Generation Z, exploring future employees' preferred leadership styles in a Western and an Eastern culture. They identify cultural differences but find generally high expectations and specific demands regarding the leadership competencies of future leaders. Twenge (2010) compares Gen X and Millennials and finds that younger generations prioritize work-life balance and extrinsic rewards more than older generations. They also tend to demonstrate lower organizational loyalty, which imposes challenges to their leaders.

1.2 Cultural Differences

Blyznyuk (2017) and Lepeyko and Blyznyuk (2016) discuss values and leadership characteristics of Eastern versus Western-influenced generations. Their research underscores the importance of understanding cultural nuances in leadership. House et al. (2004) identify key cultural dimensions that shape leadership expectations and effectiveness. The authors argue that effective leadership is culturally contingent, and traits and behaviors deemed successful in one culture may not be effective in another. Nwankwo et al. (2024) stress the importance of cultural dimensions, addressing ethnocentrism, and fostering cultural intelligence, while advocating for tailored leadership development and inclusive cultures. Rockstuhl et al. (2011) highlight the role of cultural intelligence in shaping leadership effectiveness in multinational contexts. Within the geographic context of this study, Szabo and Reber (2007) analyze leadership related matters in Austria, highlighting the importance of

participative and supportive leadership styles. Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on egalitarianism and a preference for leaders who are approachable and considerate of their employees' well-being. For Ukraine, Sikorska (2015) highlights that socio-cultural factors like collectivism, power distance, and historical influences shape leadership. She notes that the Soviet legacy has led to a preference for authoritative styles, but these are slowly changing with the influence of Western management practices.

1.3 Lifecycle Effects

Sisney (2013) emphasizes the importance of achieving the right balance of organizational development and stability through appropriate leadership practice supporting product and market lifecycles. Ward (2003) states that effective leadership requires assessing the organization's lifecycle stage and adjusting leadership style to meet its specific demands and challenges. Flexibility and adaptability are crucial, as strategies that work in one stage may not suit another. Leaders who adeptly navigate these phases are better positioned for long-term success. Bodolica and Spraggon (2021) review the need for adaptive leadership strategies during organizational decline, emphasizing the enhancement of human capital in economic downturns.

1.4 Research Gap

While the effects of generation, culture, and lifecycle on leadership are well-documented, an individual consideration of these antecedents might be myopic. Therefore, this paper aims to apply a more holistic perspective and address the gap in understanding how leadership styles adapt within the complex interplay of cultural contexts, economic development, and generational transitions in institutions.

2. Conceptual Model

This paper analyzes the evolution of leadership across various stages of the institutional lifecycle, with a particular focus on the interplay of cultural and generational influences. By examining these dynamics within the distinct context of two institutions from different countries and cultural backgrounds, the study offers insights into the adaptive strategies necessary for effective leadership in diverse and continuously changing environments. This research contributes to the discourse on leadership adaptability, offering a deeper understanding of the factors that shape leadership effectiveness over time.

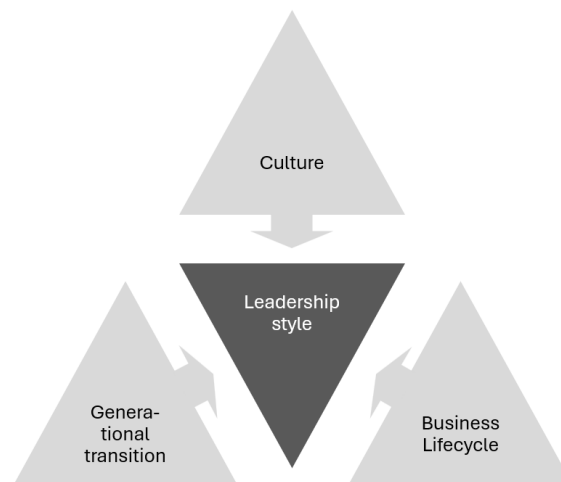


Figure 1: Conceptual model

Our research model examines three key factors influencing the dimension of leadership: business lifecycle, culture, and generational transition. Insights will be gained through a longitudinal study spanning the entire existence of two institutions in different cultural areas.

3. Methodology

The research approach in this study is grounded on behavioral theories, focusing on transformational leadership and transactional leadership (Afsar et al., 2017; MacKenzie et al., 2001). Drawing on Mahoney (2004), we employ a comparative historical case study. The study focuses on two business-oriented universities located in culturally distinct regions: Austria and Ukraine. Through a process analysis highlighting leadership style as the primary

variable, we examine its relationship with business development, life cycle stages, cultural specifics, and economic constraints. This approach facilitates the understanding of the origins and effectiveness of different leadership styles and enables an assessment of their appropriateness in relation to the subjects' performance over time. To address the generational aspect, the authors investigated the age distribution of top leadership positions (rectors, presidents, vice-rectors, vice-presidents) and middle-management positions (program directors, department heads) at both institutions. In addition to that, top and middle managers from both universities ($N_{UA} = 20$; $N_{AUT} = 21$) were surveyed regarding their views on changes in the generational structure in the coming years. By considering generational transitions, cultural specifics, and lifecycle stages, the study addresses multiple dimensions that influence leadership practices. This approach ensures a nuanced understanding of how different leadership styles can be applied in varying organizational settings, thereby contributing to both theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of leadership studies.

4. Case Study: Austrian and Ukrainian Educational Institutions

The authors analyzed the historical governance and leadership of the two universities from their emergence until today, focusing on their lifecycles, leadership structures, and generational composition. This is preceded by a presentation of the empirical context to facilitate the interpretation of the findings.

4.1 Empirical Context: Ukraine and Austria

The core values of *Ukraine's* Baby Boomer generation differ significantly from those in Western Europe, as explored by Lepeyko and Blyznyuk (2018). Unlike their Western European counterparts, whose values shifted due to changing family stereotypes after the sexual revolution (Blyznyuk, 2016), Ukrainian Baby Boomers are not defined by anti-war or anti-government sentiments or youth-centric culture. Instead, they demonstrate strong collectivism and long-term orientation, shaped by the USSR's influence as a superpower. This generation aligns with the "prophets" archetype, representing political and public figures (Lepeyko and Blyznyuk, 2016). Currently, this cohort, aged 54 to 72, is transitioning from maturity to old age but remains a dominant segment of Ukraine's population. Generation X in Ukraine, shaped by the challenges of perestroika, shortages, and national independence before 1993 (Lepeyko & Blyznyuk, 2018), shares core values with their Western European counterparts but lacks their informal outlook and patriotism. Despite these differences, Ukrainian Gen X, akin to the "nomads" archetype, exhibits global thinking and tends to achieve significant success in their maturity. Generation Y's values are shaped by terrorism, military conflicts, epidemics, and digital advancements (Blyznyuk, 2016; Lepeyko & Blyznyuk, 2018). Influenced by globalization and modern technologies, this generation exhibits similar values in Ukraine and Western Europe (Lepeyko & Blyznyuk, 2016; Lepeyko & Blyznyuk, 2018), with minimal national differences. As part of the "heroes" archetype, they contribute significantly to community and technological progress, displaying inherent technological literacy compared to previous generations (Blyznyuk, 2017).

In *Austria*, the size of the elderly population is expected to rise, and the Baby Boomers reach retirement age soon. This results in a shortage of skilled workers in the economy, and consequently attracting and retaining talented (young) people will gain importance. Companies are doing their best to convince talents to join and stay with their workforce (Mangelsdorf, 2015). Not only do the demographics change, but the value system does as well. Individuals are not only striving to fulfil their material needs, but also to accomplish their individual goals (Wirtschaftskammer Österreich, 2018). Generation X in the Austrian labor market is characterized by a strong work ethic and independence, also partly due to the strong economic development during the younger ages of this generation. They value job security and stability and are also known for their adaptability to changing work environments and technology. Generation Y in Austria is known for their tech-savviness and emphasis on work-life balance. They value meaningful work, teamwork, and frequent feedback (Bednarska-Wnuk and Januszkiewicz, 2013). Currently, Generation X and Y constitute the largest share of the working population in Austria (Statistik Austria, 2024). Gen Z has entered the Austrian labor market, prioritizing work-life balance and personal growth alongside professional achievements. They seek flexible work arrangements and meaningful work environments that offer development opportunities (Aldjic and Farrell, 2022; Zehetner et al., 2020). Companies must evaluate their capacity to balance work and personal life, requiring significant organizational resources. Globalization and international competition further intensify these challenges (Ng and Parry, 2016; Parry and Urwin, 2011), with technology reshaping employer requirements and employee attitudes.

4.2 Leadership Transformation and Lifecycle at a Ukrainian University

Founded in 1912, the university initially offered advanced commercial courses and became prominent for its high-quality training in commerce and management. By 1930, the Kharkiv Engineering and Economic Institute (KhEEI) emerged, characterized by transformational leadership and informal, collaborative processes, which established its reputation in industrial economics within the Ukrainian Soviet Republic.

In the 1950s, during post-war reconstruction, the university trained engineering economists for heavy industries, with leadership focused on transformation and motivation. Over time, leadership shifted to a more hierarchical and bureaucratic approach to manage increasing administrative complexity.

During a phase of rapid growth from about 1965 - 1980, the university focused on developing its core strengths, including a high-quality educational process and scientific research. Leadership styles transitioned to more transactional approaches to manage the expanding institution effectively. Transactional leadership during this period emphasized structures, rewards, and performance monitoring to maintain stability and drive growth.

In the 1980s, the university reached a maturity stage. It expanded its training programs to include accounting, international economics, IT, finance, and management. Leadership during this period became more formal and hierarchical, with a clear division of responsibilities and a well-structured motivation system. However, the predominant transactional leadership style lacked innovation, leading to stagnation, a decline in educational quality, reduced research programs, and a decrease in employee qualifications. The emphasis on maintaining order and following established procedures resulted in limited progress and adaptability.

In the last decade of the 20th century, the university rebranded and introduced significant innovations in educational technologies and processes. However, leadership remained bureaucratic and rigid, reflecting a Soviet-era mentality that impeded transformative progress and adaptation to new challenges.

In 2000, a significant leadership transition occurred as representatives from the Silent Generation were replaced by Baby Boomers. This was a phase of a second rapid growth, and it allowed for strategic changes and new development foundations. Leadership during this period emphasized transformational approaches, fostering informal relationships with subordinates, and promoting innovative strategies. The university underwent two more rebranding cycles in 2004 and 2014, which helped it achieve leading positions in Ukrainian economic education. Transformational leadership played a crucial role in revitalizing the institution and driving growth.

The period from 2015 to present was marked by challenges such as the Russian invasion in 2014, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in 2022, leading to digitalization and virtualization of the educational process. Current leadership, rooted in Baby Boomer traits, struggles with the need for agility and tends towards rigid bureaucracy. This bureaucratic leadership style, focused on maintaining control and stability, has been less effective in responding to the rapidly changing environment. The university now faces a critical juncture, with its future trajectory poised between potential rapid growth and decline, contingent on its ability to adapt leadership styles to meet new challenges.

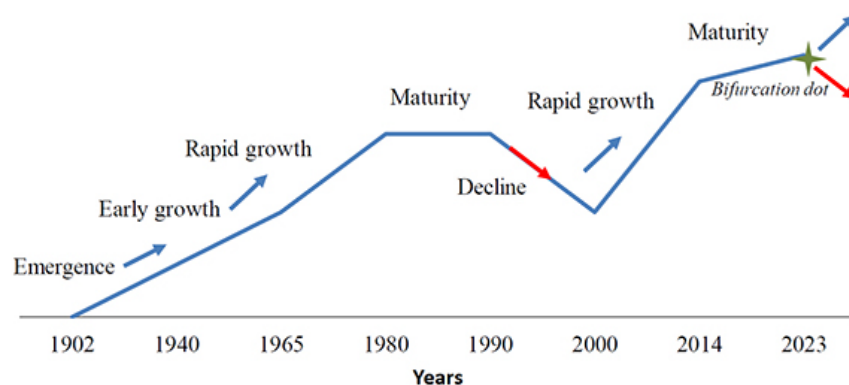


Figure 2: Lifecycle of Ukrainian University

4.3 Leadership Transformation and Lifecycle at an Austrian University

Universities of Applied Sciences in Austria are typically organized under private law, often as limited liability companies, associations, or non-profit private foundations. This specific organizational structure influences the management styles and required organizational frameworks, distinguishing them from those of traditional

universities. The university selected for this case study is a public University of Applied Sciences. In its founding year, 1994, the university launched two academic programs (Automation Technology and Software Engineering). These programs were managed as largely autonomous units by small, subject-specific teams.

The management of the study programs was decentralized, with program directors bearing the main responsibility and performance requirements. These directors oversaw teaching, research, and leadership (including leading professors, administrative staff, assistants, and researchers), as well as marketing and attracting applicants. The (mostly young, 30 to 40 years old Baby Boomer) directors worked in small, interdisciplinary teams, fostering intrinsic motivation, entrepreneurial spirit, and teamwork. Their leadership style was predominantly transformational, characterized by idealization, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. This period can be considered a phase of awakening in the university's lifecycle.

From 2001, the university's growth phase involved merging the degree programs into four schools and adopting more transactional leadership at the corporate level. Between 2002 and 2006, significant growth in programs and student numbers led to increased costs and revenues. During this time, the university restructured by separating academic and commercial decision-making, introducing deans responsible for commercial aspects while study program directors retained academic oversight. This resulted in a largely informal, matrix-oriented management style, with deans using a blend of transformational and transactional leadership.

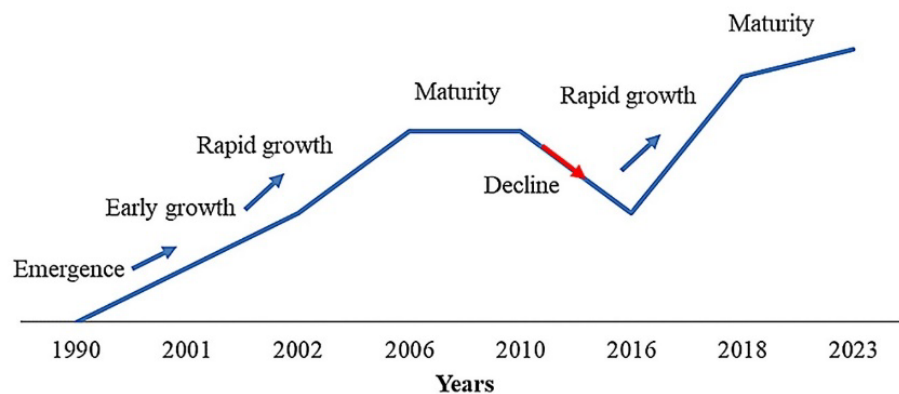


Figure 3: Lifecycle of Austrian University

From 2007 to 2010, continued growth in degree programs and student numbers required further adaptation of the management and organizational structure. A democratically organized body, the “Kollegium,” was established, comprising equal numbers of elected members from teaching, administration, and the student body. This body served in an advisory and decision-making capacity rather than a leadership role. Leaders could consult the Kollegium for decisions in cases of doubt, effectively delegating difficult decisions to this higher, quasi-neutral body.

To align administration, commercial activities, support structures, and academia, a university management board was established, headed by the university president, consisting of leaders from various departments (like IT, research, studies, international relations, organization) and the schools’ deans. This board primarily uses a transactional leadership style, with decisions relayed through deans and unit leaders. In response to external competition, study program leadership adopted a mix of transformational and transactional elements: transactional for administrative and marketing activities, and transformational, collegial for teaching and research. This approach led to record student enrollments between 2014 and 2016, driven by performance-based incentives and sanctions.

By 2018, the university entered a maturity stage, facing crowding-out effects from increased competition. Leadership within programs shifted to a more care-oriented approach, focusing on well-matched teams and high motivation, while striving for differentiation. From 2018 to 2023, intensified national and international competition introduced uncertainty, leading to a blend of transformational leadership to motivate teams and commercial (largely transactional) leadership to meet clear targets and monitor progress for attracting students.

5. Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study reveal that leadership structures oscillate from transformational to transactional or autocratic in response to organizational growth, functional level and changing demands. It underscores the role

of cultural factors in shaping leadership strategies and provides recommendations for selecting appropriate leadership styles at different lifecycle stages.

5.1 Lifecycle and Leadership

The case studies show that leadership styles at both universities evolve with the lifecycle of their organizational units: transformational leadership characterizes the foundation and start-up phases with small teams and flat hierarchies, while transactional elements dominate in larger, mature programs. In programs facing declining enrolment and existential threats, autocratic leadership elements become more prevalent.

These findings support earlier research demonstrating that increasing financial and market pressures lead to a shift from transformational to transactional leadership styles. Carrasco and Fromm (2016) found that financial and market pressures lead to leadership styles focused on market concerns (transactional) rather than collegiality (transformational, laissez-faire), complicating team building and professional development. Haddon et al. (2015) observed that during crises, employees prefer leaders with ‘masculine’ traits and less emphasis on individualized consideration, contingent reward, and laissez-faire approaches, while valuing inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and management by exception. The insights and conclusions presented in this paper are also in line with the latest findings discussed at the St. Gallen Symposium and the NextGen Value Creation Barometer 2023 and 2024, which examine global trends in intergenerational fairness (Rüdiger and Casas, 2024).

Table 1 provides advice for leadership to choose an appropriate leadership style based on the organization's lifecycle. This generalization, informed by our case studies, outlines actionable recommendations for leaders to adapt their approach according to the organization's current phase, ensuring alignment with evolving needs and challenges.

Table 1: Recommendations for choice of leadership style depending on lifecycle stage

N	Stage	Leadership style	Guidelines
1	Emergence	Entrepreneurial Transformational	Be visionary and innovative to establish a unique identity. Foster a culture of risk-taking and experimentation. Encourage team collaboration and creativity. Lead by example and be hands-on.
2	Early growth	Transformational Coaching	Focus on scaling operations and expanding market reach. Empower employees and delegate responsibility. Develop and mentor the team. Promote a culture of adaptability and agility.
3	Rapid growth	Coaching Transactional	Focus on scaling operations and expanding market reach. Empower employees and delegate responsibility. Streamline processes and improve efficiency. Implement performance metrics and incentives.
4	Maturity	Transactional or Servant Leadership	Streamline processes and improve efficiency. Implement performance metrics and incentives. Serve as a facilitator and problem solver. Encourage employee development and well-being.
5	Decline with revitalization	Transformational Turnaround	Identify root causes of decline and make tough decisions. Revise strategies and reposition the organization. Inspire change and regain market relevance. Communicate openly and transparently.
6	Decline with recovery or sustained growth stage	Transformational Collaborative – employee oriented	Continue innovation and adaptation. Build strong partnerships and alliances. Maintain a focus on long-term sustainability.

N	Stage	Leadership style	Guidelines
			Empower employees to take ownership.
7	Decline with established and dominant stage	Collaborative or Charismatic Leadership	Foster a culture of excellence and continuous improvement. Leverage the organization's reputation and brand. Encourage innovation to stay ahead of the competition. Be an inspiring and visionary leader.

These general implications are not rigid, and leadership styles may overlap or evolve over generations. Leadership styles should be flexible and adaptable to specific needs and challenges of an enterprise throughout its lifecycle. Effective leaders must evolve their styles, potentially combining different approaches to address business aspects and align with the cultural environment, generational values, and organizational objectives.

5.2 Functional/Hierarchical Level and Leadership

The case studies reveal that top management in the commercial sector increasingly adopts transactional leadership styles due to growth and complexity, emphasizing task orientation and corrective measures. In contrast, the academic sector remains predominantly transformational, with leadership styles varying by lifecycle stage. These findings are in line with previous research highlighting differences in leadership styles within universities. Academic settings typically favour collaborative and decentralized decision-making, reflecting a focus on autonomy and informal networks (Kienast 2023). In contrast, commercial areas of universities, often employ a more hierarchical and managerial approach, driven by financial pressures and performance metrics (Gerashchenko 2022).

As an implication, businesses are advised to tailor their leadership approach to align with functional and hierarchical levels. Management should systematically evaluate their organization's current functional and hierarchical stage and adjust their leadership style to address specific needs effectively. This strategic alignment will enhance organizational effectiveness, navigate evolving challenges, and promote growth and success.

5.3 Culture, Lifecycle and Leadership

Leadership styles in Ukraine and Austria demonstrate similarities as well as differences across organizational phases. In start-up phases, both countries exhibit similar leadership approaches. During the growth phase, Ukraine tends toward transactional and authoritarian leadership, influenced by higher power distance and collectivism, while Austria employs more decentralized methods. In restructuring and recovery, Ukraine adopts a bureaucratic and hierarchical style, whereas both countries rely on transactional leadership during periods of rapid growth to provide guidance and structure. Ukraine's bureaucratic approach can hinder progress in rapidly changing environments, necessitating a shift to transformational leadership. In contrast, Austria's individualistic culture supports a blend of decentralized transformational leadership and centralized, matrix-oriented management that integrates both transformational and transactional elements.

Businesses should tailor their leadership styles based on both organizational lifecycle stages and cultural contexts. For instance, during growth and restructuring phases, businesses in high power distance and collectivist cultures may require more transactional and hierarchical leadership, while those in individualistic cultures might benefit from decentralized and transformational approaches. In highly competitive economic situations, transactional leadership prevails in both countries. This is in line with arguments presented by Carrasco and Fromm (2016) and Haddon et al. (2015) as discussed earlier. Adapting leadership strategies aligning with both cultural values and the lifecycle stage can enhance effectiveness and support organizational success.

5.4 Generational Shift in Leadership Roles

In Ukraine, top management (rectors, presidents, vice-rectors, deans) is predominantly composed of representatives from the Baby Boomer generation (over 60 years old). In contrast, nearly 40% of top management positions in Austria are held by Generation X. In Ukraine, the middle management level (program directors, department heads) is largely occupied by individuals aged 40 to 59 (Generation X), while in Austria, this level includes a certain proportion of individuals over 60, as well as nearly 15% from the 20 to 40 age group.

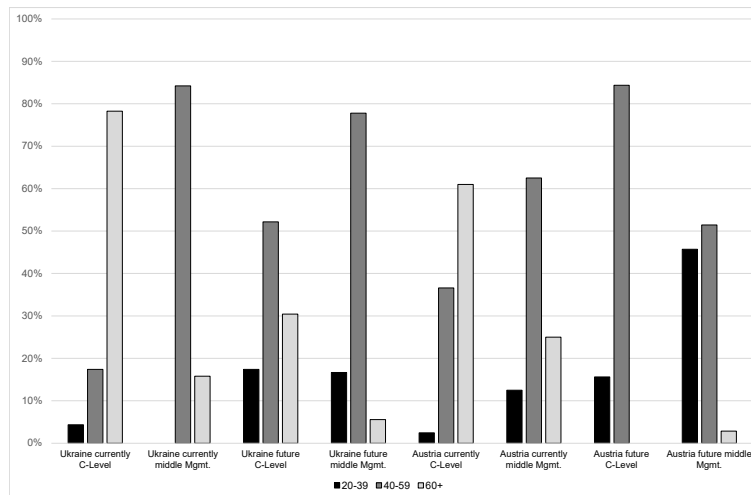


Figure 4: Generational composition of first and second-level leadership and anticipated future changes

In Ukraine, top leadership positions are still expected to be occupied by representatives of the 60+ generation, whereas in Austria, this age group is no longer represented. Both countries, however, anticipate a relatively stable proportion of approximately 15% of young top leaders aged 20 to 40 years.

In middle management roles, notable differences between the two countries exist: in Ukraine, most positions are held by individuals aged 40-59, while in Austria, over 40% are expected to be occupied by younger managers aged 20-39. This trend indicates a significant rejuvenation in Austria's middle management, unlike in Ukraine, where collectivist values lead to a preference for longer-serving, older leaders. This cultural difference underscores the varying approaches to leadership succession and recruitment in the two contexts.

Businesses should account for generational differences in leadership when planning. Organizations with top management predominantly from older generations may face challenges in integrating younger leaders, whereas those with a mix of older and younger managers are likely to experience more dynamic leadership transitions. Understanding these generational differences can help businesses tailor their leadership development and succession planning to better align with evolving organizational needs and foster effective leadership across all age groups.

6. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study focuses on just two countries, limiting its cultural scope; including more diverse contexts could enhance understanding. Evolving political, economic, or social conditions may affect the relevance of the findings. The case study methodology, while providing deep insights, limits generalizability and reliability. Future research should use different methodologies and larger samples for more robust results.

As this study focuses on the academic sector, transferring these findings to other types of organizations should be done cautiously. Future research should include case studies from different industries to better understand the evolution of leadership styles across different contexts.

This research concentrates on generations up to Gen Z. However, generational dynamics are continually evolving, and new cohorts with distinct demands are entering the labor market. Future research could explore these emerging generations, such as Generation Alpha, to offer up-to-date insights for labor market trends. Interesting avenues for further study might include how the technological upbringing of Generation Alpha influences their leadership preferences, the role of digital literacy in shaping their career trajectories, and the impact of their values on organizational culture and leadership practices.

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