



# National Study on Leadership During a Crisis and Beyond

Unexpected Insights and Strategies during COVID-19

By Sanborn & Associates, Inc.

Confidential. Copyright 2020 Sanborn & Associates, Inc. All rights reserved.

[MarkSanborn.com](https://MarkSanborn.com)



# Introduction

Leaders today face an unprecedented and challenging situation: how to understand, lead, and support Americans who are often feeling anxious, overwhelmed, and stressed about their lives and futures. Missing from the conversation is data that specifically uncovers what's important now when it comes to leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. What is working, what needs improvement, and what are Americans' expectations for the future?

Sanborn & Associates, Inc. led a national research study to uncover the research-based truth about leadership expectations during these perplexing times in the U.S. today. Specifically, we sought to answer: How well did leaders display specific qualities during this crisis? How has leadership handled the COVID-19 pandemic challenges so far? How do Americans expect their lives to change after this crisis is over?

Answering these questions is an urgent priority for leaders across industries to inform and instruct how they can connect, motivate, and ultimately support their communities. Taking action now is critical. The research team is incredibly excited about these discoveries and their implications for leadership across specialties. Let's dive into the findings from the national study...



## RESEARCH STRATEGY:

# National Quantitative Study with In-Depth Analysis

In designing this national quantitative study, it was important to uncover and establish a deep understanding of leadership perspective and future expectations across the United States.

Survey participants in the national study consisted of 1,005 consumers ages 18-90 weighted to the U.S. Census for age, gender, geography, and ethnicity. This sample composition provides a highly accurate “snapshot of America”.

## Key Insights Uncovered about Leadership

The study uncovered two key insights that have broad implications across a wide swath of leadership disciplines. We'll explore each of these in more detail:

- Americans are mixed about the performance of their leaders during COVID-19 with Millennials experiencing the best leadership support during this crisis.
- Americans are feeling anxious about the future of our country and generations have different expectations about their work and personal lives after this crisis is over.





## LEADERSHIP QUALITIES AND EXPECTATIONS DURING COVID-19:

# What leaders did best, what leaders did worst, and what leaders can do better.

Since the start of this pandemic, Americans have experienced a flood of information and messaging from leadership on everything from updates and expectations to safety protocol. Across the U.S., communication is the quality that Americans believe their leaders are exhibiting best during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**56% of Americans working full-time say their leaders are communicating well or extremely well during this crisis**

The national research study showed that almost half (47%) of Americans believed leaders communicated well during the crisis, with 33% being neutral, and 20% saying that leaders did not communicate well. This was significantly higher than all other qualities tested including “shows concern for me” (42%), “is a role model in behavior and attitude” (41%), “keeps me and my team focused” (41%), and “keeps my morale up” (39%). Interestingly, 56% of Americans working full-time say their leaders are communicating well or extremely well during this crisis, significantly higher than all other employment status groups.

Although communication was the highest rated quality overall, simply communicating *more* may not be as important as communicating *well*. To this point, only 36% of Americans agreed that leaders “communicated appropriately during the crisis”, while 31%, said leaders “did not communicate appropriately”, and 33% being neutral. Additionally, 28% of Americans said that leaders “did not show concern for me” (23%), “were not role models in behavior and attitude” (24%), and “did not keep morale up” (25%).

**23% of Americans said that leaders did not show concern for me**

**45% of Americans said leaders in the U.S. generally did not handle the pandemic well**

There appears to be a lack of personal connection in leadership that has been assessed in these sentiments. Furthermore, 45% of Americans said leaders in the U.S. generally did not handle the pandemic well, compared to only 29% who said they did handle it well, and 27% who were neutral. All of these challenges beg the question, what can leaders do to better connect with and earn the respect of Americans during future challenges?

The national study also uncovered key generational differences in leadership performance. Across all generations, Millennials are experiencing the best leadership support during this crisis, rating every leadership quality higher than any other generation.

Clearly, leaders communicated in a way that most resonated with Millennials over any other generation. Gen Z rates leadership the lowest overall, with less than one-third saying that leaders are performing well at keeping their morale up. Although leaders have done the best job communicating and connecting with Millennials overall, they seem to be the most out of touch with Gen Z, and reaching this younger generation presents the most room for improvement.

**Gen Z rates leadership the lowest overall across all generations with less than 1/3 saying that leaders are performing well at keeping their morale up**



## Future Life Changes

As Americans and organizations look to the future and navigate uncharted waters, this pandemic has dramatically reminded them that ‘normal’ is not what *has* happened, but what *is happening*. The national study found that 57% of Americans feel more anxious about the future during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to only 17% that don’t feel anxious and 26% that are neutral. Anxiety about the future is most pronounced with the youngest generation as 67% of Gen Z agree they have become more anxious about the future during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**48% of Americans with 3 or more children said their relationships will be better when this crisis is over**

When asked about their expectations for change after the crisis, Americans were overall more positive than negative. Over one-third of Americans agreed their personal life would be better (35%), their relationships would be better (34%), and their productivity would be better (33%). Americans were more than three times more likely to say they will be better off than worse off after the crisis is over. This sentiment grew stronger with family size, with 48% of Americans with three or more children saying their relationships will be better when this crisis is over, highest among all demographic groups.

Interestingly, over half of all Americans expect their personal lives, relationships, productivity, and work life to stay the same, highlighting the enormous uncertainty felt across the country.

Future expectations from a generational perspective highlights an interesting trend. More than older generations, Gen Z expects the most positive change after this crisis is over. Gen Z shows significantly higher positive expectations for productivity (45%), work life (40%), and relationships (40%) compared to older generations. Boomers, however, are the most skeptical about any aspect of their life getting better after the crisis. These findings highlight the dramatic differences that exist between generations when it comes to future predictions and post COVID-19 expectations.

**Compared to older generations, Gen Z expects the most positive change after this crisis is over. Gen Z has significantly higher positive expectations for:**

**45%** productivity

**40%** work life

**40%** relationships



## Moving Forward: What This Means to Leaders

Regardless of the question or the age of respondent, there is much room for leadership improvement. No result scored high enough to confirm that leaders were doing very well, much less as well as possible.

Will leaders learn from this experience of unexpected crisis, or will the lessons be lost?

No matter if a team member believes his or her life will be better or worse in the future, leaders are challenged to inspire and instruct in a way their lives will become better. Beliefs are open to change, and it is a job of leadership to deliver on positive expectations and either eliminate or reduce negative expectations.

Even workers who were positive about the future still admitted to anxiety. Leaders may not know exactly what the future holds, but there is still much they can do to deal constructively with anxiety.

While there is much that all generations share as opinions and aspirations, a one-size-fits-all response isn't enough. The research indicates significant differences between what is desired by employees and how well leaders deliver, and the only way to improve is to understand both the *what* and the *why* of those differences.





## SANBORN & ASSOCIATES, INC.

# How We Can Help

Research is the first step toward understanding our environment and recognizing problems. But understanding strengths and weaknesses means nothing if they are not addressed.

**Sanborn & Associates, Inc. can help you in these ways:**

**1**

**Quickly create alignment with your leadership team and employees through in person or virtual presentations.**

**2**

**Advise key leaders and/or leadership teams in actionable ideas to improve performance in key areas.**

**3**

**Provide training and development resources to grow leaders at every level.**

## Sanborn & Associates, Inc.

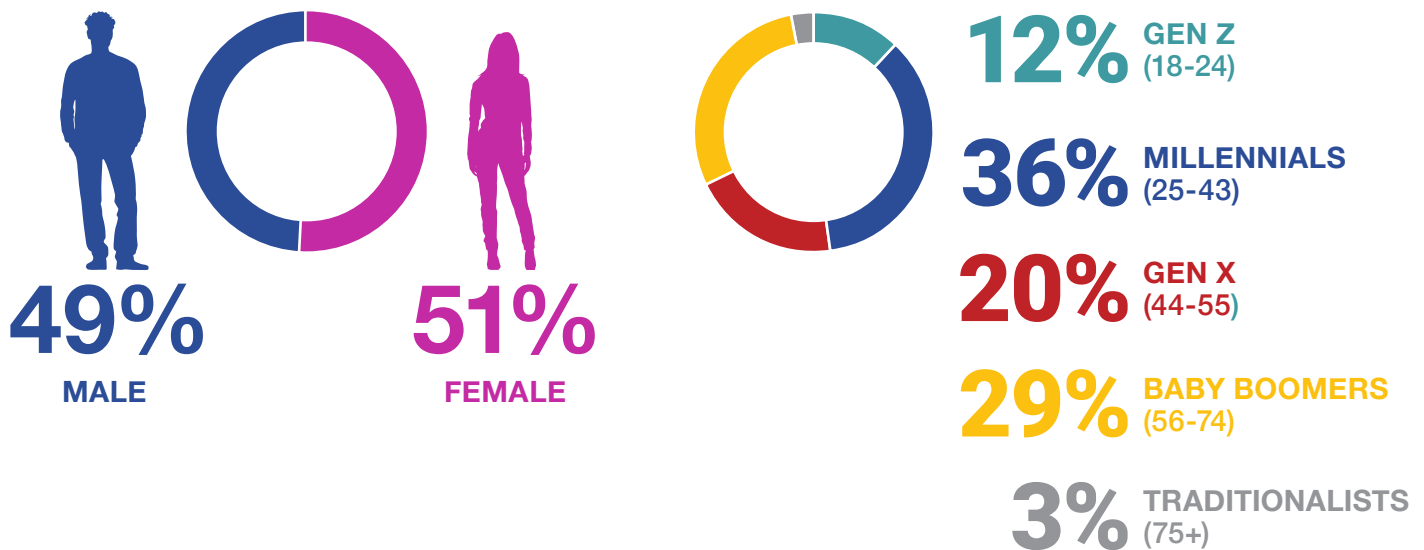
Sanborn & Associates, Inc. is an idea studio for leadership development. Mark Sanborn, President, has more than 35 years experience in developing leaders at every level to turn ordinary into extraordinary. Mark is a bestselling author of 8 books and speaks in person and virtually to large audiences around the world. He is an advisor to high level leaders and a coach to help both executive and professional speakers communicate at their best.

Learn more about Sanborn & Associates, Inc. at: [www.MarkSanborn.com](http://www.MarkSanborn.com)

# Methodology

This custom study was designed collaboratively by Sanborn & Associates, Inc. and The Center for Generational Kinetics and conducted online from April 28, 2020, to May 4, 2020. The survey was administered to 1,005 U.S. respondents ages 18-90. The total sample was weighted to current U.S. Census data for age, region, gender, and ethnicity. Figures are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Margin of error is +/-3.1 percentage points.

CUSTOM STUDY COMPLETED BY **1,005** PARTICIPANTS







This document is copyrighted 2020 Sanborn & Associates, Inc. All rights reserved.

The information in this document can be referenced in the media, in whole or in part, as long as this document is cited as the source of the information. In no way does this document provide an endorsement of any product, service, company or individual.

This document is provided “as is.” Information and views expressed in this document may change without notice. The strategies and examples depicted herein are provided for illustration purposes only and are not guarantees of specific results. You bear the risk of using this document.