



THE CHANGE-READY GENERATION

WHAT THE RESEARCH REVEALS AND WHAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO ABOUT IT.

A RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT | CHANGE ENTHUSIASM GLOBAL | 2026

Cassandra Worthy, Founder and CEO of Change Enthusiasm Global, was mid-keynote at a professional gathering of more than 500 faculty, staff, and partners at a prominent academic medical center when a Gen Z faculty member stood up with a question: *“Why do older generations just want us to pull up our bootstraps and keep our feelings to ourselves?”*

The room went quiet. Not because the question was uncomfortable. Because everyone in the room knew he was right.

That moment reflects a generational tension playing out in organizations across the country. Gen Z is widely framed as a workforce challenge: too emotional, too demanding, too sensitive for the realities of organizational change. Our research tells a different story.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

In January 2026, Change Enthusiasm Global partnered with The Center for Generational Kinetics (CGK) to conduct a 12-question national research study with 750 U.S. participants ages 16 to 65. Five questions repeated verbatim from a 2022 study enable direct benchmark comparisons across four years. All results are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (margin of error: ± 3.58 percentage points).

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

↑19PTS

Gen Z anticipation during
change since 2022
(30% → 49%)

70%

of Gen Z wish they were
better at navigating
change—highest of any
generation

↑11PTS

Gen Z hope during
change since 2022
(26% → 37%)

67%

of Gen Z are comfortable
expressing emotions
with coworkers—highest
of any generation

89%

of Gen Z are more
motivated to adopt change
when they feel heard

59%

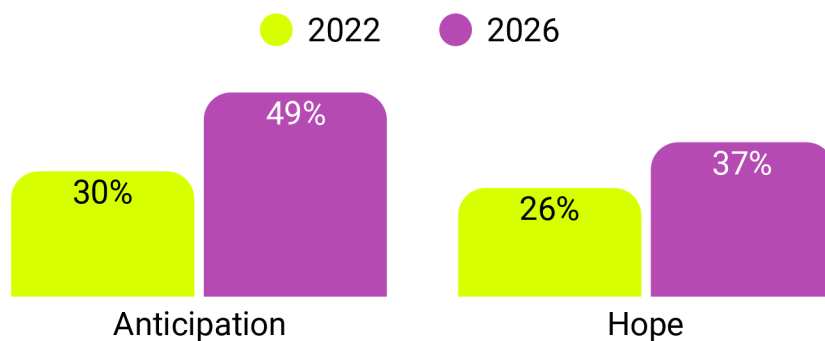
of working Gen Z stretch
outside their comfort
zone—highest of any
generation

THE MISREAD

Nearly half of Gen Z respondents (**44%**) describe themselves as resistant to change. But look across generations: Younger Millennials report 39% resistance, Gen X 32%, Boomers 35%. Every generation in this study is contending with some level of resistance. Now consider that each generation, from youngest (Gen Z) to oldest (Boomers) drops in comfort level expressing emotions with coworkers. Gen Z is the most comfortable at 67%, Millennials drop to 63%, Gen X is at 59% and Boomers are the least comfortable at 56%. Gen Z being the most comfortable expressing emotion with coworkers suggests they may not be meaningfully more resistant, they might simply be the most willing to reveal and discuss the resistance they feel.

70% of Gen Z wish they were better or more skilled at navigating change, the highest of any generation. The picture the data paints is not necessarily that Gen Z is more resistant, but that they have greater honesty and willingness to be vulnerable about the resistance they feel. A generation that names what it feels is better positioned to work through their experience than one that suppresses the same feelings in silence. The 44% resistance to change and the 70% desire to improve skills for navigating change are not in conflict. They are describing a generation that sees clearly where its challenges lie and wants to close the gap.

Consider that Gen Z is also the generation most likely to be more motivated to adopt change when they feel truly heard and understood by their manager and peers (89% agreed). The data does not describe a disengaged generation. It describes one that feels change acutely, knows what growth requires, and wants more support to get there. The misread is not about Gen Z's capacity. It is about the conditions organizations are creating for them.



Gen Z's Positive Emotional Shift, 2022 to 2026 | Source: CGK National Research Studies, 2022 & 2026

WHAT GEN Z IS ALREADY DOING

Between 2022 and 2026, Gen Z's anticipation about workplace change climbed **19 percentage points**, from 30% to 49%. Their hope rose 11 points, from 26% to 37%. No other generation moved as far or as fast in a positive direction across the same period.

This did not happen because the environment became easier. The data suggests it happened because Gen Z is practicing behaviors that the rest of the workforce is still learning.

They make the invisible visible. Gen Z leads all generations in comfort expressing emotions with coworkers (67%), outpacing Gen X (59%) and Boomers (56%). They are more likely than anyone to name what they feel during change. That is not instability. That information carries wisdom: anxiety often signals a need to prepare more or communicate more clearly; anger signals a perceived injustice or violation; sadness alerts us that something important that we may want to preserve is being lost; activated hope fuels action towards change. Engaging with those messages, whether privately or by bringing them into the open, is how people and organizations learn through change and adjust course when necessary. Suppressed emotion leads to lost opportunity, disengagement and poor change outcomes.

They stretch. Among working respondents, 59% of Gen Z always or often push themselves outside their comfort zone, the highest of any generation. The data offers no support for the narrative that Gen Z avoids difficulty.

They seek connection. 66% name seeking support from coworkers, friends, or family as a primary coping strategy when resistance hits. Rather than managing change in isolation, they build the relational networks that help teams navigate transitions together.

They allow vulnerability. Nearly half of working Gen Z (45%) allow themselves to be vulnerable to their organization during complex change, significantly above Gen X (34%) and Boomers (28%). This mirrors precisely the behaviors that psychological safety research identifies as the foundation of organizational learning.

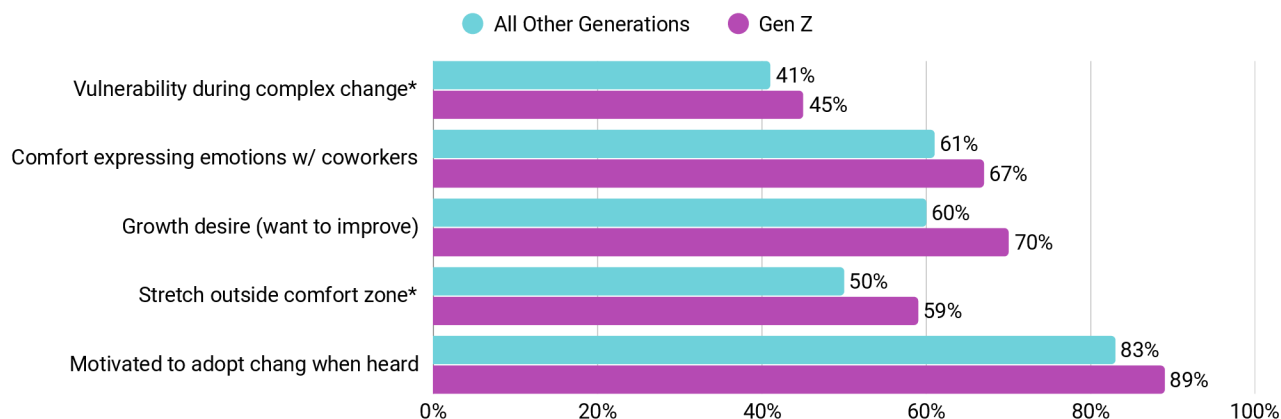
They carry the growth hunger. 70% of Gen Z wish they were better or more skilled at navigating change, the highest of any generation by a meaningful margin. For organizations that invest in change readiness, this is a significant data point. Growth orientation is difficult to instill in people who do not already have it. Gen Z arrives to the workplace with a transparent and active desire to grow. Critically, that desire is not passive. It is paired with the willingness to stretch, to seek support, and to name what they do not yet know how to do. Curiosity and honesty together are where learning actually happens.

They signal what the room won't say. When 59% of survey participants report anxiety as their dominant emotion during workplace change but all generations other than Gen Z are reluctant to share their concern, there is an opportunity for Gen Z to serve as an early warning system. Most change initiatives surface resistance when it is too late, and the organization is already actively experiencing disengagement, absenteeism, or turnover. Gen Z surfaces resistance early, in words, while there is still time to act. For leaders willing to receive the warning, Gen Z's messages can deliver a valuable, actionable signal to a change-impacted team.

The instinct without the authority. One finding complicates the picture in a way that matters: Gen Z holds the lowest felt sense of personal agency over their change experience of any generation. Only 70.8% believe they have the power to choose how they experience change, compared to 80.6% for Gen X. Nearly half (46%) agree they feel powerless when change happens. This does not contradict the strengths described above. It clarifies them. The instincts are active. The confidence and organizational conditions to act on them consistently are not yet there. What can look from the outside like fragility is more accurately a capability gap in an environment that has not yet learned to meet Gen Z where they are.

**“BEING SCARED TO TALK ABOUT IT, AND
WORRIED THAT THEY MIGHT SEE YOU AS WEAK.”**

Gen Z research respondent | CGK 2026 National Study



Gen Z vs. All Other Generations on Key Change-Readiness Indicators, 2026 | *Among employed respondents | Source: CGK 2026 National Research Study

WHEN ORGANIZATIONS LISTEN, GEN Z LEADS

There is one finding that organizational leaders should not overlook: **89% of Gen Z say they are more motivated to adopt change when they feel truly heard and understood by their managers and peers.** That number climbed 15 points since 2022, the largest jump of any group in this study, and six points above all other generations combined (83%).

Gen Z's change readiness is not dormant; it is responsive. These are not employees who need to be managed through change. They are employees who activate powerfully when met with genuine engagement.

Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson's foundational research established psychological safety as the primary precondition for learning behavior in teams. Learning behavior, not compliance, is what drives adaptive performance. Gen Z is already instinctively seeking and promoting what Edmondson's research identifies as the catalyst. Rather than dismissing Gen Z as overly sensitive, organizations have an opportunity to embrace their potential for leadership in the space of psychological safety and improve change-growth outcomes for all.

"THE LARGEST HIDDEN BARRIER IS PROBABLY CONFIDENCE. WHEN SOMETHING IS CHANGING, YOU'RE NOT AS CONFIDENT BECAUSE OF UNFAMILIARITY. THIS IS WHY SUPPORT FROM THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU IS IMPORTANT DURING CHANGE. EVEN JUST SLIGHT WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT, THEY'RE VERY EFFECTIVE."

Gen Z research respondent | CGK 2026 National Study

THE ORGANIZATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Organizations have been asking: how do we manage Gen Z through change? The more productive question, as this data reveals, is what would our change readiness look like if we stopped managing Gen Z and started learning from them?

Gen Z is already modeling the behaviors the broader workforce is being encouraged to develop: emotional expression, vulnerability, support-seeking, and growth orientation.

They do this while carrying the highest anxiety, the lowest felt sense of personal agency, and a sharp concern that their voice will not be heard.

The instincts are present. The organizational conditions to activate them are not.

Deloitte's 2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey found that those who feel supported by leadership are significantly more likely to report strong wellbeing and engagement. Gallup's 2024 data found Gen Z engagement declining, not from inherent disengagement, but because organizations are delivering less of what Gen Z needs to activate: clarity, recognition, and the felt experience of being heard. Those same conditions, this research shows, unlock 89% motivated change adoption.

The gap between Gen Z's potential and their felt empowerment is not a generational problem. It is a leadership opportunity, and if we don't act, the window will close.

"HONESTLY, PEOPLE JUST NEED TO REMEMBER THAT CHANGE IS GOOD. IT MEANS YOU'RE GROWING AND LEARNING. YOU'RE GETTING OUT OF THAT SAME CAVE YOU'VE BEEN IN. SO WHEN CHANGE HAPPENS AND IT STARTS TO GET HARD, REMEMBER THAT FEELING IS GOOD."

Gen Z research respondent | CGK 2026 National Study

WHAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO

At a recent keynote, Cassandra asked the top 200 executives of a global professional services firm leading more than 360,000 employees to make one personal commitment: how would they show up differently for their people? The firm's Global Chairman stood first. His commitment was to make time to listen to his Gen Z workforce, 41% of the firm's global headcount. He admitted he makes time for the executives in that room, but not for Gen Z. By naming that gap out loud, Cassandra then told the room, he had just given every leader there permission to do the same.

1. MAKE THE COMMITMENT FROM THE TOP, PUBLICLY.

The most powerful thing a senior leader can do is name their own gap out loud. When leaders make specific, visible, behavioral commitments to engage with their Gen Z workforce, they signal what the culture values and give everyone else in the room permission to do the same.

2. CREATE LISTENING SESSIONS WHERE GEN Z VOICES LEAD.

Design structured sessions that bring Gen Z perspectives to the center. Pair them with a leader who is accountable for a visible response, and close the loop: communicate back what was heard and what changed as a result. For many Gen Z employees, that moment of real, specific, confidence building acknowledgment can shift their relationship to change entirely and bring others along with them towards change readiness.

3. DISTRIBUTE AGENCY DURING CHANGE, NOT AFTER IT.

Gen Z has the lowest felt sense of personal agency during change of any generation, and they are the most likely to name it. Treat that as intelligence, not noise. What might initially look like risk to vision alignment is often the earliest read on how well change is actually landing across the organization. Intentionally create bite-sized leadership opportunities: assign meaningful roles in shaping how change is communicated and responded to at the team level. Invite people at every level to help shape the response, not just receive it. Leaders who do will learn more, faster.

4. REWARD THE REACH, NOT JUST THE RESULT.

Actively look for and publicly celebrate those who attempt to engage with change, regardless of outcome. This is how you signal what the culture actually values and give Gen Z a place to shine.

5. LET GEN Z'S QUESTIONS BE YOUR SIGNAL.

When Gen Z asks why a change is happening, they are rarely the only ones in the room who needed the answer. They are simply the ones most likely to say so out loud. Build the "why" into every change communication before it goes out, not as an accommodation for one generation, but because Gen Z's willingness to name what is missing makes them an early warning system for the whole organization. Design for their transparency and everyone benefits.

HOW CHANGE ENTHUSIASM GLOBAL CAN HELP

Change Enthusiasm Global operates at the intersection of change and emotion, the exact intersection this research illuminates. Our mission is to shift professionals' mindsets and develop their skillsets to accelerate growth and humanize change. Our vision is a world where change inspires enthusiasm and growth, fueled by the wisdom of emotion.

WE PARTNER WITH ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH:

KEYNOTES AND EVENT ACTIVATIONS

that shift the emotional frame around change from threat to opportunity, opening space for the engagement Gen Z is already modeling.

ENTERPRISE SOLUTIONS

diagnostics, custom programs, coaching and learning experiences that build change readiness as an organizational capability, equipping leaders and teams with the skills this research shows matter most.

CHANGE GROWTH ACCELERATOR™ (CGA)

an accredited certification program for practitioners ready to carry this work into their own organizations.

The research is clear: the willingness to name what you feel, seek support, allow vulnerability, and grow through discomfort is not generational softness. It is the change readiness skill the workforce needs most right now. Gen Z is already practicing it. The question is whether your organization is creating the conditions to harness it.

changeenthusiasmglobal.com



Change Enthusiasm®
G L O B A L

Research conducted by The Center for Generational Kinetics (CGK). Study: 750 U.S. participants, ages 16–65, December 2025–January 2026.

Results statistically significant at 95% confidence level (± 3.58 pp margin of error). Generational cohorts: Gen Z (ages 16–29), Younger Millennials (30–36), Older Millennials (37–45), Gen X (46–59), Boomers (60–65). Change Enthusiasm® Global © 2026. All rights reserved.