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Intergenerational leadership: How young managers foster inclusivity in age-diverse teams

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Orientation: The research focuses on young Southern African managers and their experiences relating to intergenerational leadership.

Research purpose: To examine how leadership behaviours and practices foster the integration of age-diverse employees and teams.

Motivation for the study: Increasing age diversity in the workplace presents both opportunities and challenges for organisations and societies. The younger age groups are taking up leadership positions and leading the older generation. It is this nuance that has spurred research into which specific leadership behaviours matter in this instance, through which processes they unfold, and what their effects are, with the hope of developing a coded, uncluttered Systems Influence Diagram (SID).

Research design, approach and method: Through the Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA) process, data from six managers were collected and analysed, and an interrogation of the elements of intergenerational leadership was conducted.

Main findings: This is an exploratory qualitative study carried out via a focus group drawn using biased sampling based on 'distance and power' analysis of the phenomenon of intergenerational leadership, with the purpose of unpacking its nuances.

Practical/managerial implications: In essence, the research underscores that effective intergenerational leadership is an outcome of character forged at the intersection of values, bias awareness, behavioural consistency, and structural alignment.

Contribution/value add: The study offers contextual insight into intergenerational leadership and, in practice, contributes a preliminary systems-based model derived from participants' perceptions.

Keywords: intergenerational leadership; scale development; interactive qualitative analysis; age diversity; organisational inclusivity.

Introduction

There are cultural and demographic shifts that organisations are currently facing. This involves younger demographic groups progressively joining and undertaking leadership roles, although a significant proportion of senior employees persist in the professional environment (Gabrielova & Buchko 2021; Galdames & Guihen 2022; Kinger & Kumar 2023). There is a combination of potential benefits and challenges that this demographic transition gives rise to. This suggests, from one view, that new approaches to collaboration, digital fluency, and fresh perspectives can be presented by the younger leaders. Generational differences in prescribed roles and professional practices, as well as in values, can conversely create reduced cohesion, conflict, and misunderstanding (Anderson et al. 2017; Mangal 2025; Sulaeman et al. 2025). Intergenerational tension becomes more evident in leadership practices and organisational systems that have failed to adjust (Anderson et al. 2017; Galdames & Guihen 2022). The study explores how younger leaders demonstrate leadership towards senior (older) employees and develops a context-specific model of the determinants that facilitate or hinder intergenerational leadership in the Intergenerational Leadership (IGL) study, using a participant-centred Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA) approach.

The consideration of IGL is appropriate for leadership development interventions, including leadership-related offerings by business schools, given the phenomenon's positioning at the nexus of organisational performance, human resource systems, and leadership development. Utilising creativity across generations, retaining talent, and sustaining institutional knowledge are areas in which organisations that proficiently manage generational diversity are better

positioned to ensure continuity. Equally, inadequate consideration of the mechanisms underlying age-diverse teams can result in higher turnover, underperformance, and disengagement (Bellotti et al. 2022; Galdames & Guihen 2022; Rašticová & Hinzmann 2024).

Nevertheless, the majority of existing literature investigates discrete constructs in isolation or considers generations as monolithic categories. There is a scarcity of participant-led, comprehensive models that demonstrate how a range of variables interact to generate inclusive leadership outcomes. This discrepancy prompted the current investigation.

This article aims to achieve three objectives. To begin with, it provides an account of the variables originating from the six participants and their functional definitions, as validated by the focus group, employing IQA. Subsequently, the process output is a Systems Influence Diagram (SID) that depicts the causal pathways linking drivers and outcomes from an interrelational and dynamic perspective. Finally, it presents practical implications for leadership development and managerial practice, in particular the manner in which organisations may place greater importance on systems alignment, bias mitigation, and values work to enable young leaders to adequately lead across generations. Through this analytical process, the study provides both conceptual insights and empirical evidence regarding IGL dynamics. Conceptually, it presents a values-driven model that incorporates systemic, interpersonal, and personal factors pertinent to organisational leadership. Empirically, it employs a participant-centred approach to investigating IGL. The article adopts an epistemological position grounded in constructivism, in which participants constructed, modified, and evaluated their own data while the researchers served as facilitators of the stages of analysis.

Literature review

Intergenerational leadership

To address generational diversity, leadership in modern organisations has moved beyond the confines of hierarchical authority. Leadership now includes inclusive, ethical, and relational dimensions. The leadership landscape has been transformed by the rise of multiple generations within the same workforce. These generations include Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Each group embodies different outlooks on work–life balance, authority, communication preferences, and values (Ingale 2025; Puaschunder 2019; Srivastava 2024). There are challenges as well as prospects for learning and innovation that diversity presents when managed effectively (Chaudhary 2025; Malik & Shahid 2024; Westover 2025).

Intergenerational leadership concerns the ability of leaders to integrate, influence, and engage employees who are of different age groups through balancing deference to experience against willingness to embrace alternative viewpoints (Klaffke 2020; Puaschunder 2019). It entails mediating opposing motivations, technologies, and worldviews while promoting shared purpose and cohesion. In the context of business schools, this proficiency is critical for supporting cultural harmony, talent retention, and organisational agility in volatile environments (Chaudhary 2025; Westover 2025). The study at present advances this discourse through the application of IQA to delineate the manner in which young leaders theorise IGL.

Values as the grounding for leadership

Leadership values have historically been acknowledged as the ethical framework that guides management behaviour and decisions (Groves 2020; Kobstan & Sasonto 2023). *Values* clarify what followers and leaders regard as legitimate conduct, outline interpersonal trust, and shape the nature of organisational culture (Groves 2020). Integrated leadership theories simultaneously identify values as the foundational aspect of effective leadership. Authentic leaders adjust strategies in accordance with transparency, fostering integrity and internalised moral standards (Kobstan & Sasonto 2023). Transformational leaders project an idealised image that encourages collective purpose (Kobstan & Sasonto 2023).

In the context of intergenerational relationships, values assume greater significance across age groups, which prioritise distinct principles. Younger leaders, for instance, might stress social impact, autonomy, and innovation, whereas mature employees might stress duty, stability, and loyalty (Chaudhary 2025; Puaschunder 2019; Srivastava 2024). Discrepancies create friction, while shared values, including fairness and respect, facilitate connection across generational disparities. The values a leader embeds, as a result, can become a potential source of conflict or a unifying force. A study on organisational behaviour indicated that leadership that is value-based determines adaptability, trust, and employee engagement (Groves 2020). Improving value-driven decision-making and ethical awareness is currently regarded as essential to sustainable leadership practice (Kobstan & Sasonto 2023). Thus, *Values* form the conceptual anchor from which *Biases, Character*, and other variables derive meaning.

Biases and perceptual filters in generational interaction

Biases refer to the underlying cognitive shortcuts, stereotypes, and assumptions that influence social perception. In the context of leadership dynamics, biases determine the manner in which authority, commitment, and competence are attributed to individuals across diverse age groups or backgrounds (Watkins & Omilion-Hodges 2025). Generational bias, which comes in the form of reverse ageism or ageism, can diminish trust and distort evaluations (Judijanto, Winanto & Setiyawan 2024; Watkins & Omilion-Hodges 2025). For young leaders managing mature employees, biases typically manifest in two forms. Young leaders may perceive their power as being critiqued. This critique is based on age-related stereotypes that relate competence to seniority. It is also the case that young leaders,

on their own, hold implicit biases that fail to appreciate the caution and experience of mature workers.

Implicit leadership theory suggests that preconceptions unconsciously determine the manner in which leaders distribute opportunities and interpret behaviour (Klaffke 2020). *What is then rendered central to inclusive leadership development is addressing bias?* Metacognitive strategies are encouraged by scholars to challenge and surface hidden assumptions. The strategies may include perspective-taking and reflexive dialogue (Klaffke 2020; Watkins & Omilion-Hodges 2025). Reducing bias is instrumental in improving knowledge transfer and collaboration across age groups.

Character and the moral core of leadership

Character refers to the persistent psychological and moral traits that sustain behaviour across various situations (Groves 2020; Kobstan & Sasonto 2023). It integrates virtues such as integrity, humility, courage, and empathy. These virtues determine how leaders enact their values and manage power. Business scholars have increasingly foregrounded character-based leadership as a counterbalance to instrumental approaches driven solely by performance metrics (Crossan, Gandz & Seijts 2015).

In intergenerational settings, character becomes visible through behavioural authenticity, as younger leaders earn credibility with older subordinates by demonstrating fairness and respect. Research indicates that employees assess leader authenticity through congruence between espoused values and observed actions (Gardner et al. 2005). A leader of strong character builds psychological safety, enabling open dialogue across hierarchical and generational lines (Edmondson 2018).

Leadership skills as enablers of intergenerational cohesion

Skills are the behavioural and cognitive abilities that enable intent to become effective leadership action. Common leadership skills frameworks emphasise communication, conflict management, emotional intelligence, and adaptability as fundamental competencies (Boyatzis 2008). Particularly evident in intergenerational teams is the capacity to communicate across varying levels of technological literacy, motivational stimuli, and cultural references (Bazmi et al. 2025).

Millennial leaders may have strong technological competence and a collaborative orientation, but leading older employees may require development in assertive communication and diplomacy (Gabriel, Alcantara & Alvarez 2020). On the other hand, the experience of older workers can improve team learning when leveraged through coaching-style leadership (Gabriel et al. 2020). Evidence suggests that emotional intelligence helps explain how leadership style affects intergenerational team performance (Goleman 2013; Salovey & Mayer 1990). Literature on business education increasingly supports integrative skill development. This combines technical management training with socio-emotional and ethical competence (Laasch, Moosmayer & Antonacopoulou 2023; Maulana 2023).

Systems and structures as organisational enablers

Although values, biases, personality, and abilities mostly function at the individual level, systems and structures ground leadership behaviour at the organisational level. While structure describes the hierarchical and procedural allocation of power and responsibility (Gurr, Longmuir & Reed 2020), systems include the official and informal mechanisms through which work is synchronised. In leadership theory, systems thinking underlines that achieving sustained performance relies on matching individual actions with institutional design (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen 2025).

Studies on learning organisations show that intergenerational knowledge exchange is encouraged by supporting infrastructure, including mentorship programmes, feedback routes, and cooperative technologies (Park & Kim 2018). On the other hand, strict hierarchies may continue generational silos and stifle creativity. Research indicates that using diversity as a strategic advantage requires adaptive structures (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen 2025). Values that leaders represent affect policies and processes. Over time, these become institutionalised as system-wide expectations. This underscores the need to educate future leaders on how to create inclusive systems that translate personal ethics into group conduct.

Inclusivity as the desired organisational outcome

In modern organisations, inclusiveness is both a moral obligation and a performance motivator. Inclusive leadership entails the active acknowledgement, respect, and integration of diverse points of view beyond mere demographic representation (Shore, Cleveland & Sanchez 2018). Leaders must foster psychological safety, equal opportunity, and voice across all identity factors, including age. Empirical studies suggest a relationship between inclusive environments and greater organisational commitment, inventiveness, and involvement (Cahyono, 2024).

In an intergenerational environment, inclusion lessens the possibility of age-based exclusion and promotes reciprocal learning. Younger leaders who model inclusive behaviour challenge conventional hierarchies and promote reciprocal mentorship, thereby facilitating bidirectional knowledge flow. According to the IQA process, inclusiveness, as the ultimate result of the causal system, is a synthesis of values-driven behaviour, reflexive bias management, strong character, applied skills, and supportive systems. This finding aligns with inclusive leadership models that identify openness, empowerment, and justice as the final goals of moral leadership growth (Cahyono 2024).

Inclusion links leadership education with corporate social responsibility and sustainability plans, thus transforming leaders into guardians of human capacity rather than just performance managers. Incorporating inclusion into leadership education prepares graduates to lead ethically in increasingly varied global settings.

Integration of research variables

Combining these six ideas (*Values*, *Biases*, *Character*, *Skills*, *Inclusivity*, *Systems and Structure*) reveals a consistent framework in which organisational and moral elements interact dynamically.

This development agrees with systems leadership theory, which views effective leadership as the coordination of personal, interpersonal, and structural components towards a common goal (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen 2025). This aligns with responsible leadership models that view stakeholder inclusion and ethical reflexivity as pathways to sustainable value generation (Grobler & Koen 2024; Maak & Pless 2006). The IQA-derived framework helps leadership research to theoretically combine micro-level (individual), meso-level (team), and macro-level (organisational) elements.

Such integrative modelling promotes theory and practice. It shows how leaders can intentionally shape inclusive cultures through value-driven behaviour, thereby bridging behavioural leadership ideas with systemic organisational design. Moreover, it emphasises the pedagogical requirement for experiential learning approaches such as reflective discussion, mentoring, and cross-generational initiatives that help students to internalise these ideals.

In summary, based on ethical ideals, reflective awareness of bias, moral character, adaptive abilities, enabling systems, and inclusive outcomes, IGL is a multidimensional construct established by the evaluated literature. The synthesis sees inclusion as its final expression and values as the fundamental driver of excellent leadership. By thinking of leadership as an integrated ethical–relational–structural process, this research helps leadership theory continue to develop towards models that are at once ethically, inclusively, and systemically conscious.

Research methods and design

Research paradigm and rationale

The study followed an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm. This followed the underlying assumption that social reality is jointly constructed through meaning-making and human interaction. Intergenerational leadership is regarded as a relational process influenced not only by competence and static traits but also by perception, culture, and context. This line of thought allowed for an investigation into how young leaders negotiate and understand the challenges of leading senior colleagues in diverse South African organisations.

The IQA was chosen as the research design because it combines qualitative inquiry with the preservation of participants' meanings. Developed by Northcutt and McCoy (2004), IQA permits the respondents to identify, define, and interrelate factors of collective experience. This creates an SID, which is regarded as a visual model of perceived cause-and-effect relationships. Interactive Qualitative Analysis extends beyond thematic description to system-level modelling, in contrast to traditional thematic analysis, which is limited to category generation. It is suitable for business and management research aimed at cultivating practical frameworks that may enhance understanding of leadership development and organisational policy (Bargate 2014; Eva et al. 2019; Grobler & Koen 2024). The objective was consequently to go beyond simply investigating lived experiences and to conceptualise a practical leadership model grounded in empirical data.

Research context

The investigation was conducted in an organisational context that is both multicultural and multigenerational. Diversity poses both an advantage and an obstacle, as the simultaneous presence of multigenerational role players creates conflicting expectations in the workplace. This gives rise to distinct expectations pertaining to technology, communication, and authority. Young leaders are frequently assigned to lead teams that include older, more experienced employees, resulting in both learning opportunities and relational tensions. This setting provided a robust context for analysing the mechanisms of IGL, as well as the components that facilitate or constrain inclusive organisational cultures. The research to address this multifaceted nature recruited participants from multiple industry sectors.

Sampling and participants

To select participants capable of offering experience-based, meaningful understanding of the phenomenon, a purposive sampling strategy was employed (Table 1). The IQA process avoids representativeness in the statistical sense but rather prioritises depth of understanding and conceptual diversity. The investigation centred on young leaders leading older employees.

There were six participants in the study. The participants were between the ages of 28 years and 37 years and held managerial or supervisory roles, all with more than 5 years of experience. The participants had between 9 years and 18 years of industry experience and encompassed multiple sectors and genders. This arrangement facilitated divergent viewpoints while preserving a shared generational identity. The IQA literature notes that a group of between 6 participants and 12 participants provides sufficient richness for collective sense-making without becoming unwieldy in the structured analytic process (Northcutt & McCoy 2004). The numerical composition of the group enabled each perspective to be listened to comprehensively while maintaining methodological manageability.

TABLE 1: Characteristics of the participants.

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Sector	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private
Industry	Civic leadership	Education	Healthcare	Agriculture	Justice	Professional services
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female
Age (years)	28	37	30	32	30	34
Highest education	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree	Diploma	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree
Race	Black person	Black person	Black person	Black person	Black person	Black person
Frequency of contact with other leaders	Daily	Monthly	Daily	Daily	Daily	Monthly

Data collection procedures

The structured IQA sequence was followed in data collection. This commenced with the creation of an issue statement, which was designed to guide the discussion without constraining participants' interpretation. The issue statement was: *What are the challenges experienced by younger leaders when leading older generations of employees, and what are the solutions to those challenges?* The question demonstrated sufficient scope to invite reflection yet was precise enough to focus on the phenomenon of interest.

A face-to-face session was conducted over 2 h. The six respondents received an information sheet prior to the session detailing the objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and confidentiality provisions. Written consent from the participants was received. Throughout the proceedings, the facilitator clarified the IQA procedure and highlighted that the participants, not the researcher, would establish their themes and their meanings.

To begin the session, a silent brainstorming session in which contributors presented short phrases, words, or statements articulating their experiences of IGL. Fifty-eight raw statements were obtained from this stage. Duplicates were eliminated in the clarification process, and all participants validated the intended meanings. To group the statements drawn inductively according to conceptual similarity, the cohort proposed labels for their clusters and reconvened to consolidate the results through discussion and negotiation.

An Affinity Relationship Table (ART) was afterwards completed by each participant. It indicated all potential pairs of affinities, and the participants needed to establish the direction of influence among them. In instances where no relationship was identified, the participants could capture a null relationship.

Data analysis approach

Data analysis adhered to the structured IQA process. Individual ARTs were combined to form a Group ART that reflected the number of participants endorsing each directional relationship. These frequencies were entered into an Excel spreadsheet, which allowed the calculation of cumulative totals and relative frequencies. To identify which relationships represented broad consensus, a Pareto analysis was completed. This process classifies relationships according to the sequence of frequencies and recognises the subset that accounts for approximately 80% of the total variance in participant perception. The Pareto principle was applied to isolate dominant relationships and minimise the influence of outliers.

The surviving relationships were assigned to an Interrelationship Diagram (IRD), where outgoing and incoming links were tallied for each affinity. The distinction between the two, expressed as delta (Δ = Out – In), indicated the causal position of each variable. Positive deltas denote drivers (causal variables), negative deltas indicate outcomes (effects), and near-zero deltas identify pivots that both influence and are influenced by others. This calculation provided an empirical foundation for the subsequent system modelling.

The IRD results were used to construct the SID. Two diagrams were prepared: (1) a cluttered version incorporating all surviving relationships, and (2) a simplified version representing only the strongest causal links.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2016) criteria. Credibility was strengthened through member validation at every stage. Participants reviewed the affinity definitions, confirmed that their raw statements were correctly represented, and validated the SID to ensure the accuracy of interpretation. Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participant profiles, enabling readers to assess relevance to their own organisational settings. Dependability was achieved through the systematic, replicable IQA algorithm, which provides an explicit audit trail from raw data to final model. Confirmability was reinforced by maintaining detailed reflexive notes documenting all procedural and interpretive decisions.

To maintain ethical integrity, participants offered informed consent. They were additionally made aware that involvement was confidential and voluntary. Exposure to harmful conditions was minimal, as the study did not investigate confidential personal matters but professional experiences.

Researcher reflexivity

The dual role of facilitator and analyst required introspective insight. The facilitator in IQA oversees the process while letting participants control the content. However, indirect impact may emerge as a result of emphasis or clarifications.

To address this issue, the deliberations were well documented and continuously clarified with the participants. The participants were invited to challenge or correct any explanations that failed to represent shared comprehension. This perspective is consistent with research ethics and guarantees that the findings stay participant-driven.

Triangulation and rigour

To improve analytical rigour, internal and theoretical triangulation were employed. Internal triangulation involved cross-checking data from multiple sources, including raw statements, ART matrices, and group discussions, to confirm consistency. Theoretical triangulation occurred when the emergent SID was later compared with established leadership theories. The systematic IQA framework was articulated clearly, even though the sessions were conducted online. Participants collaborated using shared visual boards and all data outputs. Affinity Relationship Tables, Pareto graphs, and SID drafts were distributed for verification to ensure accuracy and transparency in data management.

Data analysis

This section presents the analytic process used to transform raw qualitative data from the participants into a structured system of interrelated variables. Following the principles of IQA, data analysis was conducted in sequential stages: (1) inductive coding, (2) axial coding, (3) identification of affinity relationships, and (4) construction of the SID. This systematic procedure ensured that meaning emerged directly from participant input while maintaining methodological transparency and traceability.

Inductive coding

The analysis commenced with inductive coding; a process aimed at identifying and clustering raw statements generated during the focus group phase. Each participant responded to the issue statement: *What are the challenges and opportunities associated with intergenerational leadership in contemporary organisations?*

A total of 58 discrete statements were collected. These were sorted, compared, and combined into conceptually similar groupings through open discussion and researcher facilitation. This step ensured that data remained grounded in participants' own words, minimising researcher bias. Emerging themes included: (1) respect and humility, (2) bias between age groups, (3) authentic leadership behaviour, (4) communication and mentoring skills, and (5) inclusive systems. These clusters served as the foundation for the next analytic level, in which the group refined conceptual meanings and defined relationships between emerging categories.

Axial coding

Fifty-eight raw affinity statements were created through the IQA process. The clustered statements were revisited, refined, and labelled with conceptually dense names, known as affinities, during axial coding analysis. The process involved comparing and contrasting similar clusters until the group reached consensus on six overarching themes that represent the IGL system: (1) *Values*, (2) *Biases*, (3) *Character*, (4) *Skills*, (5) *Systems and Structure*, and (6) *Inclusivity* (Table 2).

Detailed affinity relationship table

After the six affinities were validated, participants individually completed ARTs to identify directional causal relationships among all possible pairs of affinities (Table 3). Each participant indicated whether, in their perception, affinity A influenced affinity B, affinity B influenced affinity A, or no relationship existed.

These individual ARTs were then aggregated into a Group ART, and frequencies were tallied to determine the dominant directional patterns. Relationships supported by a majority of participants (four or more out of six) were retained for further analysis. The results were synthesised into the Tabular IRD, which summarised *in-*, *out-*, and *delta* scores for each affinity, indicating its relative influence or dependence in the system.

This numerical profile established the causal order of the system, with *Values* identified as the strongest driver and *Inclusivity* as the ultimate outcome. Every directional arrow from the Group ART was included, resulting in a dense network of overlapping connections that displayed the system's full complexity. Using the IRD results, a cluttered SID was constructed to visualise all surviving relationships. To improve interpretability, participants reviewed the cluttered diagram and removed redundant or low-frequency relationships. The resulting uncluttered SID presented a simplified yet analytically robust causal model of IGL, as depicted in Figure 1.

Values act as the initiating force, shaping attitudes (*Biases*) that influence behavioural integrity (*Character*). *Character* determines both interpersonal capability (*Skills*) and the ethical design of organisational frameworks (*Systems and Structure*). Together, these lead to the emergence of *Inclusivity*

TABLE 2: Final affinity groups and definitions.

No.	Affinity theme	Definition
1.	Biases	Personal standards and subjective norms that one has and that one imposes on others. They influence the direction in which one wants to take the organisation.
2.	Values	Attributes that one holds dear and that matter and/or inform who they are. These are shaped by one's upbringing and experiences. They can be used to exercise good business leadership.
3.	Character	Observable attributes of one's behaviour that are shaped by one's values. These inform the leadership style in the business and decision-making. These, in turn, inform one's personal brand; the latter, in turn, influences the company's brand.
4.	Inclusivity	Embracing diversity for a common good by having processes and activities in a business that intentionally create a space where everyone feels that they belong (unity in diversity).
5.	Skills	An acquired or natural (enhanced) abilities that help one be efficient as a business leader.
6.	Systems and Structure	A collection of measures and techniques put in place in a business to effectively derive maximum value.

TABLE 3: Final tabular inter-relationship diagram.

Affinity	1	2	3	4	5	6	OUT↑	IN←	Δ
2. Values	↑	-	↑	↑	↑	↑	5	0	5
1. Biases	-	←	↑	↑	↑	↑	4	1	3
3. Character	←	←	-	↑	↑	<>	2	2	0
5. Skills	←	←	←	↑	-	↑	2	3	-1
6. Systems and Structure	←	←	<>	↑	←	-	1	3	-2
4. Inclusivity	←	←	←	-	←	←	0	5	-5

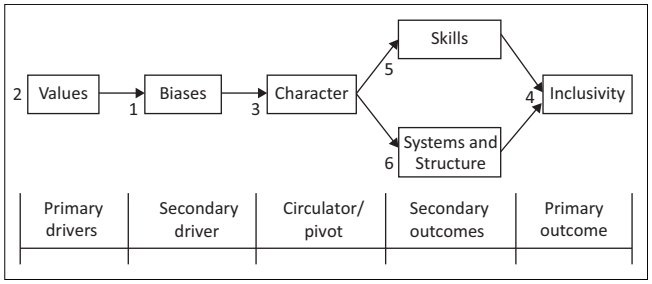


FIGURE 1: Uncluttered systems influence diagram.

as a systemic outcome. This reflects participant perceptions, not absolute causality.

A tour through the system

A narrative 'tour' through the final SID offers a holistic understanding of how the system operates.

- *Values* provide the moral compass that anchors leadership behaviour.
- When leaders act with empathy and respect, *Biases*, especially age-related stereotypes, are diminished.
- Reduced bias allows *Character* to develop authentically, expressed through humility and consistency.
- *Character* then informs *Skills*, shaping leaders' ability to manage conflict, communicate effectively, and mentor across generations.
- These skills influence *Systems and Structure*, ensuring policies, performance frameworks, and team norms reflect fairness.
- The culmination of all preceding dynamics is *Inclusivity*, where diverse employees experience psychological safety and shared belonging.

This pathway confirms participants' collective perception that ethical values form the foundation of effective IGL.

Feedback loops and zooming

Although the primary causal flow is linear, several reinforcing feedback loops were identified. Participants observed that Inclusivity feeds back into *Values* and *Character*: As teams experience fairness and belonging, leaders receive affirmation that strengthens their commitment to ethical conduct. Similarly, effective *Systems and Structure* reinforce *Skills* by embedding mentorship and cross-generational collaboration into organisational routines.

Closer examination of subsets within the SID revealed two interconnected subsystems: (1) a moral subsystem (*Values* → *Biases* → *Character*), which governs personal leadership integrity, and (2) an operational subsystem (*Character* → *Skills* → *Systems* → *Inclusivity*), which describes the organisational enactment of leadership.

Collectively, these subsystems illustrate that the effectiveness of IGL emerges from ongoing reciprocal feedback between individual virtue and institutional structures.

In summary, the IQA analysis transformed participant reflections into a coherent causal system that integrates personal, interpersonal, and organisational dimensions of leadership. The final SID positions *Values* as the primary driver and Inclusivity as the outcome, with *Biases*, *Character*, *Skills*, and *Systems and Structure* mediating the transformation from ethical intent to inclusive organisational practice. This analytic framework forms the foundation for the interpretation and theoretical discussion that follow.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee (No. 2025_SBL_AC_020_SD_7109).

Results

Results relating to the focus group

The IQA procedure conducted for the IGL study yielded a rich corpus of participant statements. The statements, through repeated clarification and coding, solidified into six basic affinities from 58 initial statements. The participants yielded the ultimate affinity set: (1) *Values*, (2) *Biases*, (3) *Character*, (4) *Skills*, (5) *Systems and Structure,* and (6) *Inclusivity* through clustering and axial coding (Table 4). The group's demographic diversity offered several perspectives that reinforced the legitimacy of group sense-making during the IQA procedure.

Each affinity was defined collectively by participants to capture its underlying meaning. For instance, *Values* were associated with respect, empathy, humility, and accountability, which are principles regarded as essential to ethical leadership. *Biases* represented prejudices and assumptions based on age, gender, or culture that distort perception and limit collaboration. *Character* was identified as the behavioural expression of internal values, encompassing consistency, humility, and integrity. *Skills* reflected the practical abilities, including communication, empathy, coaching, and conflict management, through which character becomes visible.

TABLE 4: Final affinity groupings for the intergenerational leadership framework.

Affinity grouping	Affinity grouped per IGL thematic category
Values	Authenticity; humility; respect; empathy; fairness
Biases	Generational stereotypes; assumptions; expectation biases
Character	Integrity; teachability; accountability; consistency
Skills	Communication; mentoring; digital literacy; conflict navigation
Systems and Structure	Policies; recruitment; performance management; career pathways
Inclusivity	Belonging; voice; equitable participation; psychological safety

IGL, intergenerational leadership.

Systems and Structure denoted the organisational frameworks and human resources (HR) mechanisms that institutionalise or constrain inclusive leadership. *Inclusivity* captured teamwork, belonging, and openness, the outcome of value-driven leadership.

By sorting the affinities in descending order by their delta (Δ) values from the tabular IRD, positional roles were assigned within the emergent system. Positive deltas point to net causal outflow (drivers), whereas negative deltas point to net inflow (outcomes). This methodical arrangement created a well-defined causal hierarchy, with *Values* as the primary driver and *Inclusivity* as the ultimate system outcome. Together, the IRD and SID offer an audit trail of the analytical process and show the theory produced by the focus group (Northcutt & McCoy 2004). Figure 1 displays the graphical depiction of affinity pair relations as well as the Pareto-based cutoff used to choose which relationships were maintained for the composite IRD.

Primary driver: Values

The results indicate that values constitute a central force shaping IGL, aligning with prior research that positions values as foundational to leadership orientation and practice, even where other constructs are foregrounded as primary drivers (Grobler & Koen 2024). Participants constantly defined *Values* in moral and relational terms: authenticity, humility, respect, empathy and a commitment to fairness. *Values* were described as the perspective from which leaders interpret the behaviours, motivations, and capacities of younger and older colleagues. Many respondents pointed out that efforts to bridge generational divides become transactional and brittle in the absence of a common ethical standard. One participant pointed out that 'when values are clear, people forgive mistakes; when values are absent, mistrust grows'. Across generational groups, this idea was repeated, and *Values* appear to act as a universal stabiliser in teams spanning several generations.

The group's discussion connected *Values* to practical leadership actions. Fair decisions about workload assignment, mentorship obligations, and the acknowledgement of contribution across age groups were guided by values. The analytic implication is that interventions intended to enhance intergenerational cooperation should start with clear values clarification and collaborative sense-making activities. The significance of *Values* coincides with qualitative IQA studies that frequently identify ethical and cultural anchors at the top of causal hierarchies (Grobler & Koen 2024; Human-Vogel 2006).

Secondary drivers: Biases and character

The SID positions *Biases* and *Character* as secondary drivers, constructs meant to both moderate the effect of *Values* and shape downstream phenomena. Participants' accounts of generational stereotypes, assumptions about competence, and unexamined expectations about how different age groups show up at work are captured in biases. Participants frequently mentioned that biases manifest subtly: They arise in hiring language, in assumptions made during meetings, and in casual narratives about the manner in which things have always been done. Participants contended, above all, that acknowledging and naming biases is a step towards converting common values into concrete actions.

Character was defined as the moral-expressive aspect that turns values into conduct. Integrity, consistency, humility, and teachability define character. The focus group stressed that character decides whether values are embodied or performative. Strong character leaders were said to be those who consistently do the right thing for staff of all ages, even under duress, prioritising long-term outcomes. Both *Biases* and *Character* in the IRD recorded positive delta values. This indicates their role in spreading influence across the system.

Circulator: Skills

Skills seem to be the circulator within the IGL model, a construct that both receives influence from upstream drivers and distributes influence on downstream outcomes. Participants identified adaptive leadership skills, digital literacy, conflict resolution, mentoring and reverse mentoring, and intergenerational communication as critical. These skills are the operating systems that transform ethical intent into visible workplace action. Importantly, the focus group showed that *Skills* operate bidirectionally: They are developed by *Values* and *Character* (e.g. a leader rooted in humility will embrace mentoring). They also feed back to influence *Biases* and *Character* by altering relational patterns and expectations. The IRD showed this circulatory function as *Skills* had around equal 'ins' and 'outs', so positioning them at the centre, catalytic capacity inside the system.

Secondary outcome: Systems and Structure

The structural outcome layer in the IGL system is *Systems and Structure*. These cover formal methods, policies, performance management systems, recruiting pipelines, and daily rituals that define how intergenerational interaction takes place. Participants said that inclusion follows when systems are created with intergenerational fairness in mind, that is, flexible work arrangements, cross-generational mentorship mandates, and clear career paths.

By contrast, misaligned systems, such as rigid promotional requirements that favour tenure, magnify generational conflicts. The IRD analysis showed that *Systems and Structure* usually had a negative delta value, therefore acting as receivers of upstream influence. Still, *Systems and Structure* participate in feedback loops that, depending on design choices, may either dampen or amplify inclusive results.

Primary outcome: Inclusivity

The primary outcome of the system is inclusion: The observable level of belonging, voice, and equitable participation experienced by employees across generations. In practical terms, inclusiveness was described by the participants as chances for significant contribution, acknowledgement of diverse career paths, and the availability of safe spaces for cross-generational conversation.

Inclusivity was presented as both a pragmatic driver and an ethical goal of organisational resilience, with participants linking it to retention, innovation, and employee well-being. Although Inclusivity arises from the interaction of *Values*, *Biases*, *Character*, *Skills*, and *Systems*, it also serves as a reinforcing outcome: (1) greater degrees of *Inclusivity* increase the chances that values are shared, (2) biases are acknowledged and addressed, and (3) skill-sharing becomes routine.

Results relating to definitions

One of the goals of the study was to create an empirically grounded definition of IGL for the organisational context under analysis (Gardner et al. 2005; Grobler & Koen 2024). The focus group's work yielded a summative definition based in the IGL paradigm: Intergenerational Leadership is defined as 'a values-centred, bias-aware leadership process in which character and skill development are institutionalised through organisational systems to produce enduring inclusivity across generational cohorts'.

This definition combines the system's causal logic: Leadership starts with values, is mediated by character and bias awareness, is implemented through skills, and is coded into inclusive outcome-producing organisational structures. The definition highlights the dynamic and interactive nature of leadership; it is not a fixed attribute but rather a process that changes as values are implemented and structures grow.

Interpretation of the Systems Influence Diagram and theoretical implications

For the study of leadership across generations, the SID presents three prominent theoretical consequences. Firstly, the dominance of *Values* emphasises a values-first ontology of leadership: Leadership effectiveness rests on moral coherence before strategy. Secondly, the placement of *Biases* and *Character* as secondary drivers underscores the role of reflective practice. Leaders must surface and challenge preconceptions to match behaviour with stated beliefs. Thirdly, the circulatory function of *Skills* reveals that competencies are embedded within interpersonal dynamics and, when combined with fitting systems, result in inclusion rather than being merely additive.

The IGL model theoretically builds on current leadership paradigms by emphasising the connection between personal moral development and institutional design. Unlike models that prioritise either individual competencies or structural reforms, the IGL framework combines both planes, since neither is sufficient on its own. Training programmes that include skills interventions, for instance, will be short-lived if systematic incentives favour tenure-based promotion, which marginalises younger talent. On the other hand, initiatives supporting intergenerational mobility will fail if leaders lack the integrity to implement them fairly.

Virtually, the results offer a phased sequence for intervention. Start with values work (clarification, story-sharing, co-created ethical charters), then move to bias awareness training and character formation initiatives (coaching, reflective practice), and then invest in skill development (cross-generational mentoring, reverse mentoring, digital upskilling) before codifying gains inside systems (policy change, performance indicators). This sequence is not linear. Feedback loops will need iteration and recalibration, but the ordering identifies leverage points where small investments produce outsized systemic change.

The ART and IRD's audit trail provide organisations with a practical plan. By measuring directional influence and identifying delta values, organisational diagnosticians can prioritise which affinities to pursue for quick effect. For instance, an organisation with low delta scores for *Values* might give top importance to cultural efforts, whereas another with strong values but poor systems could give structural change top priority.

Feedback loops in practice and subsystems

Particularly useful for operational decision-making are the feedback loops found in the IGL model. The *Values–Character–Skills* loop suggests that any intervention at a point in the loop can ripple through the whole system. Strengthening character through leader coaching, for instance, will likely spur changes in mentoring approaches, thereby increasing inclusiveness through better decision-making.

Human resource policy is particularly relevant to the *Systems and Structure–Inclusivity* cycle. Inclusive practices (for instance, by evaluating mentoring results in performance reviews) encourage leaders to act inclusively when embedded in systems. As inclusion becomes visible and valued, it fuels back into the organisational narrative, strengthening values and reducing bias.

Two subsystems were also identified, revealing important micro-dynamics. Narrative, mentoring, and ritual practices that socialise leaders into ethical disciplines drive the moral subsystem (*Values*, *Biases*, *Character*). The operational

subsystem (*Skills*, *Systems and Structure*, *Inclusivity*) is functioning and can be engineered. Cross-walking these subsystems reveals intervention points where narrative-driven work and structural engineering converge.

Limitations and reflexivity

Although the IGL results provide a strong map of IGL dynamics, there are limitations. Six members selected from a small group of organisations define the composition of the focus group, which helps ensure that results are contextually grounded rather than universally generic. The emergence of particular affinities and their significance was moulded by participant demographics. For instance, an increased presence of female participants could affect how salient relational values are, which might, in turn, be gender sensitive.

Reflexively, facilitation affects results – the way questions were phrased and the group dynamics probably shaped which affinities came into view. Despite the limitations, the method's strength lies in its audit trail, which offers transparent documentation of group meaning development, allowing other researchers to trace analytical decisions and either modify or repeat the process across several contexts.

In essence, the analysis shows a cohesive systems view of leadership across generations, in which values come before action, biases moderate perception, character transforms moral stance into skills, practice circulates influence, systems formalise change, and inclusivity represents the desired organisational outcome. The analytic sequence results in both practical guidance and theoretical clarity. The emergent definition and model offer grounds for future empirical testing and for designing measurement tools that are sensitive to the systemic nature of IGL.

Discussion

Integrating the Systems Influence Diagram with leadership theory

By highlighting values as the initiating mechanism in a systemic causal chain that leads to inclusivity, the participant-generated results contribute to progress in leadership theory. Many established leadership frameworks, including transformational, authentic, and inclusive leadership, acknowledge the importance of ethics and relational competence. However, their treatment of these dimensions varies. The results particularly integrate values, perceptual filters (biases), behavioural dispositions (character), applied competence (skills), and institutional design (systems) into a single mid-range theory. This integration agrees with multi-level intervention (personal, relational, structural) advocated by systems leadership approaches to achieve long-lasting organisational results (Senge, Hamilton & Kania 2015).

Extending existing frameworks

By making their causal interdependencies explicit, the results complement and extend the authentic leadership (self-awareness and honesty), transformational leadership (values-based motivation), and inclusive leadership (openness and participative environments) literatures. Authentic leadership's focus on self-awareness, for instance, appeals to this model's value–character junction; transformational leadership's ethical component is reflected in *Values* as driver; inclusive leadership maps onto the final result, but the SID suggests that inclusive by itself cannot bring inclusivity; systems and skills need to be aligned.

Challenging generational stereotypes

One main practical implication is that the model redefines generational dispute as a systemic outcome rather than a fixed trait. The results identify the problem of dysfunction in misaligned values, unchecked biases, underdeveloped character, and poorly constructed systems rather than attributing it to generational categories like 'Millennials are entitled'. This reframing lessens stereotyping and turns executive focus to leverage points that actually alter behaviour and results.

Leadership as a systemic phenomenon

One of the main theoretical contributions of the study is the explicit presentation of leadership as a system. The causal cascade reveals that interventions at any single node (e.g. skills workshops) are likely to have limited effect unless upstream (*Values* and *Character*) and downstream (*Systems* and Structure) conditions are addressed. This systematic viewpoint underlines the need for combined leadership development courses that sequence values work, character reflection, skill acquisition, and systematic design.

Pedagogical and managerial implications

The SID provides a curriculum blueprint for business schools: Begin with values and ethics courses that foster humility and respect; then proceed with character development and reflective practice; and finally, embed skills training (emotional intelligence [EQ], coaching) matched with practicum opportunities that test real systems. The model advises organisations to make simultaneous investments: (1) leadership initiatives that foster *Values* and *Character*, (2) HR systems that encourage *Inclusivity*, and (3) ongoing *Bias* audits that identify systematic inequities.

Limitations and avenues for further research

Although the results are robust as a participant-validated mid-range model, they are based on a small purposive sample of six millennial leaders and thus warrant further empirical investigation. Future research may operationalise the results into a survey instrument to quantitatively test path strengths across sectors and cohorts, or employ longitudinal designs to investigate how over-interventions at one node, such as values training, spread across the network over time. Including older leaders in comparative studies would also help improve the relevance of the model.

The IQA results reinterpret IGL as a values-driven, systematic process that leads to inclusivity. Mapping participant-authored causal chains offers both a theoretical contribution, integrating moral, cognitive, behavioural and structural dimensions, and a practical blueprint for leadership development and organisational change. To put it simply, organisations have to go beyond skill development, nurture values, tackle prejudices, build character, and change systems if they want to create inclusive intergenerational workplaces; thus, inclusion becomes the emergent quality of coordinated human and institutional activities.

Conclusion

Using IQA, this research investigated IGL to show that leadership across generations operates as a values-driven system. Six connected variables, including *Values*, *Biases*, *Character*, *Skills*, *Systems and Structure*, and *Inclusivity*, form a coherent causal network in which moral orientation initiates behavioural and organisational change. The resulting SID offers a structure for grasping and fostering inclusive, multigenerational employment realities, including leadership.

For business schools and leadership development in general, the study emphasises how crucial leadership programmes should integrate ethical reflection, bias awareness, and systemic thinking. It may demonstrate to organisations that inclusivity is attainable when values and character are intentionally aligned with systems and institutions. Leadership success essentially results from ethical consistency across organisational levels rather than from generational conformity.

Future studies could validate causal connections and quantify the results using larger and more heterogeneous samples to build on this work. Comparative research across sectors and cultural situations would help more clearly define the model's overall applicability. Longitudinal studies might also investigate how targeted interventions on values and character translate into measurable improvements in performance and inclusivity over time. This study helps both theory and practice by presenting leadership as an interdependent moral–structural system, therefore providing a direction for growing leaders who exemplify ethical behaviour, manage diversity constructively, have integrity, and create organisations in which every generation may flourish.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Simangele L. Mkhize: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Anton Grobler: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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