U.S. Army Lt. Col. Scott Morley, commander of the Phoenix Recruiting Battalion, administers the oath of enlistment to 40 future Soldiers from the battalion, Aug. 26, 2018 at Chase Field, Phoenix. The mass enlistment took place shortly before a Major League Baseball game between the Arizona Diamondbacks and Seattle Mariners. (Photo by Mike Scheck, USAREC Public Affairs)

Engaging Gen Z

By Senior Master Sgt. Chris C. Moore

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Leading new generations of personnel entering the military is an age-old issue. From Baby Boomers, to Gen Xers, to Millennials, and now Generation Z (Gen Z), each generation is different from the last, with different motivators and principles. Gen Z is now entering the workforce and military in great numbers, so it is critical for supervisors, especially noncommissioned officers (NCOs), to understand what motivates them in order to effectively manage their units.

In 1995, the internet made its public debut on the world stage, and the first of Gen Z (also known as the iGeneration, Net Gen, or Digital Natives) were born (Wertz, 2018). According to *Forbes*, "Generation Z is composed of those born between 1995 and 2010, which means that the oldest … are just entering the workforce" (Patel, 2017, para. 1).

This article seeks to give perspective to NCOs on how to relate to and motivate Gen Z in order to increase unit readiness and lethality.

Characteristics

In their relatively young existence, Gen Z has been shaped through a shared experience of exponential advances in technology, economic volatility and growth, ever-present public violence, and social justice movements (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). The political turbulence of the past two decades has had an immense influence on this generation. Even the oldest of Gen Z do not remember the world prior to September 11, 2001. They have only known the nation at war with terrorism. In the *Harvard Political Review*:

> *For Generation Z, memories of the energetic early phases of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are almost as faint as those of 9/11…Few have clear memories of President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech, the capture of Saddam Hussein, or the Second Battle of Fallujah. Instead, many of the Gen Zers surveyed were becoming politically aware as the longest war in American history dragged on and turned increasingly unpopular.* (Barenberg & Corzo, 2019, para. 5)

Gen Z is coming of age at the dawn of the digital renaissance. This new generation has access to information and technology like no other before it. They grew up with smartphones and universal broadband internet access (Patel, 2017). Everything that they have ever wanted to know has been a click away.

This potent mixture of information and speed has resulted in young military personnel who prefer immediate responses and constant interaction. They prefer information presented visually and can handle multiple tasks at the same time. But this advanced mobile communication also comes at a price. It can lead to less physical interaction, extreme interactivity, lack of focus due to multi-tasking, distraction, and unconventional societal norms (Green 2019).

Gen Z can devour massive amounts of information rapidly, but they also lose interest quickly in a subject if they do not understand the impact it has (Heitzman, 2018). It would be incorrect for an NCO to think of Gen Z as being aloof and disconnected, as they are actually motivated to make an impact to the organization, the world, and be successful (Mercurio, 2017).

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>
> —Senior Master Sgt. Chris C. Moore, U.S. Air Force

A Class of 2023 cadet familiarizes himself with the M4 carbine as part of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point's Cadet Basic Training July 9, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Matthew Moeller)

What they Value

Gen Z values interconnection, information, and interaction. They feel a need to connect emotionally to what they are doing. More so than the generations before them. They want to know the *why* of what they are doing, as much as the *what*. If they feel that they are not making a difference in an organization, or if their leadership does not appreciate their efforts, they are quick to find somewhere else to make a difference (Rampton, 2017).

Gen Z sees value in figuring things out for themselves, rather than having a superior
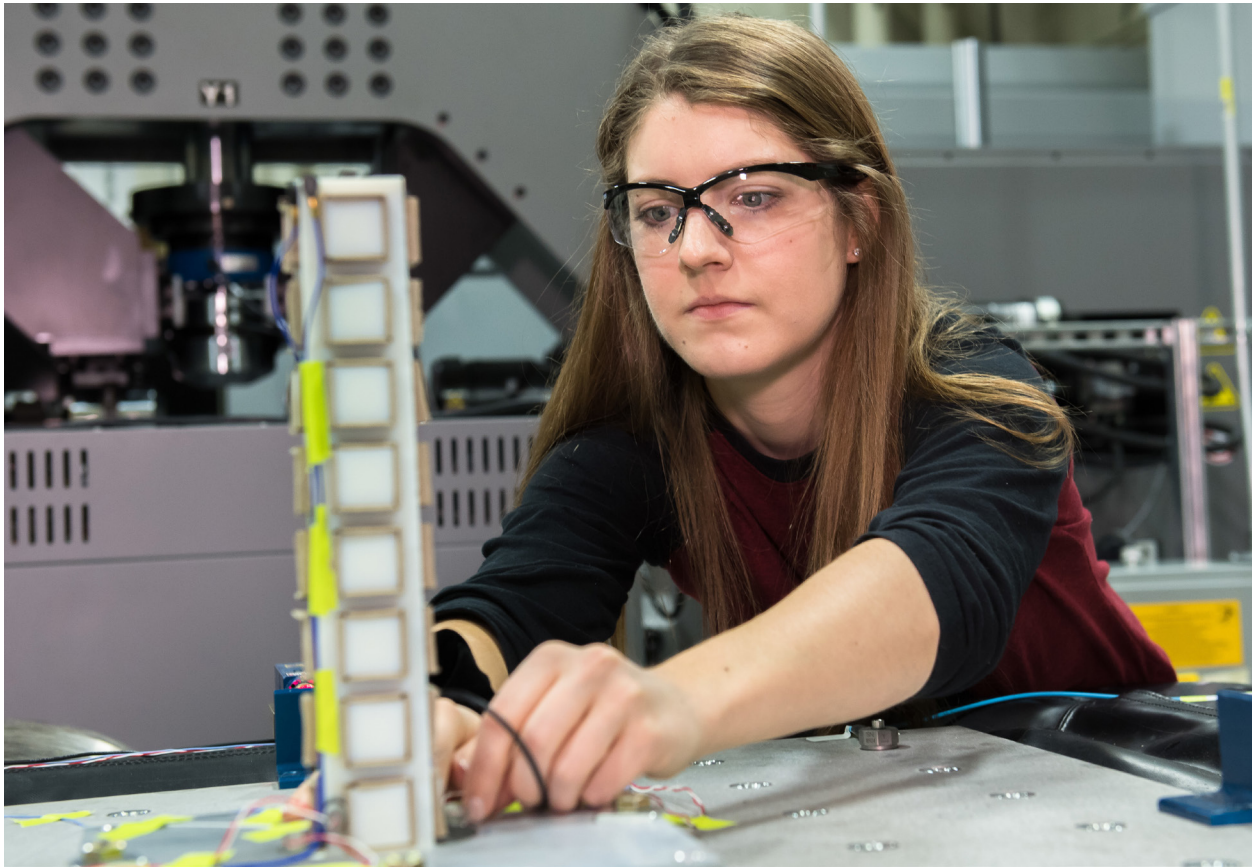
University of Michigan doctoral candidate Brittany Essink adjusts her vibration dampening experiment during testing, Sept. 25, 2018, at the U.S. Army Research Laboratory at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. (U.S. Army photo by David McNally)

micromanage their problem solutions — much like how the U.S. Army's *Mission Command* philosophy is conducted (Department of the Army, 2012). Part of this pension for solving the world's problems is that they tend to try to find innovative ways to address problems that have not been previously tried. Gen Z enjoys learning independently with help from the internet and an unprecedented comfort with modern technology. Gen Z are self-starters who will research topics with little direction from superiors, and view peers and supervisors as resources to aid in their efforts (Seemiller & Grace, 2017).

Gen Z also values choices. This preference is not necessarily about having many choices to pick from, but more about being able to express their individuality and creativeness (Bridges, 2015). Because of this drive to change the world, Gen Z are more likely to take part in demonstrations, rallies, and fight for social change (Weise, 2019). They are not afraid of hard work, but want their efforts to matter and make a difference. In *Entrepreneur*, "If you want to engage Gen Zers, make sure you appreciate them as individuals as well as recognize their performance efforts" (Patel, 2016, para. 16).

Strategies to Influence Gen Z

The following are three simple strategies that can be implemented to motivate Gen Z military personnel:

1. Explain the relevance of what they are doing.
2. Have them actively participate in work projects so they can see the impact they are making on an organization.
3. Give them the flexibility to make choices for themselves. This will allow them to express themselves and potentially create additional value to the organization. (Green, 2019).

Conclusion

Gen Z is here, so it is critical for NCOs to understand them in order to communicate effectively and engage them. According to Gen. Frank Muth, head of Army Recruiting Command, "Z Generation, they do want to be part of something bigger. They do want to give back. They do want to serve and get out there and be part of something other than just being about themselves" (Fadel, 2019, para. 22). So be the leader that motivates this new generation to new heights. ■

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