

The Fragility Paradox: Re-evaluating Gen Z's Mental Health Crisis as a Radical Shift in Leadership Intelligence

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Abstrak

Integrasi Generasi Z ke dalam angkatan kerja global, yang diproyeksikan terdiri dari 27% tenaga kerja pada tahun 2025, bertepatan dengan tingkat kecemasan, depresi, dan kelelahan yang belum pernah terjadi sebelumnya di antara kelompok ini. Narasi manajemen yang berlaku sering kali mempatologikan sifat-sifat ini sebagai kerapuhan atau kurangnya ketahanan, menciptakan gesekan dengan model kepemimpinan komando-dan-kontrol tradisional. Tinjauan literatur integratif ini menantang perspektif berbasis defisit dengan mensintesis keilmuan dari psikologi klinis, studi manajemen, dan sosiologi untuk membingkai ulang hipersensitivitas Gen Z sebagai bentuk kecerdasan adaptif tingkat tinggi. Melalui lensa Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa reaktivitas emosional Gen Z berfungsi sebagai deteksi sinyal fidelitas tinggi, memungkinkan identifikasi dini dinamika toksik, penyimpangan etika, dan risiko sistemik yang diabaikan oleh model kepemimpinan yang tabah. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penyebaran bahasa klinis Gen Z mencerminkan literasi emosional tingkat lanjut daripada menjadi korban, dan kecemasan lingkungan mereka menunjukkan kapasitas untuk analisis konsekuensi sistemik yang penting untuk tata kelola yang berkelanjutan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa sektor korporat sedang mengalami evolusi yang diperlukan dari kepemimpinan Stoik menjadi Permeabel, di mana sifat-sifat yang dilabeli sebagai kelemahan sebenarnya adalah aset penting untuk menavigasi kompleksitas etis dunia modern.

Kata kunci: Kepemimpinan Gen Z, Sensitivitas Pemrosesan Sensorik, Kepemimpinan Adaptif, Kecerdasan Emosional, Stigma Kesehatan Mental, Perilaku Organisasi.

Abstract

The integration of Generation Z into the global workforce, projected to comprise 27% of labor by 2025, coincides with unprecedented rates of reported anxiety, depression, and burnout among this cohort. Prevailing management narratives often pathologize these traits as fragility or a lack of resilience, creating friction with traditional command-and-control leadership models. This integrative literature review challenges that deficit-based perspective by synthesizing scholarship from clinical psychology, management studies, and sociology to reframe Gen Z's hypersensitivity as a form of high-level adaptive intelligence. Through the lens of Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), the research argues that Gen Z's emotional reactivity functions as high-fidelity signal detection, enabling the early identification of toxic dynamics, ethical lapses, and systemic risks that stoic leadership models overlook. The findings suggest that Gen Z's deployment of clinical language reflects advanced emotional literacy rather than victimhood, and their eco-anxiety indicates a capacity for systemic consequence analysis essential for sustainable governance. The study concludes that the corporate sector is undergoing a necessary evolution from Stoic to Permeable leadership, where the very traits

labeled as weaknesses are actually critical assets for navigating the ethical complexities of the modern world.

Keywords: Gen Z Leadership, Sensory Processing Sensitivity, Adaptive Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health Stigma, Organizational Behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of re-evaluating Gen Z's mental health crisis as a potential radical shift in leadership intelligence is particularly urgent in late 2025. As this cohort, now aged 13–28, enters the workforce en masse, they are projected to represent 27% of the global labor force by 2025, making their integration critical for organizational success. This integration occurs amid ongoing post-pandemic recovery and economic volatility, creating a friction point between traditional management expectations and emerging workforce needs (Bartels, 2025).

Recent data confirm persistently high rates of anxiety and depression among Gen Z, with U.S. surveys estimating 44 million adults reporting near-daily anxiety and youth mental health erosion continuing well into 2022. The dominant narrative in media and management literature often frames these statistics through a snowflake lens, viewing this cohort as fragile or difficult to manage. However, this research counters that view by proposing their hypersensitivity is adaptive for ethical leadership in complex environments (Bitsko, 2022; Harari et al., 2023; McGorry et al., 2025; Pathak & Makk-Frid, 2025). The current workforce interprets these high rates of mental health struggles solely as a *deficit* or *pathology*, rather than a *response* to environmental complexity. This misreading ignores the societal impact where Gen Z reports higher vulnerability yet superior empathy for multigenerational teams.

In leadership studies, emotional intelligence (EQ) has long been linked to effective navigation of ethical dilemmas, with recent reviews showing EQ enhances team outcomes and adaptability. However, a significant gap exists: while clinical psychology focuses on treating the symptoms of Gen Z, and management theory focuses on merely accommodating them, few studies have analyzed the intersection of *hyper-awareness* (anxiety) and *ethical decision-making* as a singular evolutionary trait (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023). The fragility paradox demands attention in integrative reviews, as few studies intersect Gen Z anxiety with leadership adaptation. Current research treats symptoms clinically, ignoring evolutionary leadership potential. Timely discourse is needed to prevent pathologizing an

entire generation and to advocate for theory-driven interventions that elevate the conversation from crisis management to visionary leadership evolution.

This study seeks to explore the extent to which the psychological traits currently associated with Gen Z's mental health crisis, specifically hypersensitivity, anxiety, and vulnerability, can be re-conceptualized not as deficits, but as precursors to high-level adaptive leadership. Furthermore, the research investigates how this perceived fragility functions as a form of advanced Emotional Intelligence (EQ), particularly within complex ethical landscapes where traditional leadership models may falter.

METHOD

The research employs a qualitative integrative literature review design, which synthesizes existing scholarship from disparate fields, clinical psychology, management studies, and sociology, to construct a novel theoretical framework connecting Gen Z's psychological traits with adaptive leadership competencies. This methodological approach is particularly suited for knowledge-building across disciplinary boundaries, as integrative reviews enable researchers to combine qualitative and quantitative evidence to address complex phenomena that single-discipline perspectives cannot fully capture (Badu et al., 2019; Booth et al., 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Dhollande et al., 2021). The search strategy draws from multiple databases including PubMed for clinical psychology literature on anxiety and high sensitivity, Business Source Complete for management and leadership scholarship, JSTOR for sociological analyses of generational dynamics, and gray literature from corporate entities like McKinsey and Deloitte regarding future workforce trends. Inclusion criteria prioritize peer-reviewed articles published between 2010–2024 that address Adaptive Leadership, High Sensitivity Persons (HSP), Gen Z Workforce Psychology, and Ethical Intelligence, while excluding studies focused solely on pharmacological interventions or demographic surveys lacking psychological depth.

The analytical approach integrates thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across psychology and management texts, specifically examining how constructs like emotional reactivity, deep cognitive processing, and aesthetic sensitivity in HSP research align with emerging Gen Z leadership preferences for empathy, authenticity, and purpose-driven work (Bas et al., 2021; Trå et al., 2022). Comparative analysis contrasts traditional Command and Control leadership models historically associated with Boomer and Gen X generations against

Empathetic/Vulnerable leadership models that resonate with Gen Z employees, who demonstrate superior adaptive performance under inclusive, transformational, and supportive leadership styles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Theme I: Deconstructing Fragility , The Semantics of Suffering

Generation Z demonstrates a marked departure from previous generations in their deployment of clinical and trauma-informed language within everyday discourse, employing terms such as trauma, boundaries, gaslighting, triggering, and dissociation with precision and frequency unprecedented in workplace settings. This linguistic shift has been misinterpreted by older cohorts as evidence of heightened fragility or victimhood mentality, yet emerging research in psycholinguistics reveals this pattern reflects *emotional literacy* rather than emotional weakness. Studies analyzing affective language use demonstrate that individuals who possess sophisticated emotional vocabularies exhibit enhanced capacity for emotion regulation, adaptive coping, and early intervention in psychological distress, suggesting that Gen Z's clinical language functions as a diagnostic tool for identifying toxic organizational dynamics before they escalate into systemic dysfunction (Nook, 2023). The 33% prevalence of sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) among Gen Z nursing students, characterized by heightened emotional repair, empathy, respect, and global communication skills, further substantiates that this generation's linguistic precision corresponds with actual psychological competencies rather than performative vulnerability.

The research findings challenge the narrative of generational weakness by demonstrating that Gen Z's trauma-informed language serves multiple adaptive functions: establishing psychological safety protocols, articulating boundaries that prevent burnout, and detecting subtle power imbalances that previous generations normalized through powering through cultures. Qualitative studies with young people conceptualizing mental health experiences reveal sophisticated self-management strategies and help-seeking processes informed by clinical frameworks, indicating that language literacy enables proactive mental health maintenance rather than passive victimhood (Lynch et al., 2025). This linguistic evolution parallels findings in trauma-sensitive healthcare, where precise language use by clinicians reduces re-traumatization and builds trust, Gen Z applies this same principle horizontally within peer and workplace relationships, creating environments where early warning signs of organizational distress become visible and addressable. The generational

friction observed in workplaces thus stems not from Gen Z's inadequacy but from leadership's inability to interpret their advanced emotional communication systems, which operate at a level of granularity that traditional command-and-control models lack vocabulary to engage (Camfield & Bayers, 2023; Hart et al., 2024).

The implications for organizational development are profound: workplaces that dismiss Gen Z's clinical language as oversensitivity forfeit access to *high-fidelity organizational diagnostic data* embedded within their communications. Research on workplace mental health detection emphasizes that psychological literacy among employees, exactly the trait Gen Z exhibits, enables earlier identification of systemic problems, reduces stigma through normalization of mental health discourse, and strengthens organizational capability to support employee wellbeing (Poddar & Chhajer, 2024). Comparative generational studies confirm that while Gen Z reports higher rates of anxiety and depression, they simultaneously demonstrate superior emotional regulation capacities and lower reliance on maladaptive coping behaviors when provided with supportive environments that validate their linguistic frameworks. This paradox, higher reported distress coupled with superior emotional intelligence, dissolves when understood through the lens of detection sensitivity: Gen Z identifies and articulates psychological challenges that previous generations experienced but lacked language to describe, creating false comparisons between visibility and prevalence of mental health struggles.

Table 1: Emotional Literacy Indicators Across Generations

Dimension	Gen Z (1997-2012)	Millennials (1981-1996)	Gen X (1965-1980)	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Source
Clinical Language Use in Workplace	High (trauma, boundaries, gaslighting)	Moderate	Low	Very Low	(Nook, 2023)
Emotional Vocabulary Precision	Advanced diagnostic terminology	Self-help terminology	Limited terminology	Minimal terminology	(Nook, 2023)

Mental Health Disclosure Rate	36% report poor/fair wellbeing	27%	20%	<15%	(Pathak & Makk-Frid, 2025)
Early Detection of Toxic Dynamics	High sensitivity to microaggressions	Moderate	Low	Very Low	(Poddar & Chhajer, 2024)
Emotional Repair Capacity (HSP)	Superior (p=0.033)	Not measured	Not measured	Not measured	(Bas et al., 2021)
Help-Seeking Behavior	Proactive, framework-driven	Reactive	Avoidant	Highly stigmatized	(Lynch et al., 2025)

3.2 Theme II: Anxiety as Signal Detection (The Evolutionary/Psychological View)

The reconceptualization of Gen Z's anxiety through the lens of *Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS)* provides a neurobiological foundation for understanding their heightened reactivity as an adaptive trait rather than pathology. SPS, characterized by depth of cognitive processing, emotional reactivity, aesthetic sensitivity, and ease of overstimulation, affects approximately 20-30% of the population but shows markedly higher prevalence among Gen Z, particularly in high-stakes professional contexts like nursing (33%) and leadership roles (Bas et al., 2021). This trait functions as a *constant environmental scanning mechanism*, enabling highly sensitive individuals to detect subtle changes in social dynamics, ethical incongruencies, and team stress levels that neurotypical individuals fail to register until crises manifest. Research on SPS and leadership demonstrates that individuals high in this trait exhibit significantly higher ethical perceptions when working under transformational leaders, suggesting their sensitivity acts as an amplification system for both positive and negative organizational signals, making them ideal canaries in the coal mine for organizational health (Ponce-Valencia et al., 2024).

The evolutionary advantage of anxiety-as-signal-detection becomes evident when examining workplace outcomes: studies reveal that highly sensitive employees derive greater

benefits from positive job resources than their less sensitive peers, demonstrating a *vantage sensitivity effect* where the same permeability that causes distress under poor conditions enables exceptional performance under supportive leadership (Onesti et al., 2024). This finding directly parallels Gen Z's documented pattern of thriving under inclusive, democratic, and transformational leadership while experiencing acute distress under transactional or authoritarian management. The neurological mechanism underlying this pattern involves differential susceptibility to environmental quality: individuals high in SPS process stimuli more deeply, retain emotional memories longer, and demonstrate heightened responsiveness to both threats and opportunities, positioning them as superior environmental monitors in volatile contexts. Qualitative research with highly sensitive adults reveals they describe their experiences using metaphors of absorbing everything, being overwhelmed by subtle cues, and noticing what others miss, precisely the competencies required for early detection of microaggressions, ethical lapses, and team burnout before organizational interventions become necessary.

The paradox emerges in its full complexity here: *the identical trait that produces personal distress simultaneously generates superior organizational monitoring capacity*. Research on sensory processing and leadership styles confirms that highly sensitive individuals under job stressors experience diminished wellbeing, yet this vulnerability is mitigated by democratic leadership, and importantly, these same individuals outperform less sensitive peers in identifying early warning signs of systemic dysfunction. This pattern aligns with Gen Z's documented demand for psychological safety, transparency, and ethical governance, conditions that are not special accommodations for fragility but rather *optimal environments for deploying their advanced signal-detection capabilities*. Studies examining health-oriented leadership emphasize that leaders' staff-care awareness, their ability to perceive employees' warning signals, critically determines intervention effectiveness, yet Gen Z employees inherently possess this perceptual capability, detecting distress in themselves and peers with precision that previous generations' stoicism obscured (Grimm et al., 2021). The implication for leadership theory is transformative: organizations that pathologize Gen Z anxiety forfeit access to their most sophisticated early-warning system for organizational pathology, while those that cultivate psychological safety unlock predictive intelligence about team health, ethical risks, and systemic vulnerabilities.

Table 2: Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) as Leadership Asset

SPS Characteristic	Manifestation in Gen Z	Leadership Application	Organizational Benefit	Source
Depth of Processing	High cognitive reflection on decisions	Ethical decision-making, consequence analysis	Reduced short-term thinking, long-term strategic gains	(Ponce-Valencia et al., 2024)
Emotional Reactivity	Heightened response to team dynamics	Early detection of morale issues, conflict	Preventive intervention before crisis escalation	(Onesti et al., 2024)
Aesthetic Sensitivity	Awareness of subtle environmental cues	Detection of microaggressions, inequities	Enhanced inclusivity, reduced discrimination incidents	(Bas et al., 2021)
Overstimulation Susceptibility	Distress under poor leadership	Amplified response to organizational dysfunction	Immediate feedback on toxic management practices	(Onesti et al., 2024)
Vantage Sensitivity	Exceptional performance under support	Thriving under transformational leadership	Higher engagement, innovation in positive climates	(Onesti et al., 2024)
Ethical Perception	Superior ethical cognition	Organizational integrity monitoring	Compliance, reputation protection, stakeholder trust	(Stenmark, 2024)

3.3 Theme III: The Shift from Stoic to Permeable Leadership

Traditional leadership models inherited from Baby Boomer and Gen X paradigms emphasized *stoic, command-and-control approaches* that valorized emotional suppression, hierarchical authority, and individual resilience as markers of leadership competence. This Stoic archetype, rooted in industrial-era management theories, operated under assumptions

that vulnerability signals weakness, emotion compromises rationality, and leaders must maintain psychological distance to preserve authority. However, contemporary research across multiple disciplines demonstrates these assumptions produce suboptimal outcomes in modern organizational contexts characterized by knowledge work, cross-functional collaboration, and innovation-dependent value creation. Comparative studies of Gen Z workplace performance reveal they exhibit significantly higher adaptive performance, engagement, and retention under *inclusive, democratic, and transformational leadership styles* that emphasize empathy, transparency, and psychological safety, precisely the opposite of stoic command structures (Ogunsola et al., 2024). Gen Z future leaders explicitly reject traditional authoritarian models, instead prioritizing being supportive, empathetic, egoless and managing with love and respect, indicating a fundamental reconceptualization of leadership legitimacy away from power-distance toward relational authenticity.

The emergence of permeable leadership, characterized by vulnerability, emotional transparency, and bidirectional influence, reflects not generational preference but *empirical evidence of superior organizational outcomes*. Research on vulnerable leadership demonstrates that leaders who disclose mental health struggles build higher trust scores, strengthen team psychological safety, and achieve better retention rates, particularly in flat-hierarchy organizations where knowledge workers demand authentic relationships rather than formal authority. Studies examining health-oriented leadership reveal that leaders' self-care (acknowledging own health needs) and staff-care (perceiving employees' wellbeing) directly improve team engagement, reduce exhaustion, and mediate positive working conditions, suggesting that permeability, the capacity to sense and respond to psychological states, constitutes a core leadership competency rather than a liability (Pischel et al., 2022). Gen Z's demand for this leadership model stems from their own SPS-enhanced capacity to detect inauthenticity: research confirms highly sensitive individuals immediately recognize incongruence between espoused values and enacted behaviors, making traditional do as I say, not as I do leadership untenable. Their insistence on permeable leadership thus functions as quality control ensuring leaders possess the psychological literacy to navigate complex ethical landscapes where stakeholder interests conflict and simple hierarchical decisions prove inadequate.

The paradigm shift from stoic to permeable leadership generates measurable competitive advantages particularly relevant to contemporary organizational challenges:

climate crisis response, diversity and inclusion, technological disruption, and stakeholder capitalism. Research demonstrates that Gen Z employees exhibit superior adaptive performance during major cultural shifts specifically when leadership styles incorporate employee voice behavior, structural empowerment, and flexible work arrangements, all elements of permeable leadership that stoic models historically suppressed (Katsaros, 2025b, 2025a). Studies on ethical leadership confirm that Gen Z resilience, proactive behavior, and technological innovation increase under leaders who model vulnerability and ethical reasoning, suggesting that permeability enables knowledge transfer about navigating uncertainty that stoic leaders cannot provide. The Connected Authentic Leadership Model, developed specifically for Gen Z workforce engagement, emphasizes authentic connection, ethical transparency, and emotional availability as core competencies, directly contradicting legacy models that positioned these qualities as weaknesses. Organizations persisting with stoic leadership face documented risks: Gen Z turnover intentions increase, adaptive performance declines, and innovative capacity diminishes under transactional or authoritarian management, while competitors adopting permeable models capture talent and outperform on engagement metrics (Mitchell, 2025; Onson et al., 2025).

Table 3: Leadership Model Comparison - Stoic versus Permeable Paradigms

Dimension	Stoic Leadership (Boomer/Gen X)	Permeable Leadership (Gen Z)	Empirical Outcome	Source
Emotional Expression	Suppression, detachment	Transparency, vulnerability	Higher trust, retention with permeable	(Pischel et al., 2022)
Authority Source	Hierarchical position, expertise	Relational authenticity, competence	Superior engagement in flat structures	(Mitchell, 2025)
Decision-Making	Top-down, command-driven	Inclusive, voice-enabled	Higher adaptive performance with inclusion	(Katsaros, 2024)
Mental Health Disclosure	Stigmatized, career-limiting	Normalized, trust-building	Improved psychological	(Poddar & Chhajer, 2024)

			safety, reduced stigma	
Response to Employee Distress	Toughen up, minimize	Staff-care awareness, intervention	Earlier detection, preventive support	(Grimm et al., 2021)
Ethical Framework	Compliance, profitability	Systemic justice, stakeholder welfare	Enhanced reputation, long-term sustainability	(Onsori et al., 2025)
Failure Tolerance	Low, blame-oriented	High, learning-oriented	Increased innovation, psychological safety	(Mitchell, 2025)
Gen Z Performance Under Model	Decreased engagement, higher turnover	Increased adaptive performance, retention	Documented across multiple studies	(Ogunsola et al., 2024)

3.4 Theme IV: Ethical Intelligence and Systemic Thinking

Gen Z's mental health crisis exhibits distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from clinical depression or generalized anxiety: their distress disproportionately manifests as *eco-anxiety*, *societal anxiety*, and *intergenerational concern*, indicating psychological architecture optimized for systemic consequence analysis rather than purely individual wellbeing. Research on Gen Z environmental attitudes reveals they experience persistent fear, helplessness, and despair specifically regarding climate change's long-term impacts, with studies documenting that this cohort uniquely perceives environmental degradation as interconnected with social justice, economic inequality, and political dysfunction (Tsevreni et al., 2023). Comparative intergenerational analyses demonstrate Gen Z shows significantly higher levels of eco-anxiety than Millennials, Gen X, or Boomers, coupled with superior capacity to articulate systemic connections between individual actions and collective outcomes. This pattern suggests their anxiety functions not as individual pathology but as *appropriate affective response to existential threats that require systemic solutions*, positioning their worry as adaptive intelligence rather than maladaptive catastrophizing. Studies examining intergenerational concern confirm that

individuals with heightened awareness of future generations' welfare exhibit more constructive coping with climate change, higher pro-environmental engagement, and stronger ethical frameworks for decision-making, precisely the psychological profile Gen Z demonstrates at population scale (Syropoulos et al., 2024).

The correlation between mental health awareness and systemic justice consciousness reveals Gen Z possesses what can be termed *ethical intelligence*, the capacity to perceive second- and third-order consequences of decisions across temporal, social, and environmental dimensions. Research on Gen Z sustainability advocacy demonstrates their exposure to social media content regarding environmental and social issues produces measurable behavioral changes toward sustainable practices, lifestyle modifications, and advocacy for circular economy principles, suggesting their anxiety serves as motivational architecture for ethical action (Malikova, 2021). This stands in marked contrast to previous generations' documented pattern of cognitive dissonance between environmental knowledge and behavior: Boomers and Gen X frequently possessed climate awareness without corresponding anxiety or behavioral adaptation, enabling continued participation in destructive practices. Gen Z's inability to psychologically compartmentalize systemic threats, often pathologized as overthinking or catastrophizing, actually represents *reduced capacity for motivated reasoning and self-deception*, traits that enabled previous corporate leadership to prioritize short-term profits while externalizing long-term costs onto future generations and marginalized populations. Studies examining young people's perceptions of sustainable development goals reveal they prioritize elimination of hunger, access to potable water, and global education equity, demonstrating their systemic thinking integrates multiple justice dimensions simultaneously rather than treating environmental, social, and economic issues as separate domains (Adamczyk & Adamczyk-Kowalczyk, 2022).

The leadership implications of Gen Z's ethical intelligence and systemic thinking are transformative for organizational governance: their worry functions as *cognitive infrastructure that prevents short-termism, regulatory arbitrage, and stakeholder exploitation* that characterized previous eras of corporate leadership. Research confirms that Gen Z employees influenced by ethical leadership demonstrate enhanced resilience, proactive behavior, and commitment to technological innovation specifically when organizational missions align with societal benefit, suggesting their anxiety resolves when their labor contributes to systemic solutions. Studies on intergenerational concern and legacy motivations reveal individuals

worried about future generations exhibit heightened emotional reactions combining both concern and hope, producing constructive engagement rather than paralysis, Gen Z's simultaneous mental health struggles and activism embody this pattern (Petrescu-Mag et al., 2023). Their capacity for systemic consequence analysis makes them ideally suited for leadership in contexts requiring stakeholder balance, long-term strategic planning, and ethical complexity navigation: ESG investing, sustainable supply chains, climate adaptation, and social equity initiatives. Organizations that dismiss Gen Z's eco-anxiety as irrational fragility forfeit access to talent whose psychological architecture inherently prevents the extractive, short-term decision-making that produced contemporary systemic crises, while competitors recognizing this trait as ethical intelligence gain leaders pre-adapted to post-growth, stakeholder-centric business models increasingly mandated by regulatory environments and consumer expectations.

Table 4: Ethical Intelligence Indicators - Systemic Thinking Capacity

Indicator	Gen Z (1997-2012)	Previous Generations (Pre-1997)	Leadership Implication	Source
Eco-Anxiety Prevalence	High; persistent climate distress	Low; compartmentalized concern	Natural brake on environmentally destructive decisions	(Tsevreni et al., 2023)
Systemic Connection Articulation	Climate-justice-economy integration	Siloed, single-issue thinking	Holistic stakeholder analysis	(LeSage-Clements et al., 2024)
Intergenerational Concern	Future welfare prioritized	Present-biased decision-making	Long-term strategic orientation	(Syropoulos et al., 2024)
Sustainability Advocacy	Behavioral modification + activism	Knowledge-action gap	Authentic ESG implementation	(Confetto et al., 2023)

Ethical Framework	Stakeholder, systemic justice	Shareholder primacy, profitability	Post-growth business model adaptation	(Onsori et al., 2025)
Cognitive Dissonance Tolerance	Low; requires value-action alignment	High; compartmentalization enabled	Organizational integrity enforcement	(Malikova, 2021)
Response to Ethical Lapses	Anxiety, proactive intervention	Normalization, complicity	Early ethical risk detection	(Stenmark, 2024)
Decision-Making Time Horizon	Multi-generational consequences	Quarterly earnings, short-term	Prevention of long-term liability accumulation	(Petrescu-Mag et al., 2023)

CONCLUSION

This research has systematically deconstructed the narrative of Generation Z's fragility, demonstrating that what is often perceived as a mental health crisis is more accurately understood as a sensitivity revolution in the workforce. The synthesis of clinical and management literature reveals that the high prevalence of anxiety and depression in this cohort is not merely a sign of reduced resilience, but a manifestation of high-fidelity environmental scanning. Gen Z employees are not breaking under pressure; rather, they are measuring pressure with greater precision than previous generations. By functioning as canaries in the coal mine, their heightened sensitivity allows them to detect toxic work cultures, latent ethical risks, and psychological safety violations long before they escalate into catastrophic organizational failures. The crisis is, therefore, a signal of an evolutionary adaptation suited for an increasingly complex and volatile global landscape.

The study offers a critical realignment for both psychology and management theory. For the field of psychology, it advocates for a shift away from solely pathologizing generational anxiety, suggesting instead that these traits be viewed through the lens of Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), an adaptive social trait that serves a protective function for the group. For management theory, the findings necessitate a redefinition of High Potential employees. The traditional value placed on grit (the ability to endure silence and pain) must be balanced with,

or even superseded by, a value on permeability (the capacity to sense and navigate emotional complexity). This theoretical pivot challenges the legacy of the Stoic leader, positing that future organizational survival depends on leaders who possess the emotional bandwidth to process, rather than suppress, systemic stress.

To leverage this shift, organizations must abandon attempts to toughen up Gen Z and instead restructure to utilize their sensitivity as a strategic asset. A primary recommendation is the implementation of Mentorship Reversal programs: while older generations continue to mentor Gen Z on operational endurance and institutional strategy, Gen Z should formally mentor senior leadership on emotional literacy, psychological safety protocols, and ethical foresight. Furthermore, organizations must engineer Structural Change that incentivizes early warning behaviors. This involves moving from hierarchical command structures to flat, psychological safety-centric networks where anxiety is interpreted as data regarding organizational health, allowing specifically for the early detection of burnout and ethical drift that Gen Z is uniquely wired to provide.

We are currently witnessing the death of the Iron Leader, the archetype of the detached, invulnerable authority figure, and the difficult birth of the Sentient Leader. The mental health struggles of Generation Z are not defects to be medicated away in isolation; they are the growing pains of this necessary evolution in human governance. By re-evaluating this fragility paradox, society can stop trying to fix a generation that isn't broken and start fixing the broken systems they have successfully diagnosed.

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