

How the Proactive Behavior of Generation Z Soldiers Stimulates the Emergence of Leadership

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Abstract: With the surge of the times and the increasing complexity of the world's military environment, Generation Z officers and soldiers are gradually becoming the core of the army's armed forces, and their unique perspectives, innovative thinking, and pursuit of individual and collective achievements are crucial to the future development of the army. Based on self-determination theory and implicit leadership theory, this study explores how Generation Z officers and soldiers can stimulate leadership emergence through proactive behaviors in a highly standardized organization like the military. The military needs officers and soldiers to perform more proactive behaviors aligned with organizational goals to promote better achievement of collective goals. According to the generational characteristics of Generation Z officers and soldiers, they have more forward-looking ideas and a stronger desire for proactive behaviors, and proactive behaviors can enhance their influence in the group, thus stimulating the emergence of their leadership.

Keywords: Generation Z officers and soldiers; Proactive behavior; Leadership emergence; Self-efficacy; Self-determination theory

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1. Introduction

The chairman of the CCP stressed at the Central Military Commission's Talent Work Conference held in 2021 that "we must grasp the laws of growth of military personnel, grasp the characteristics and requirements of the development of various types of personnel, innovate management concepts and ways and means, promote the optimization of military human resources policy and system, create a strong atmosphere of trust in talent, respect for talent, support for talent, caring for talent, and the vast number of officers and entrepreneurs enthusiasm, initiative and creativity of the majority of officers and entrepreneurs are fully stimulated."

With the rapid changes in the external environment, the traditional stereotypical hierarchical and vertical management model has been challenging to adapt to complex war scenarios; the army needs to change from relying on the limited formal leadership within the organization to relying on the informal leadership emerging from the vast number of individual officers and soldiers at the grassroots level, leadership emergence^[1]. In the

organization, compared with the superior-subordinate relationship, ordinary individuals will have more frequent and in-depth communication and understanding of each other, and the members who show leadership among them often have specific calling power. As a new constituent base of the military in response to the times, Generation Z officers and soldiers will play an increasingly important role in the future. Therefore, this paper considers Generation Z officers and soldiers the main research object and explores how to stimulate their newborn power under the new normal, tap the army's potential, and stimulate a more sustainable competitive advantage of talents.

Generation Z refers to the young people born between 1995 and 2010. According to the United Nations Population Survey, the Generation Z population will account for 32% of the global population in 2020, and this age group is gradually becoming the pillar of society. From the social background, Generation Z was born in the era of China's reform and opening up, the rising comprehensive national power, and the accelerated opening up of all people's minds; from the family background, under the regulation of family planning policies, many Generation Z families are of the "421" type, which is inclined to miniaturization, refinement, and childlessness, which makes the individuals of Generation Z the "C" position in the family from the moment they are born^[2]. The individuals of Generation Z in the "C" position in the family have many flavors and high-quality resources. They have a distinctive intergenerational portrait: "affluence + independence + freedom + significance + patriotism." Generation Z has a unique pursuit of value in the workplace, and they care more about the workplace feeling of "ritual + experience + participation + achievement"^[3]. As the "Net Generation", Generation Z officers and soldiers master diversified information access channels, have a broader vision and platform, pay more attention to independent thinking, do not unthinkingly follow authority, dare to think and dare to do, have self-confidence and self-improvement, and have a great curiosity and creativity. However, at the same time, the social and family background they grew up in makes them unable to self-regulate, long for more attention and recognition, have poor pressure-bearing ability, and lack patience. For Generation Z officers and soldiers, optimizing the cyclical management of military organizations through the four links of "selection, training, employment, and retention" is also an issue we must consider and discuss^[4].

Proactive behaviors refer to (proactive behaviors) the organization of individuals in the understanding and prediction of environmental changes based on positive action, taking the initiative to make the future and change-oriented work behavior, which is the organization of the ordinary individual emergence of leadership, and the sense of identity is an important way. By proactively undertaking work, solving problems, and participating in teamwork, they can demonstrate more self-confidence and competence, responsibility and positive attitudes, thus obtaining a sense of identity, enhancing personal influence, demonstrating leadership potential, facilitating teamwork, improving personal competence, broadening interpersonal relationships, and ultimately realizing the enhancement of personal value and career development. The proactive behavior studied in this paper mainly refers to the positive behavior of employees who exceed the work requirements set by the organization and take the initiative to carry out their work on their initiative; this kind of behavior has five characteristics: (1) consistent with the overall goal of the organization; (2) continuity of the behavior; (3) the emergence of difficulties and obstacles can be actively responded to; (4) the initiative is carried out on their initiative; (5) the proactive behavior will not harm the interests of others; (6) most of them are found in the sudden events^[6].

Earlier research has shown that proactive behavior is less desirable in assembly-line work, which is standardized and programmed, whereas individual proactive behavior usually implies non-standardization. When faced with a traditional team, leaders may feel threatened by the proactive behavior of an employee, leading to a state of defensiveness and negative feedback. It can also impact and threaten coworkers' work, causing resentment

and internal friction. In contrast, the positive outcomes of proactive behaviors are earning positive evaluations from leaders, individual rewards, obtaining high-quality leader-member exchange relationships, reducing task conflict, and increasing team and organizational effectiveness. Individual proactive behaviors can also increase work commitment, optimize existing rule-based procedures, and enhance organizational change capacity and innovation ^[5]. Using the military organization as a research context, in organizations such as the military, where the situational environment can change at any time, there is a need for more forward-looking proactive thinking to guide officers and soldiers to be more adaptive and better able to accomplish various complex tasks.

The cognitive-motivational process of proactive behavior is different from the result of passive compliance with norms in that when employees exhibit proactive behavior that meets the above criteria, they are perceived by other members as showing some leadership despite not having any formal rights in the team, a phenomenon called leadership emergence ^[7]. Unlike hierarchical leadership, leadership emergence is a temporary, explosive, and contingent leadership in horizontal and flat team structures. In this regard, different studies have given different definitions. However, in general, they define leadership emergence as an individual in an organization whom team members perceive as demonstrating leadership-like influence despite having no formal authority. At the same time, because horizontal structures reduce delays in decision-making and execution in vertical structures and the results presented come from within team members, leadership emergence in horizontal structures also creates a supportive culture for the organization, which in turn is tightly woven like a spider's web and promotes innovation and breakthroughs in the development of the organization ^[8]. Modern equipment, talent, and management styles are required for the military to achieve sustained competitive advantage and greater cohesion, collaboration, and combat effectiveness. As a form of informal leadership, leadership emergence is seen as a key requirement for organizations to achieve sustained competitiveness in today's dynamic and changing competitive environment ^[9].

2. Theoretical foundations

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a new branch of cognitive motivation theory that was developed recently and proposed by Deci and Ryan in the 1980s. According to this theory, self-determination has the potential for empirical choice, a free choice of action made by an individual based on full awareness of the individual's needs and environmental information. This theory has evolved to produce six sub-theories: basic psychological needs theory, cognitive appraisal theory, organic integration theory, causal orientation theory, goal content theory, and relational motivation theory ^[10].

Self-determination is not only an individual's ability but also an emotional need. The theory focuses on the extent to which human behavior is voluntary or self-determined, emphasizes subjective agency, and values the dialectical relationship between individual initiative and social context ^[11]. The theory suggests that people have three basic intrinsic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for belonging. These needs are crucial for the development and health of the individual. Several cross-cultural studies have demonstrated that the satisfaction of people's basic needs is positively correlated with people's experience of well-being, which motivates people to engage in more positive behaviors and moves them along the optimal path of individual development. Meanwhile, causal orientation theory suggests that people with high autonomy orientation tend to exhibit self-innovation, seek out interesting and challenging activities, and take responsibility ^[10].

Self-determination theory emphasizes the influence of intrinsic motivation on an individual's behavior. It suggests that self-efficacy stimulates an individual's intrinsic motivation, which promotes active participation

and persistence in a task or activity. The theory emphasizes the influence of autonomy, competence, and individual-organizational relationships on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a form of self-determination that reflects an individual's perceptions of his or her own abilities and values, as well as an individual's internal perceptions following external feedback on his or her proactive behavior. From this aspect, the individual's perception of the self is divided into two stages; the first is the primary review, that is, the review of the self-coping ability when facing external stimuli, judging whether their ability and the current pressure match and then is the consequences of the prejudgement, that is, according to the reality of the situation to judge their proactive behavior, the organization will give positive feedback or negative feedback. The two phases are in a progressive relationship, and together, they influence the outcome of the individual's self-determination. Suppose the individual believes he or she can handle the challenge or task and obtain positive benefits (personal achievement, organizational recognition) through proactive behavior. In that case, he or she will be more likely to obtain positive self-efficacy, which will stimulate the individual to further think and practice and thus promote the emergence of his or her leadership potential; on the contrary, if the individual obtains negative feedback from the outside world through the proactive behavior, then he or she will be more likely to obtain a negative sense of self-efficacy, which inhibits the individual's desire to engage in proactive behaviors afterward, thus suppressing the emergence of his or her leadership talent ^[4].

One of the foundational theories of leadership emergence is the implicit leadership theory, which has been an important topic in the field of organizational psychology and leadership research in recent years. From the theoretical basis, implicit leadership theory originates from the information processing method and leader classification theory, which is the individual's expectations and beliefs about the traits or behaviors that leaders should have, as well as the individual's "internal labels" to distinguish between leaders and non-leaders, and between effective and ineffective leaders, which are stored in the individual's memory and activated when combined with a specific leader or leadership situation, providing a basis for understanding leadership behavior. This label is stored in the individual's memory and is activated when combined with a specific leader or leadership situation, providing the basis for understanding leadership behavior and is a fundamental element of organizational perception ^[12]. The theory's main idea is that an individual's ability to emerge as a leader depends on whether or not their traits fulfill others' expectations of what a leader should be. Also, the theory states that there are two ways in which individuals are perceived as leaders by others, namely, reasoning orientation and discriminating orientation. Reasoning orientation refers to an inference made by others as to whether an individual has high performance and a positive impact on the team when the individual has not yet demonstrated special talents. Discriminative orientation refers to an individual having current competency traits and thus emerging as a leader. In implicit leadership theory, people observe the leadership behaviors of others through the process of identification matching and identify them as leaders based on how well these behaviors match the leader archetype in their mind. In the Chinese context, the theory categorizes the traits of leaders into four dimensions: personal character, goal effectiveness, interpersonal competence, and transformational. These are similar to the findings of Western studies but also have national cultural specificities, such as the character factor being more prominent in Chinese implicit leadership theory, which reflects the more profound expectations and requirements of Chinese people for leaders. The theory can guide leaders' self-cultivation and practice and help evaluate and select leaders ^[12-13]. Even in the same Chinese context, different groups' perceptions of implicit leadership traits still generate different expectations and evaluations, and this study focuses on how to stimulate more leadership potential in Generation Z groups in military organizations.

In summary, this study constructs a model of the influence of proactive behavior on leadership emergence in Generation Z officers and soldiers, as shown in **Figure 1**.

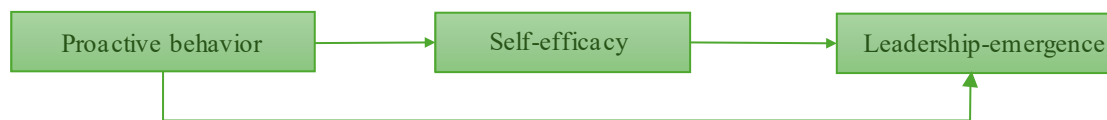


Figure 1. A model of the influence of proactive behaviors on the leadership emergence of Generation Z officers and soldiers based on self-perception theory and implicit leadership theory

3. The relational argument

3.1. Generation Z officers and soldiers' proactive behaviors can positively reinforce their sense of self-efficacy

Given the unique zeitgeist of Generation Z officers and soldiers and their important role in military organizations, their proactive behaviors enable them to adapt actively and lead change. At the same time, leadership emergence emphasizes individual influence in the absence of formal positions. In delving into the behavioral patterns of Gen Z officers and soldiers and their psychological makeup, it is easy to see a subtle but strong connection between proactive behavior and self-efficacy. By experiencing a variety of proactive behaviors that break the boundaries of their duties, officers and soldiers demonstrate their self-confidence and determination and validate their ability and competence through practical actions, thus strengthening their sense of self-efficacy.

According to self-determination theory, when an individual's basic psychological needs, including autonomy, competence, and sense of belonging, are satisfied, his or her intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy will be significantly enhanced. Proactive behavior is an effective way to satisfy these needs, which reflects the individual's autonomy and competence and facilitates the connection with others through positive contribution, strengthening the individual's sense of self-efficacy from the social scene. Whether volunteering for important tasks or actively exploring new training methods to improve their military skills, it stems from an intrinsic self-confidence and sense of mastery of the task, leading to more proactive identification of task gaps and challenges, thus repeatedly confirming their competence and self-efficacy. This proactive behavior may not be accidental and may be closely related to Generation Z officers' deep-seated belief in their ability to successfully meet various challenges, which also stems from positive perceptions of their own abilities in past proactive behaviors. Based on these phenomena and reflections, the researchers infer that the proactive behaviors of Generation Z officers and soldiers can positively strengthen their sense of self-efficacy.

3.2. Generation Z officers and soldiers' proactive behavior can positively guide the emergence of their leadership

Implicit leadership theory suggests that individuals' perceptions and evaluations of leaders are based on their internal expectations of leader traits and behaviors (implicit leadership theory prototype). This cognitive process also applies in military organizations. Generation Z officers and soldiers expect leaders to have traditional military skills, command abilities, and modern leadership traits, such as teamwork, communication skills, creativity, and adaptability. Generation Z officers and soldiers usually gather the characteristics of a "sense of ceremony + sense of experience + sense of participation + sense of achievement", strong adaptability to new technologies and tools, ability to quickly master and apply modern military technologies, more willingness to try new methods

and strategies in their work, and a stronger sense of innovation. Meanwhile, Generation Z groups emphasize traditional military skills and command ability and may also include modern leadership traits, such as teamwork, communication ability, a sense of innovation, and adaptability. At the same time, the Generation Z group emphasizes teamwork and is good at expressing their own views and ideas in collaboration, with a strong self-expression ability. These characteristics make it easier for Generation Z officers and soldiers to show proactive behaviors in the team, such as taking the initiative to propose solutions, actively participating in team discussions, and taking the initiative to undertake additional tasks.

The proactive behaviors of Generation Z officers and soldiers can help them react quickly when facing complex and changing military tasks, such as proposing solutions to urgent tasks. This resilience matches the leader archetype in the implicit leadership theory and can enhance their influence on the team. Another example is that the traits of Generation Z officers and soldiers make them more positive and extroverted in their work. In the process, they can demonstrate strong guidance ability, which also matches the leader traits in implicit leadership theory and helps them establish a leadership position in the team. All these show that the proactive behaviors of Generation Z officers and soldiers can positively guide the emergence of their leadership.

3.3. Self-efficacy of Gen Z officers and soldiers can catalyze their leadership emergence

In dynamic military missions, the emergence of leadership depends not only on traditional seniority or position. However, it is more related to the individual's ability to demonstrate influence and guidance in the team and relies on their ability to intervene proactively in response to uncertainty. Individuals with a high sense of self-efficacy are more inclined to make risky decisions, demonstrate non-positional influence such as goal-focusing and resource integration in crises, and propose solutions beyond the boundaries of their responsibilities, thus catalyzing the emergence of their leadership potential.

According to self-determination theory, self-efficacy, as an individual's belief in his or her ability to accomplish a task, may be of particular significance to Generation Z officers and soldiers. We have argued that proactive behaviors enhance their self-efficacy, while proactive behaviors of Gen Z officers and soldiers positively predict their leadership emergence. According to existing research, Gen Z officers with high self-efficacy have a unique attributional model of responsibility, and their work style has shifted from "wait for instructions" to "I can fix it" thinking, which is common in traditional hierarchical systems. When Gen Z officers and soldiers demonstrate proactive behaviors, they not only take action to meet challenges but also build psychological confidence to succeed, further stimulating their leadership potential. Thus, self-efficacy catalyzes the emergence of their leadership in the process.

Combined with the demonstrated positive reinforcement of self-efficacy by proactive behaviors in Gen Z officers and soldiers, it is reasonable to infer that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between proactive behaviors and leadership emergence in Gen Z officers and soldiers.

4. Conclusions of the study

This study focuses on how the proactive behaviors of Generation Z officers and soldiers stimulate their leadership emergence. It also analyzes the mediating effect of self-efficacy between proactive behaviors and leadership emergence. Through analysis and investigation, the study concludes that Generation Z officers and soldiers have more distinctive marks of the times compared with officers and soldiers of other generations. They are more

outgoing, more independent, and pay more attention to the value and significance of their work, by proactively identifying task gaps and breaking through the boundaries of their duties and responsibilities to make proactive behaviors can enhance their inner self-efficacy and mastery of their tasks, which can lead to the spiraling up of their work moods and sense of acquisition, and thus strengthen their self-efficacy and leadership emergence. This will lead to a spiral upward movement of their emotions and sense of accomplishment, which in turn will strengthen their sense of self-efficacy. Because of the repeated reinforcement of the belief that “I can solve problems” by previous proactive behaviors, individuals with a stronger sense of self-efficacy are more inclined to take on the roles of decision-makers and change-makers in tasks, and they will be bolder in breaking new ground and showing the temperament of leaders to the outside world, which makes self-efficacy play the role of a bridge between proactive behaviors and the emergence of leadership. This allows self-efficacy to bridge proactive behavior and leadership emergence, thus catalyzing their leadership emergence.

5. Research limitations and future directions

Although this study provides valuable insights, there are still some limitations. First, the study only rests on theoretical reasoning and has not been further investigated using survey methods to validate more nuanced intrinsic relationships. Future research should consider well-designed survey methods or situational experimental methods further to validate the essence of their more three-dimensional connections. Second, the study only focuses on one mediating variable, self-efficacy, and future research can consider other potential mediating and moderating variables, such as leadership style, organizational culture, and personal values., to obtain more comprehensive and in-depth research results and to provide a more reliable, credible, and usable theoretical basis for talent development.

In summary, self-efficacy has a unique mediating value in Generation Z officer and soldier groups, and organizations should enhance the causal visibility of behavior-efficacy through task design, cultivate and stimulate the leadership potential of Generation Z officers and soldiers, tap into the more significant potential of the organization, create more potential power for the future of the organization, and enhance the sustainable competitiveness of the organization in the complex and ever-changing military environment to keep pace with the times so that the new generation of military personnel’s initiative can be effectively transformed into resilient leadership adapted to future warfare.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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