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14. ABSTRACT
Gen Z is vastly different than previous generations. Their unique traits and experiences create a significant understanding gap between Gen Z and older generations. Senior Marine Corps leaders are identifying this gap between themselves and their Gen Z Marines. The Marine Corps historical reluctance to change is placing the responsibility on Gen Z Marines to conform to the institution to reduce the understanding gap. However, closing the understanding gap is a two-way street. Senior leaders need to adapt their leadership to Gen Z, and Gen Z needs to conform to the values, principles, orders, and regulations of the institution. Utilizing emotional intelligence, senior Marine Corps leaders will better understand generational differences and their Gen Z Marines holistically. Gen Z has a naturally inquisitive nature that through the application of critical thinking assists them in rapidly conforming to the Marine Corps. The understanding gap is not insurmountable and requires both sides to take responsibility for meeting in the middle.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**GENERATION Z AND THE IMPACT TO MARINE CORPS LEADERSHIP:
HOW TO CLOSE THE UNDERSTANDING GAP BETWEEN SENIOR LEADERS AND GEN Z MARINES**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 2019-20

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Executive Summary

Title: Generation Z and the Impact to Marine Corps Leadership: How to Close the Understanding Gap between Senior Leaders and Gen Z Marines

Author: Major Frank J. Mastromauro, United States Marine Corps.

Thesis: Historically, the Marine Corps has demonstrated a strong reluctance to adapting to societal change. However, today's leaders need to transition away from fixating on Gen Z's perceived faults and instead figure out how they can adapt their leadership style to resonate with their Gen Z Marines.

Discussion: Historically, the Marine Corps has been resistant to adapting to societal changes. This is in large part due to senior Marine Corps leaders clinging to tradition, legacy, and experience. Today, these same leaders are experiencing an understanding gap between themselves and their Gen Z Marines. Gen Z's generational traits and experiences are making them distinctly different from previous generations. Senior leaders tend to characterize these differences as negative stereotypes based on inaccurate anecdotal evidence and expect Gen Z to close the understanding gap through conformity to the institution. Gen Z has a responsibility to conform to the Marine Corps, but senior leaders also have a responsibility to understand and adapt their leadership to their Marines. Through emotional intelligence, senior leaders can empathize with their Gen Z Marines and take responsibility for meeting Gen Z in the middle. Developing critical thinking in Gen Z Marines allows them to quickly conform to the Marine Corps by leveraging their unique traits and experiences to build a more lethal force. Senior leaders can continue to refine Gen Z Marines' traits and experiences by modifying existing leadership principles and development fundamentals that resonate with Gen Z.

Conclusion: Gen Z has specific traits and life experiences that are significantly different from their Millennial and Gen X leadership, creating a gap in understanding. While Gen Z may be different, it is essential to remember that these differences are not all negative. Gen Z's unique traits and experiences make them inherently prepared to apply Maneuver Warfare to today's complex and evolving battlefield. They require senior leaders who are willing to teach, coach, and mentor them to refine their skills into a lethal fighting force. Gen Z is ready to meet the demands of the Marine Corps to conform to the institution. If the Marine Corps wants to leverage their traits and experiences to succeed on today's battlefield, then senior Marine Corps leaders also need to adapt their leadership to meet Gen Z halfway.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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Preface

Gen Z is vastly different than previous generations. Their unique traits and experiences create a significant understanding gap between Gen Z and older generations. Senior Marine Corps leaders are identifying this gap between themselves and their Gen Z Marines. The Marine Corps' historical reluctance to change is placing the responsibility on Gen Z Marines to conform to the institution to reduce the understanding gap. However, closing the understanding gap is a two-way street. Senior leaders need to adapt their leadership to Gen Z, and Gen Z needs to conform to the values, principles, orders, and regulations of the institution. Utilizing emotional intelligence, senior Marine Corps leaders will better understand generational differences and their Gen Z Marines holistically. Gen Z has a naturally inquisitive nature that, through the application of critical thinking, assists them in rapidly conforming to the Marine Corps. The understanding gap is not insurmountable and requires both sides to take responsibility for meeting in the middle.

I much appreciate the inspiration and assistance I received in completing this project. I would like to thank LtCol Robert McCarthy, who started me on this journey when he brought Ms. K.C. Reid to 3d Battalion, 11th Marines for a lecture on generational differences holistically and Gen Z specifically. I also want to thank GySgt Lucas Soderbery for the countless hours of conversation we had trying to understand our Gen Z Marines. Finally, I want to thank my mentor, Dr. Bradford Wineman, for his support throughout this endeavor. Without his mentorship, guidance, and direction, I would never have translated my thoughts about Gen Z and the Marine Corps into this final project.

The Marine Corps places a significant emphasis on the individual warfighter. To defend the United States at home and abroad, the Marine Corps makes Marines who win the nation's battles and returns each Marine as a quality citizen.¹ In the Commandant's Planning Guidance, General David H. Berger says, "Everything starts and ends with the individual Marine."² As the smallest service in the Department of Defense, the Marine Corps relies on recruiting and retaining highly qualified individuals from the larger United States population. The growth and development of the individual Marine are just as important to the Marine Corps as the development and implementation of concepts, equipment, and technology. Former Commandant Alexander A. Vandegrift stated, "Positions are seldom lost because they have been destroyed, but almost invariably because the leader has decided in his own mind that the position cannot be held."³

While the Marine Corps places significant value in the individual Marine that it recruits and retains, senior Marine leaders regularly question whether the current cohort of Marine meets the same standards as the generations of Marines before them. As senior leaders struggle to connect with their Marines, they quickly fault their younger Marines rather than look at themselves to find an answer for the disconnect. This may be due to senior Marines clinging to tradition, legacy, and experience rather than adapting to changes that come with a new generation of Marines filling the junior to mid-level ranks. Marine leaders have documented these same, usually negative, generalizations in recent studies, which stated today's Marines are weaker, less disciplined, unfocused, not as proficient, more individualistic.⁴ During periods of decreased combat deployments, the question of generational differences tends to amplify. This is coupled with junior Marines, who begin to ask more questions and do not understand their purpose if they are not deploying for combat.⁵ The current generation in the Marine Corps is no

different. As leaders grapple with how to relate to their Marines, there appears to be a significant and noticeable understanding gap separating leader and led.

Over the last 244 years, the Marine Corps established its traditions, values, and legacy. These traditions and values have served the Marine Corps well throughout its history of fighting in all the major wars and conflicts of the United States. However, it may have created reluctance to change, such as when the Marine Corps was the slowest of the services to racially integrate after President Truman's 1948 desegregation policy.⁶ The Marine Corps demonstrated similar reluctance after the DoD policy regarding gender integration in all combat arms specialties in 2015. The Marine Corps has clung to tradition and culture as resistance to broader national social change. This institutional resistance to social change is in stark contrast to the Marine Corps' reputation for flexibility and adaptability.

Today, the Marine Corps must recognize that there is a significant enough difference in its young Marines that it must adapt to these differences, or it will struggle to retain quality Gen Z Marines. Currently, 67 percent of all Marines are 25 years old or younger, and 39 percent of all Marines are Lance Corporals and below.⁷ This means that more than two-thirds of all Marines were born in 1994 or later, which coincides with the transition to Generation Z, or Gen Z for short, starting in 1995.⁸ Additionally, the Marine Corps is the youngest service in the Department of Defense and has the highest turnover rate after the first term of enlistment.⁹ This may create an environment where leaders focus on getting the most out of their Marines in the short time they are in the Marine Corps, rather than genuinely understanding each individual. Recently, Marine Corps Recruiting Command began using generational studies to provide information to their recruiters regarding Gen Z, underlining the importance or impact of the unique traits and experiences of Gen Z on recruiting and the Marine Corps. A generation gap

exists, and senior Marine leaders recognize it as a problem. However, the problem may not lie solely with the Gen Z Marines.

Senior Marine Corps leaders realize there is a gap between themselves and their Gen Z Marines, and they focus on Gen Z as the problem. K.C. Reid, in her article, “How the Network Generation is Changing the Millennial Military,” describes how commanders told her they could not get their Marines off their phones. She also explains that Gen Z Marines are used to having immediate access to information and demand answers via apps and platforms they use regularly.¹⁰ In response to the Marine’s United Scandal, General Robert B. Neller initiated a study through the Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture and Learning (CAOCL) to examine social cohesion, gender bias, and leadership across the Marine Corps.¹¹ CAOCL conducted hundreds of interviews across the Marine Corps, and one military officer stated that Generation Z requires instant gratification and that they want “things to happen now, now, now...”¹² K.C. Reid also notes that Gen Z wants to know what is in it for them. Millennials wanted to know the “why” and now Gen Z wants to know, “why is it important to me?”¹³ In the CAOCL study, a Warrant Officer stated, “Perhaps society is considering peoples feeling a lot more...And this organization is affected by that. I mean if you want to talk transgender or considering people's feelings. That didn't exist ten years ago...They used to be able to hold a Marine accountable for doing something. Now we need to consider the back story and all his feelings and all the circumstances in his personal life surrounding that situation.”¹⁴ Many of these concerns are not new. Senior leaders take issue with their subordinates any time they do not look, act, or sound just like them. There is only so much acculturation that can occur from entry-level training to a Marine’s first duty station. New Marines will always bring part of their civilian upbringing and culture with them into the military. Gen Z Marines indeed need to

conform to the Marine Corps, but it is just as crucial for Marine Corps leadership to figure out how to mold their Gen Z Marines into a lethal team.

The underlying problem is assessing how the Marine Corps needs to adjust to meet Gen Z in the middle of the understanding gap. Part of the resistance to this process is a major pillar to the Marine Corps recruiting model is the transformation that a recruit experiences to the betterment of their character and behavior due to joining or conforming to the institution. As an institution that built itself on a foundation of discipline and instant obedience to orders, it is only natural for senior leaders to assume that this new generation of Marine is the problem. Senior leaders need to understand that they are part of the problem too. By pointing the finger solely at Gen Z and not looking internally, senior leaders create a culture of “us versus them.” Historically, the Marine Corps has demonstrated a strong reluctance to adapting to societal change. However, today’s leaders need to transition away from fixating on Gen Z’s perceived faults and instead figure out how they can adjust their leadership style to resonate with their Gen Z Marines.

What is a Generation

The definition of a generation has changed over time to adapt to changes in society. Traditional definitions focused on biological factors, mainly the time between the birth of parents and their children. This definition was no longer relevant as adults started having children later in life, and societal changes become more significant than biological ones.¹⁵ As leaders in the study of generations, William Strauss and Neil Howe define generations as, “a group of people who share a time and place in history that lends them a collective persona,” covering “roughly the length of a phase of life.”¹⁶ This definition is closer to defining today’s generations but creates arbitrary divisions based on geography, socioeconomic status, and culture, which

technology interconnects.¹⁷ Mark McCrindle in *The ABC of XYZ* defines a generation as “a group of people born in the same era, shaped by the same times and influenced by the same social markers...a cohort united by age and life stage, conditions and technology, events, and experiences.”¹⁸ This definition captures the essence of Gen Z, built on biological and societal factors that influence a cohort of individuals.

The literature, led by the Pew Research Center, identifies five distinct generations, to include: Silent, Boomer, Generation X, Generation Y or Millennial, and Generation Z. The research varies on the start and end date of each generation and Table 1 depicts these differences.

Table 1: Generations by Start and End Dates

Source	PEW ¹	Wiedmer ¹	Bencsik ¹	Tuglan ¹	Southgate ¹	Desai ¹
Silent/Traditionalist	1928-1945	1900-1945	1925-1946	pre-1946	—	1928-1945
Baby Boomer	1946-1964	1946-1964	1946-1960	1946-1964	—	1946-1964
Gen X	1965-1980	1961-1981	1960-1980	1965-1977	1967-1981	1965-1980
Gen Y (Millennial)	1981-1996	1980-1990	1981-1994	1978-2000	1982-1996	1981-1989
Gen Z	1997 - TBD	1995-2015	1995-2010	2001-TBD	1997-2011	1990-2017

Source: David E. Rosenback, “The Impact of Generation Z on Marine Corps Recruiting” (unpublished manuscript, January 16, 2020), Microsoft Word file. *Note:* – PEW Gen Z dates updated by the author.

The Silent Generation is the oldest generation born between 1928 and 1945, influenced by the Great Depression and WWII. The Boomer generation was born between 1946 to 1964, and their generation is defined by an era of prosperity and growth to include immigration, civil rights, and an increased birthrate. Following the Boomers is Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980 and defined by a period of peace and prosperity before the beginning of the war on terror.

Following Generation X is Generation Y, or the Millennials born from 1981 to 1994 defined by war and the development of personal devices and the internet. Finally, Generation Z, born between 1995 and approximately 2017, who are well educated, socially, and culturally diverse, and more globally connected. Their most defining experience is the use of technology in every aspect of life from birth.¹⁹ Each generation is distinct, with biological and societal factors that impact their traits and experiences.

There are two primary arguments against generational research. First, there are broad generalizations derived from primarily anecdotal evidence. Second, these generalizations are typically negative stereotypes. Researchers admit that there are limits to available data, but with generational differences becoming a greater focus of study, more robust data sets are developing. Researches can isolate the variance in data sets to produce empirical evidence by using cross-sectional and cross-temporal analysis. In “Generational Differences are Real,” Keith W. Campbell et al., argues that cross-temporal measurements are more useful for analyzing generational differences because it captures two types of variance, cohort and time, with a fixed age. Through this type of analysis, researches are creating data sets that account for variables such as empathy, work-life balance, anxiety, and stress. The General Social Survey, produced at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, uses data analyzed both cross-sectionally and cross-temporally controlling for variances in age, cohort, and time.²⁰ Using empirical data, the authors identified positive and negative traits associated with generations, not merely negative stereotypes. While all individuals in a generation are not the same, rejecting identified differences because of the negative connotations with the word stereotype ignores reality.²¹ Rather than categorizing these traits as positive or negative, they are unique differences that with mentorship and guidance can be used to the individual and possibly an organization's advantage.

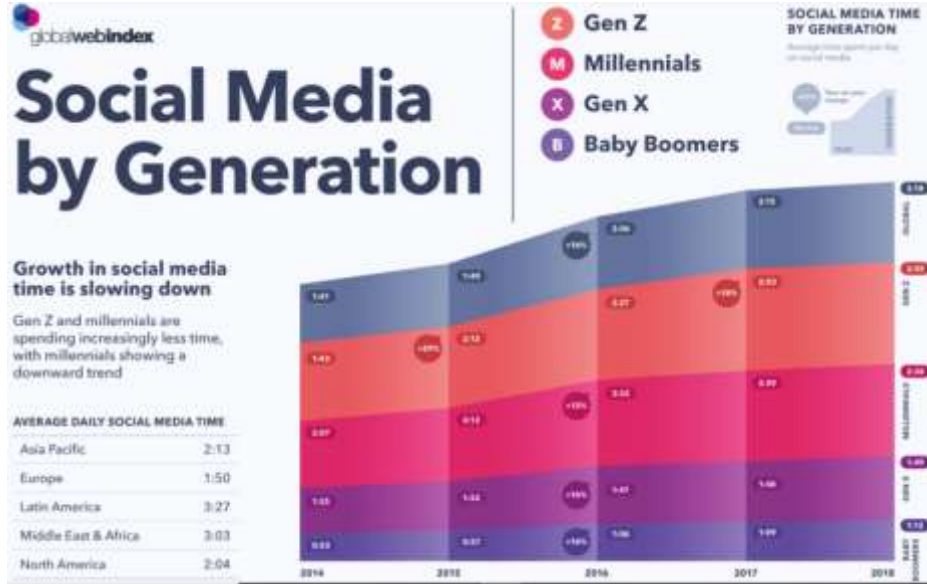
What is Generation Z?

Generation Z is the youngest generation currently defined in generational research. Generation Z begins between 1995 and 1997 and ends either by 2017 or is undetermined. The youngest generation is called many names in the literature. The three primary names are iGen, NetGen, and Generation Z or Gen Z. Dr. Jean Twenge in *iGen* argues that Gen Z does not make

sense since the term Millennial replaced Gen Y breaking up the successive, lettered generations.²² However, in *Gen Z @ Work* by David and Johan Stillman, they found that 77 percent of respondents to a national survey either had no preference or liked the term, Gen Z.²³ The most significant concern was not getting labeled at all, and Gen Z does not attach the generation to a piece of technology.²⁴

As mentioned previously, Gen Z's most well-known attribute is its digital nature. According to Dr. Twenge in *iGen*, this generation goes to bed, looking at their phones and immediately reaches for them upon waking up.²⁵ Dr. Twenge also found that Gen Z spends approximately five hours a day texting, surfing the internet, online gaming, and on video chat.²⁶ They also spend one to two hours a day watching shows or movies via their phones, tablets, or laptops rather than television or in theaters.²⁷ Gen Z is spending a preponderance of their time on social media platforms, with 87 percent of 12th-grade girls and 77 percent of boys using social media daily.²⁸ The availability of digital technology affords all generations the ability to increase their social media use, but research shows that Gen Z uses social media more than any other generation.²⁹ Figure 1 displays the amount of time each generation spends on social media.

Figure 1: Social Media Use by Generation



Source: Ashley Veins, “Visualizing Social Media Use by Generation,” *Visual Capitalist*, September 21, 2019, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/visualizing-social-media-use-by-generation/>.

Gen Z is also using group video chat apps more often than previous generations so they can “hang-out” digitally but still interact face-to-face.³⁰ The idea of FOMO or Fear of Missing Out is one explanation for increased time digital use. Gen Z does not remember a time when they could not connect to the internet. Often, they turn to their smart devices to find out what everyone in their social circle is doing or to receive updates on events such as sports and school.³¹

Generations before Gen Z may see digital technology as a means for leisure; however, for Gen Z, it is a part of every aspect of their life.

Another defining trait of Gen Z is that they are reaching fewer milestones of maturation, such as going out with friends on their own, getting a license, getting a job, and experiencing their first physical relationship. All of which indicates a lower level of maturity upon graduation from high school. Gen Z is spending more time at home under the watchful eyes of their parents throughout grade school and even college. Research shows that 12th graders are less likely to go

out with friends in 2015 than 8th graders in 2009. Overall, Gen Z is less likely to go out without their parents as chaperones.³² Gen Z is also less likely to gain independence from their parents by getting a license. According to Dr. Twenge, “Nearly all Baby Boomers had a license in high school,” but one out of four teenagers from Gen Z does not have a license in high school. It is important to identify that the rules and requirements to obtain a license have become more stringent and increased in number over time, partially explaining the decrease in permits. Additionally, Gen Z is delaying getting their first job. Less than 35 percent of 10th graders work, and just over 55 percent of 12th graders work. During the summer, only 43 percent of teens report getting a job. In comparison, in 1970, only 22 percent of high school seniors did not work during their school years.³³ As Gen Z spends more time supervised by their parents, they are less likely to date and have sex. From 1990 until 2015, all high school grades show a decrease in sexual activity.³⁴ By not meeting these teenage milestones, Gen Z is not developing the same level of responsibility, independence, or maturity as previous generations.

A third defining trait of Gen Z is they are comfortable working independently but still value personal interaction. With near limitless information at their fingertips, Gen Z is used to solving problems on their own. If they have a question, they can conduct a quick Google search and find answers in text, picture, and video format. Using sites such as YouTube, Gen Z can learn new skills quickly both at work and on their own time. In a survey by David Stillman, he found that 42 percent of Gen Z prefer to complete a project on their own, and 71 percent agree with the idea of “if you want it done right, then do it yourself.”³⁵ However, they also value personal interaction. In a San Diego State University survey by Dr. Twenge, nearly all 18-19-year-old students who responded said they preferred to communicate in person.³⁶ They understand the lack of emotional connection that comes with only communicating via digital

technology. Business leaders are finding that Gen Z requires more in-person feedback than previous generations. The biannual performance review is not enough one on one interaction for Gen Z. They continually look for growth and development, and an essential piece of development is feedback.³⁷ A desire for feedback aligns with increased social media use where feedback is constant and instantaneous. Gen Z is more than capable of working independently, but they demand feedback and mentorship from their leadership.

Finally, Gen Z is one of the most diverse and inclusive generations ever seen. By population, Gen Z is more diverse. In the U.S., 60.5 percent of people are white non-Hispanic. In the 18 years and younger demographic, only 50.4 percent of Americans are white non-Hispanic.³⁸ Gen Z is also becoming more accepting of racial differences. Gen Z reports that nearly half of their fellow students are a different race, and many said that their close friends were of different races.³⁹ According to a study by Magid Generational Strategies, Gen Z is more likely to have a diverse social structure across race, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic class than any other generation.⁴⁰ When asked if this is desirable or acceptable, Gen Z felt that the question was ridiculous.⁴¹ Gen Z is also more accepting of the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender community. Their prevailing attitude is that sexual orientation is not an issue if people are happy.⁴² Finally, Gen Z is also more accepting of evolving gender roles, such as women spending more time at work than at home. They believe that working mothers can have the same strong relationship with their children as a stay at home mother, and just as much right to work outside the home as men.⁴³ Diversity is just like technology to Gen Z; it is merely a part of who they are.

More than Just Generational Traits, Life Experience also Defines Gen Z

It is important to remember that life experiences are critical to developing generational traits. The most influential life experience of Gen Z defining their generation is the availability and use of digital technology. It is hard for prior generations to understand this constant connectivity because they remember a time when the internet either did not exist or was only available from a fixed location rather than a smartphone in their pocket. Gen Z's experience with digital technology is vastly different than previous generations. The year 1995 is recognized as the start of Gen Z, which also corresponds to the year the internet became commercially available.⁴⁴ Since then, significant advancements in digital technology occurred on nearly an annual basis for all of Gen Z's life. Table 2 shows these technological advancements by year.

Table 2: Significant Technological Advancements Experienced by Gen Z

Event	Year
Original Smart Phone	1993
Internet Commercialized	1995
First all in one device	2000
Skype	2003
FaceBook	2004
YouTube	2005
Twitter and texting as primary comms	2006
iPhone	2007
Apple Store	2008
iPad	2010
iPad in schools	2012
Apple Watch	2015

Source: David Stillman and Jonah Stillman, *Genz@Work: How the Next Generation is Transforming the Workplace* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2017), 77-78.

For Gen Z, the physical and digital world is completely intertwined, and David Stillman coined Gen Z as Phigital.⁴⁵ As an example, stores still sell physical maps, and they are used extensively in the military. However, Gen Z naturally reaches for their phone to find traffic patterns, the shortest routes, and exact distances all layered on top of their digital map. Gen Z spends more time shopping online than going to physical stores. According to David Stillman, 44 percent of Gen Z choose to buy online instead.⁴⁶ Older generations used to get together at friend's houses, the mall, or the movie theater. Today, Gen Z connects online via group video chat or online gaming. As digital experts, Gen Z is already prepared to work in this type of environment with a wealth of experience throughout their childhood and teenage years. It is a natural extension of their physical lives and affords them the inherent skills necessary to thrive in 21st-century warfare characterized by increased use of digital technology.

Along with the proliferation of digital technology came the sharing economy. According to David Stillman, the sharing economy is “the notion of people sharing their goods and services with each other and coordinating through community-based online platforms.”⁴⁷ Apps such as Liquid allow people to share bikes rather than buy them, Fon enables people to share Wi-Fi, Airbnb allows people to rent out their homes to vacationers, and Uber allows people to share their cars with others.⁴⁸ For Gen Z, this is a natural way to streamline services and resources to gain efficiency. Gen Z’s ability to gain efficiencies in their life through digital community-based platforms leads them to naturally ask “why” when they see a process or task that appears inefficient. The simple response of “that is how we always do it” does not resonate or make sense to Gen Z. David Stillman in *Gen Z @ Work* discusses how he had to discount his speaking fee for a client. His son, Jonah, did not understand why the client could not pay the cost but

could pay for fine dining and live band. David replied, that is how speaking tours are always done. Jonah's response was cut back on the food costs and play music via an iPad, and then more money is available for the fee.⁴⁹ If it does not make sense, Gen Z will ask why. They want to understand the process and try to figure out a way to become more efficient through the use of digital technology and community-based platforms they are used to using.

Gen Z and the Marine Corps

Generation X and Millennial Marine Corps leaders believe that Gen Z Marines are unfocused, undisciplined, and purposeless. Additionally, due to a lack of combat experience, disillusionment, and overall generational lack of maturity, Gen Z Marines are unprepared for positions of increased responsibility and leadership. However, these conclusions are not based on empirical evidence but driven by unsubstantiated anecdotes. In reality, the situation that Gen Z finds itself in is due in large part to more significant institutional decisions of the Marine Corps, and not due to the actions or inactions of Gen Z Marines themselves.

The videos displayed on the Marine Corps Recruiting website present an image of the Marine Corps that is not the reality for most Marines. It shows amphibious assault vehicles exiting Navy ships, aircraft dropping bombs, light armored vehicles attacking on line, and Marines assaulting an urban village amidst explosions and rifle fire.⁵⁰ This is an over-sensationalized recruiting tool used to convince potential recruits that they will immediately be fighting in combat. These recruiting tactics are not new and serve as the primary selling point for the Marine Corps over the other services. However, their negative impact increased post-2014 as the Marine Corps reduced its footprint in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As Gen Z goes through the entry-level training pipeline, they quickly become disillusioned. In a study conducted by CAOCL, a Master Sergeant remembered that "the picture the Marine Corps puts off is, 'We're

over there...kicking ass. And day-to-day life is not kicking ass.”⁵¹ A Lieutenant discussed how his young Marines are frustrated that they are not filling the roles they expected to, and it is demoralizing.⁵² The simple fact is that the vast majority of the 394 total available military occupational specialties (MOS) are not combat-related.⁵³ Only 49 of those MOSs are considered combat arms by the monitors at Manpower Enlisted Affairs.⁵⁴ Of the 49-combat arms MOSs, only 12 are infantry related MOSs,⁵⁵ which are the only MOSs designed to serve in a direct combat role. Thus, only four percent of Marines serve in direct combat roles. The number of direct combat MOSs have not significantly changed over time, but the difference today is that regardless of MOS, a large proportion of Gen X and Millennial Marines deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Senior leaders need to understand this difference in experiences between their first four years of service and those of Gen Z if they are going to bridge the understanding gap. Retired Army LtCol Leonard Wong of the Strategic Studies Institute stated, “[The idea of,] ‘think about it when you were in their shoes,’ that’s a mistake. When we were there age, we thought differently.”⁵⁶

As for deploying to combat, 11,300 Marines out of 188,900 are currently forward deployed. Of those, only 2,630 support combat operations.⁵⁷ Thus, only 1.4 percent of Marines today deploy in support of combat operations. Gen Z in the Marine Corps is not having the experience they expected when they joined active service, and the CAOCL study reinforces this point.⁵⁸ Not only do they feel let down by the institution, but they do not understand why they are conducting repetitive training if they are not going to combat. Gen Z Marines do not have a mental model for combat like their leaders. They do not understand why repeated magazine drills, or artillery gun drills, or why vehicle and weapons maintenance are essential. It is only human nature to question why hours of repetitive drills over weeks and months are necessary if

they will never get employed in combat. It is human nature to ask what role a non-combat arms MOS plays in the larger institution that glorifies and sells its product based on sending Marines to combat. The Marine Corps is not meeting Gen Z Marine's expectations for the Marine Corps due to misleading recruiting tools, a small proportion of MOSs directly involved in combat, and a decreased opportunity for combat deployments. The institution is directly responsible for the disconnect between the perceptions created by recruiters to the reality experienced by Gen Z Marines in the actual Fleet Marine Force, and their leadership needs to be more empathetic towards their reality.

Another complaint of senior leaders is that Gen Z Marines are not mature or proficient enough to hold leadership positions. As the Marine Corps drew down from more than 200,000 Marines to just over 188,000, a large portion of Marines who left the service was in mid-grade leadership positions such as NCOs and SNCOs. To fill this gap, the Marine Corps began promoting junior Marines faster and offered lateral move incentives into new MOSs. Marine Corps leaders are correct when they say their junior leaders lack experience and maturity. Yet, it is because of the situation the institution created forcing these Marines into billets that they were too inexperienced for. This issue was so significant that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David Berger, updated the Marine Corps promotion policy to take effect in January 2020 for Sergeants and Staff Sergeants, increasing the Time in Grade requirements for promotion.⁵⁹ Specific to Sergeants, Corporals must complete their first term of enlistment before becoming eligible for promotion, allowing them to focus on developing MOS proficiency and leadership skills before assuming greater responsibility. Additionally, previous Commandants Gen Joseph Dunford⁶⁰ (before becoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and Gen Robert Neller⁶¹ both advocated for maturing the force. Military leaders misdiagnose Gen Z's lack of

maturity as a Gen Z problem. It is actually the institution putting Gen Z Marines in positions of responsibility before they are ready. The institution created a situation where Gen Z Marines had to step into leadership positions they were ill-prepared for, and it must accept the consequences of that decision.

How the Business World Leverages Gen Z's Traits and Experiences

Business leaders from the older generations also identified the “understanding gap” between themselves and Gen Z. However, rather than lamenting about their differences, they already started leveraging Gen Z’s unique traits and experiences in their organizations to their advantage. One seemingly negative trait is that Gen Z is unable to focus on individual tasks. Recent studies determined that Gen Z’s attention span is around eight seconds due to the vast amounts of data they rapidly sift through on their devices.⁶² Business leaders see this as a positive because Gen Z can quickly sift through all the noise and immediately focus on what is truly important. Additionally, Gen Z seems unable to put their digital devices down and concentrate on a single task. These leaders in civilian organizations capitalize on this, leveraging Gen Z’s ability to manage multiple digital networks and the day to day administrative requirements of the workplace.⁶³ Finally, Gen Z is prone to moving from job to job with minimal notice to their employers. Studies show that Gen Z does not plan to work in one place for more than five years and are most likely to leave within three. In a survey by Randstad US, nearly half of employers surveyed had a Gen Z candidate either withdraw their application after accepting a job or did not show up on the agreed-upon start date.⁶⁴ However, this is due to a job market that favors the job seeker rather than reflecting a truly negative Gen Z trait. Gen Z is willing to move around jobs to find one that satisfies them for the long term. It is up to the business to provide competitive benefits, culture, and career growth to keep Gen Z in one

place.⁶⁵ Business leaders are adapting to the unique traits of Gen Z. The Marine Corps can learn from the business world regarding how to leverage the unique skill sets of Gen Z, rather than focusing on their shortcomings.

Closing the Understanding Gap through Emotional Intelligence

To leverage the advantages of Gen Z Marines, senior leaders must first try to understand the generational difference and their Gen Z Marines more fully. The perceived problems that senior Marine Corps leaders have with Gen Z comes from a general lack of understanding. The gap that exists between leader and led is partially due to the leader's unwillingness to take the time to understand their subordinates. To bridge this gap, Marine Corps leaders need to embrace Emotional Intelligence (EI). According to Daniel Golman et al., in *Primal Leadership*, “great leaders work through the emotions...if leaders fail in driving emotion in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could or should.”⁶⁶ The emotions that leaders display have a direct impact on the feelings of their subordinates. Leaders who can influence their subordinate's emotions in a positive manner increase output and conversely, leaders who influence emotions negatively decrease production.⁶⁷ Additionally, leaders are also directly responsible for the “mood” of their organization. This can be an uncomfortable approach in an institution that prides itself on its warrior ethos. However, the “mood” of an organization is vitally important. High levels of optimism can cause subordinates to assume greater risk. When a leader is anxious, it may signal that the task at hand is vital and requires increased time and effort to complete. Rather than being overly optimistic or anxious, if a leader maintains an even-keeled approach, he can maintain a positive emotional environment over time. Anger can signal the importance of a topic, but prolonged stress decreases output. Keeping a positive mood in an organization helps people see the right side of a situation. At the same time, a more negative

attitude causes people to focus on the negative aspects of a case.⁶⁸ It is hard to develop a positive mood or climate in an organization if the leadership only sees the negative traits in its subordinates. The only way to get past these perceived negative traits is to take the time to get to know and understand who Gen Z is and what type of leadership style resonates with them.

To truly understand Gen Z, military leaders need to empathize with Gen Z. *Primal Leadership* defines empathy as “taking employees’ feelings into consideration and then making intelligent decisions that work those feelings into the response.”⁶⁹ When discussing teams, the authors state, “the team used its skill to try to understand another part of the organization and how the two groups affected on another, thereby cultivating a mutually beneficial relationship.”⁷⁰ This is precisely what senior leaders need to do today with Gen Z. Senior leaders need to understand the defined generational traits and life experiences that shaped Gen Z Marines and use that knowledge to inform their decision making and leadership style.

Empathizing with Gen Z Marines will help commanders understand that Gen Z has grown up in a very different social and cultural environment. For example, they have not experienced a period in their life when they could not access their phones. As previously discussed, Gen Z lives in a Phigital world where their physical and digital lives are completely intertwined. The smartphone is more than just a source of leisure. It is a device of unparalleled utility, increases efficiency, maintains constant connectivity, and serves as the primary and many cases the sole source of communication. If Gen Z loses their phone, it is like losing a piece of who they are. Through empathy, senior leaders will learn that Gen Z is not asking why to be disrespectful. They want to understand the process so they can potentially make it more efficient. Moreover, senior leaders will learn that some of the negative traits, such as disillusionment and a

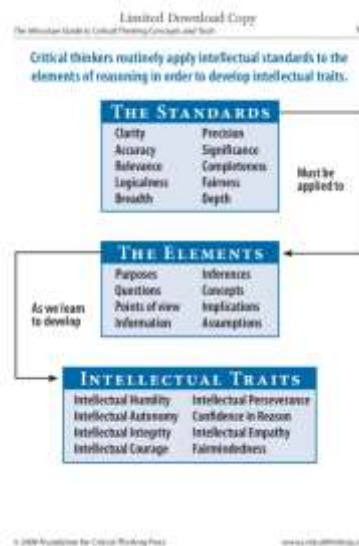
lack of maturity required for increased responsibility, are not Gen Z's fault, but caused by the institution.

Most importantly, empathy allows senior leaders to turn perceived negative traits into real positive skillsets. Gen Z's "addiction" to digital technology is actually a skill set that better prepares them for 21st Century Warfare that focuses on digital technology. Gen Z may ask why, but their desire to understand processes and make them more efficient better prepares Gen Z to meet the innovation demands of service and DoD level leaders. Through emotional intelligence and empathizing with their Gen Z Marines, senior leaders can begin to close the understanding gap as they move to meet Gen Z in the middle.

Critical Thinking and the Weaponization of Gen Z

Through empathy, Senior Marine Corps leaders will gain a better understanding of their Gen Z Marines. It will help them understand how to refine Gen Z's unique traits and experiences to assist them in meeting senior leaders in the middle by conforming to the Marine Corps. Gen Z has an inquisitive nature, and senior leaders can leverage this by cultivating a culture of critical thinking (CT). Critical thinking has three parts: intellectual standards, elements of reasoning, and intellectual traits. Figure 2 displays the application of the intellectual standards to the elements of reasoning, which allows critical thinkers to develop intellectual traits.

Figure 2: Critical Thinking Development Process



Source: Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools* (California: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press, 2009), 19.

In *Critical Thinking*, Richard Paul and Linda Elder discuss that developing intellectual traits allows critical thinkers to develop fairmindedness. They further define fairmindedness as “being conscious of the need to treat all viewpoints alike, without reference to our own feelings or selfish interests...uninfluenced by our own advantage or the advantage of our group.”⁷¹ By cultivating CT in Gen Z, leaders will develop intellectual discipline in their Marines. Intellectual discipline is to remain focused on the task, ask pertinent questions, gather required evidence to make an informed decision, and apply the intellectual standards to all thinking.⁷² As previously mentioned, social media has created a sense of FOMO in Gen Z, who wants to be involved. Intellectual discipline will help Gen Z Marines understand when their FOMO is warranted to ask questions and when to comply with assigned tasks. CT allows Gen Z to articulate what part of the mission they do not understand or when they have a more efficient way of doing things. By cultivating a culture of critical thinking, leaders will know to listen to their Marines when they

have a question or a recommendation for increasing efficiency rather than brushing them off as being difficult.

Applying CT to weaponize Gen Z's inquisitive nature allows the Marine Corps to use MCDP1 *Warfighting* more effectively. *Warfighting* states that leaders must have "flexibility of mind to deal with fluid and disorderly situations. It requires a certain independence of mind, a willingness to act with initiative..."⁷³ It goes on to discuss that leaders must discipline their decision making and be capable of thinking and understanding the intent of commanders two levels above them. CT facilitates this by developing intellectual discipline through established intellectual standards, elements, and traits. Today, leaders struggle with the number of questions from Gen Z subordinates, but they forget that maneuver warfare requires it. MCDP1 states, "Until a commander has reached a stated decision, subordinates should consider it their duty to provide honest, professional opinions even though these may be in disagreement with the senior's opinions."⁷⁴ Gen Z, by nature, has the skills and traits necessary to apply Maneuver Warfare more effectively than previous generations.

Gen Z also has abilities to better prepare them for the complex operational environment described in service level documents. The proliferation of anti-access area-denial capabilities places the Navy-Marine Corps teams highly exquisite assets, such as naval surface vessels, large overseas bases, ports, and high signature assets at risk.⁷⁵ To counter this vulnerability, the CPG identifies Expeditionary Advanced Based Operations (EABO) and Distributed Operations (DO) as the way to combat these threats. Both types of operations require Marine Corps forces to operate in a smaller, more distributed manner with the lowest signature possible without compromising the effects necessary for mission accomplishment.⁷⁶ Historically, the battalion was considered the base unit for the Marine Corps capable of conducting combined arms. With

EABO and DO, combined arms are now at the squad level.⁷⁷ This is no small task for a 22-year-old Gen Z Marine with four years of service. However, their inquisitive nature, ability to solve problems independently, and familiarity with digital technology, makes them ideally suited for EABO and DO. CT is the way that senior leaders can help Gen Z close the understanding gap by turning their perceived negative traits into weapons.

Recommendations for Adapting Current Leadership Practices to Connect with Gen Z

The development of EI and CT is essential for the shared closing of the understanding gap between Marine Corps leaders and their Gen Z Marines. Marine Corps University teaches courses in these areas and is best suited to develop a foundation of CT and EI in the Marine Corps. Officer and enlisted PME already receive formal course hours in CT. While not formally instructed, EI is a topic for leadership discussions at the school and conference group level. In addition to CT and EI, MCU needs to educate students on generations holistically and specific traits and experiences that define each generation. K.C. Reid from the I MEF Red Team already provides a brief to subordinate units regarding this topic. She covers the dates that frame each generation, which ranks typically fall within each generation, the values each generation prioritizes, characteristics and traits of each generation, and how those traits present themselves in the military. This brief focuses on understanding the audience and how each generation may require a different leadership approach. The CAOCL study can reinforce how the broader societal generational traits translate to the Marine Corps and inform the curriculum. In the absence of a formal course, guest speakers could conduct brown-bag lectures outside of official education hours. Education through MCU will set the standard for CT and EI in the Marine Corps for the Fleet Marine Force to reinforce through continued development.

In application, grounded in CT and EI, leaders need to synthesize their understanding of Gen Z with established leadership traits and principles. Generation Z is digital in every aspect of their life. Some leaders are uncomfortable or do not understand social media, digital communications, or the myriad of functions of personal devices. During a House Armed Services Committee hearing in 2017, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and four generals representing their services manpower and personnel offices discussed their service's social media policy. Of the five senior leaders, only one had a presence on social media, yet each one was responsible for explaining in detail their services policies on social media.⁷⁸ Senior leaders cannot begin to understand digital technology and social media platforms if they do not use it themselves. Applying the leadership principle "know yourself and seek self-improvement," leaders can increase their comfort and understanding of digital technology. Senior leaders can then develop a vision or intent on how to use digital technology and social media to enhance the effectiveness of their unit. Applying EI, leaders can connect with their Gen Z Marines by asking for help orienting themselves to digital platforms.

Using the leadership principles of developing a sense of responsibility within the Marines and ensuring the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished further develops Gen Z's ability to work independently. Understanding that Gen Z Marines are avoiding significant teenage milestones that develop maturity, placing them in positions of increased responsibility under the watchful of a senior leader will allow them to make mistakes, learn, and grow before attaining the next rank. Training Marines as a team will cultivate the face to face team interaction Gen Z needs. Ensuring that each Marine understands their position and role in the group will develop commitment and trust. Gen Z is more diverse than any other generation in history, used to working with people of different races, genders, sexual orientation, and

socioeconomic status. Leaders can leverage Gen Z's inclusive and socially diverse nature to build cohesive and lethal teams rapidly.

The Marine Corps places significant value on leadership development. It is the expectation of every leader at every level to teach, coach, and mentor their subordinates. Gen Z's demand for feedback perfectly aligns with the Marine Corps Order 1500.61: Marine Leader Development. This new order replaced the Marine Corps mentorship program, but it does state that, "mentorship remains an important component of developing Marines."⁷⁹ Smartphones, social media, and FOMO all contribute to an environment where Gen Z is used to obtaining instantaneous feedback. This is coupled with a naturally inquisitive nature and the fact that Gen Z simply wants to be involved. If the Marine Corps intends to leverage these qualities, then leaders need to adhere to the principles of mentorship that were first codified by Gen John A. Lejeune more than 100 years ago. This does not require a significant change. Gen Z needs to develop intellectual discipline, and Senior leaders need to adapt their leadership style to use established leadership development fundamentals effectively. The tools are already available, and both sides need to take responsibility for closing the understanding gap to take advantage of available leadership development programs.

In addition to leadership development, leaders in the Fleet Marine Force must continuously refine CT. Like leadership development, the tools are already available and require minimal changes. First, Tactical and Ethical Decision games need to be used at lower levels. NCOs must lead the decision games for their junior Marines rather than doing them at the NCO level and up. Leaders must plant the seeds of CT at the lowest levels so that Gen Z Marines can refine their intellectual discipline over time. Second, assistant squad or section leaders can sit in on platoon, company, or even battalion level meetings. This allows junior Gen Z Marines to

learn from the discussions and decision making of their senior leaders so they can adapt those lessons to their own CT development. Finally, CT must be incorporated into all levels of enlisted PME starting at Lance Corporal Seminar. CT must be reinforced at all levels of a Marines career if it is going to take hold.

Finally, Gen Z is not going to war, and leaders need to keep them committed to the organization. Applying the principle of keeping Marines informed will help maintain morale and commitment to the team. The Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, Sergeant Major Troy E. Black, identified what he called a communication gap in the Marine Corps.⁸⁰ Keeping Marines informed bridges this gap. When Marines understand what they are doing and can ask questions to clarify intent, they will feel like they are part of the team. Explaining the “why and what’s in it for them” also helps Gen Z Marines understand how necessary their training is in garrison to success in combat. Teaching Gen Z military history will show that Marines deployed throughout history with little notice, relying solely on their training. Understanding Gen Z traits and experiences allow leaders to apply leadership principles in a targeted manner that resonates with Gen Z.

Conclusion

Gen Z has specific traits and life experiences that are significantly different from their Millennial and Gen X leadership, creating a gap in understanding. While Gen Z may be different, it is essential to remember that these differences are not all negative. To bridge the gap between the leader and led, senior leaders, need to embrace EI to understand Gen Z and learn how to leverage perceived negative traits into lethal positive ones. Through CT, Gen Z can also close the understanding gap by developing intellectual discipline. This allows them to weaponize their inherent traits and experiences to better apply the Marine Corps Warfighting

doctrine to today's threat environment. Focusing on specific leadership principles and tailoring them to meet the needs of Gen Z, senior leaders can further close the understanding gap, better relate to their Gen Z Marines, and use Gen Z's traits and experiences to build a more lethal force. The understanding gap between leader and led is not insurmountable. Senior leaders need to adapt to Gen Z, and Gen Z needs to conform to the Marine Corps. Neither side is solely the problem, but both need to be part of the solution.

Additional research is necessary regarding Gen Z holistically in society as well as in the Marine Corps. As previously identified, generational research currently lacks a wealth of data associated with generations as a whole and specific to Gen Z. Through more scientific study, like the Generational Society Survey, researchers can develop more meaningful empirical data to support conclusions regarding Gen Z. Additionally, the Marine Corps needs to combine the research of CAOCL and Marine Corps Recruiting Command and make it widely available to Marine Corps leaders. Both organizations are producing data on Gen Z, but they are not nested, and the results are not widely published. As generational research is released, the entire force needs to have access to the data that will help them tailor their leadership approach to their Marines.

Just like the character of warfare, leadership needs to adapt to the current environment. If the Marine Corps wants to thrive in 21st Century Warfare, it needs to exploit Gen Z's inquisitive nature, ability to problem-solve independently, and their familiarity and comfort with digital technology. Adhering to the tenets of maneuver warfare and applying the established leadership principles, leaders can prepare their Marines for success in any situation. Gen Z is ready for the challenge, and it is up to its leaders to ensure they have the tools necessary to thrive on today's battlefield.

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