

A New Model To Explain Engagement, Retention Intentions, and Well-Being Among Generation Z Sales Professionals

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Abstract: Organizations face persistent challenges in sustaining engagement, reducing turnover intentions, and protecting well-being among Generation Z sales professionals working in fast-paced, feedback-intensive settings. This theoretical article proposes the need-supportive exchange coupling model, which integrates self-determination theory's concept of psychological need satisfaction with leader-member exchange as a relational amplifier at the moment of coaching reception. The model explains why identical coaching scripts produce divergent motivational outcomes by specifying how employees interpret the intent of feedback as either informational support or control, contingent on exchange quality and unit communication climate. The framework predicts that need-supportive coaching will enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn will increase engagement, strengthen intentions to remain, and improve well-being, with stronger effects under high-quality leader-member relationships and symmetrical internal communication. The article articulates testable propositions, offers a textual figure of the conceptual model, and presents a propositions table to guide empirical scrutiny. The practical implications of the research are that informational framing, non-punitive debriefs, and communication clarity can be used as levers to convert routine coaching into sustained vitality for Generation Z sales teams.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Generation Z, Leader-Member Exchange, Retention Intentions, Self-Determination Theory, Well-Being

Introduction

Sales organizations employing Generation Z professionals face low engagement, elevated turnover intent, and strain on well-being that collectively erode productivity and learning capacity in short-cycle, feedback-dense environments (Gallup, 2024). Evidence from organization development indicates that control-oriented measurement regimes and opaque feedback practices suppress intrinsic motivation and heighten performance anxiety, especially for early-career employees who are sensitive to credibility and fairness in evaluations (Hubbart, 2024). If feedback is framed as information rather than surveillance, individuals are more likely to surface and correct reasoning errors that impair performance; this points to the design of feedback as a strategic lever in sales settings (Argyris, 1976).

Emerging scholarship on Generation Z emphasizes preferences for purposeful work, skill development, and authentic leader communication, which together predict stronger identification with the sales role when development is experienced as collaborative rather than coercive (Hart, 2025a). Organization-level research likewise

highlights bottom-up collaboration as a channel for shaping improvement routines that align daily practices with shared aims in volatile commercial contexts (Hart, 2025b). Conceptual work on sales performance suggests that coaching architectures that honor autonomy and competence encourage discretionary effort and adaptive experimentation under pressure, especially when paired with clear cues about progress and contribution (Hart, 2025c).

To organize these insights and address the observed heterogeneity in coaching outcomes, the present paper advances a relationally conditioned motivational account that positions self-determination theory (SDT) and leader-member exchange theory (LMX) as complementary lenses rather than isolated predictors (Ryan et al., 2022). SDT identifies how autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs energize high-quality motivation in work settings, and LMX theory specifies how trust and mutual respect shape the meaning employees ascribe to ostensibly identical coaching messages in daily practice (Olafsen & Deci, 2020; Roche & Haar, 2013). The literature review in this article develops each framework and then integrates them with internal communication research to specify when coaching functions as information rather than control in modern sales units (Men et al., 2020).

Problem statement

Only 31% of Generation Z and younger millennial employees report being engaged at work, the lowest level among all generations and a risk signal for sales organizations that depend on sustained motivation (Gallup, 2024). Employees interpret coaching as energizing when framed as information and as demotivating when construed as control, which affects discretionary effort in feedback-dense settings (London & Smither, 2002). The general problem addressed by this article is that SDT and LMX are typically examined as separate, additive predictors rather than as interacting mechanisms that shape how coaching converts into psychological need satisfaction in practice (Olafsen & Deci, 2020). The specific problem is that under low-trust relationships, employees often read identical coaching, including standardized scripts, as surveillance, which undermines need satisfaction and attenuates engagement and retention (London & Smither, 2002; Roche & Haar, 2013). Existing models, therefore, leave a gap by failing to specify a coupling mechanism at the juncture of coaching to need satisfaction that explains heterogeneous responses across leader-follower dyads (Snyder, 2019). This paper addresses that gap by proposing the need-supportive exchange coupling model, which embeds psychological need satisfaction within leader-member relationships and unit communication climates to clarify when routine coaching produces durable engagement, well-being, and intent to remain (Hubbart, 2024; Men et al., 2020).

Research focus

The present framework concentrates on Generation Z employees in customer-facing sales roles because this group exhibits both unique motivational preferences and elevated sensitivity to relational quality (Gallup, 2024). Engagement, retention intentions, and well-being were selected as focal outcomes, given their consistent empirical linkages to organizational effectiveness, innovation, and financial performance (Wang et al., 2018). The sales context magnifies the relevance of these constructs; short performance cycles, constant evaluation, and high feedback volume heighten the psychological stakes of every coaching interaction (Grenier et al., 2024). Addressing these interdependencies offers theoretical value and immediate organizational applicability.

Research aim and questions

This study develops a theoretical model explaining how need-supportive coaching, moderated by exchange quality, shapes psychological need satisfaction, engagement, well-being, and retention among Generation Z sales professionals. SDT specifies the internal motivational mechanism, and LMX theory defines the relational filter determining whether coaching is perceived as empowering or controlling (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Ryan et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2018). By situating LMX as a moderator at the coaching-to-needs juncture, the model transitions from additive to conditional theorizing, offering causal logic and predictive specificity (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Snyder, 2019).

RQ1: How does need-supportive coaching relate to psychological need satisfaction and engagement in sales environments?

RQ2: In what ways does LMX quality amplify or constrain the motivational effects of need-supportive coaching?

RQ3: How do these mechanisms jointly influence retention intentions and well-being among Generation Z sales professionals?

Literature review and theoretical overview

Self-determination theory foundations

SDT posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are basic psychological needs whose satisfaction predicts internalization, vitality, and adaptive functioning at work, particularly in feedback-dense environments like sales (Olafsen & Deci, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020). When coaching provides meaningful choice, clear rationales, and perspective taking, employees tend to read feedback as informational support, which strengthens intrinsic motivation and persistence under pressure (London & Smither, 2002; Hart, 2025a). Studies further link need satisfaction to creative and improvement-oriented behaviors that matter in short-cycle commercial contexts in which experimentation and learning are central to performance (Zampetakis & Arvanitis, 2024; Senge, 1990). Conversely, control-heavy routines and punitive frames can crowd out autonomy and induce defensive reasoning, weakening the very learning loops that sales organizations rely on to improve quality and speed (Argyris, 1976; Grenier et al., 2024). This SDT literature supports the claim that need-supportive coaching should increase psychological need satisfaction and, in turn, engagement, well-being, and lower turnover intentions (Gallup, 2024; Ryan et al., 2022). Therefore, it motivates propositions P1 and P2a through P2c

Leader-member exchange theory

LMX theory conceptualizes leadership as differentiated dyadic relationships in which trust, mutual respect, and obligation govern how employees interpret leader communications in daily practice (Roche & Haar, 2013). Empirical work associates higher exchange quality with stronger role clarity, psychological safety, and willingness to act on developmental input, especially when leaders signal credibility and benevolence in ongoing conversations (Gallagher, 2023; Wang et al., 2018). At the unit level, symmetrical internal communication reduces attributional ambiguity and aligns local coaching with system narratives, increasing the likelihood that employees will infer informational intent rather than surveillance (Men et al., 2020; Cummings & Worley, 2015). In low-quality exchanges, identical messages are more likely to be construed as controlling or punitive, suppressing learning and narrowing discretion in complex service interactions (London & Smither, 2002; McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Taken together, this literature implies that exchange quality should condition the

conversion of need-supportive coaching into psychological need satisfaction; it motivates proposition P3 (Roche & Haar, 2013).

Integration: toward a relationally conditioned motivational mechanism

An integrated perspective holds that the motivational effect of coaching turns on how the message is interpreted at the moment of reception, and that interpretation is a function of the dyadic relationship and the surrounding communication climate (Olafsen & Deci, 2020; Men et al., 2020). When the exchange quality is high and the communication is symmetrical, autonomy-supportive coaching can be internalized as a legitimate path to mastery. In contrast, low-trust relationships invite reactance even when scripts are identical and well intended (London & Smither, 2002; Wang et al., 2018). This relationally conditioned mechanism clarifies why standardized coaching systems yield heterogeneous outcomes and explains how the same content can either energize or demoralize Generation Z sales professionals who prioritize credible growth signals and collaborative development (Hart, 2025a; Hart, 2025c). Positioning LMX as a moderator at the coaching-to-needs juncture advances beyond additive accounts by specifying the proximal locus where supportive or controlling interpretations emerge in practice (Ryan et al., 2022; Snyder, 2019). This integration foreshadows propositions P1 and P2a-2c (see Table 1), locates LMX as a moderator at the coaching-to-needs link, and clarifies why identical scripts yield divergent outcomes across dyads.

Synthesis and boundary conditions

The evidence reviewed here collectively suggests a coherent chain from need-supportive coaching to psychological need satisfaction to engagement, well-being, and retention intentions (Olafsen & Deci, 2020; Men et al., 2020). The strength of the first link is contingent on exchange quality and clarified by unit communication norms.

Three boundary conditions appear especially salient for sales contexts. First, extreme performance pressure may compress perceived autonomy unless competence scaffolds are raised in parallel to preserve a credible pathway to mastery during tight cycles (Grenier et al., 2024; Senge, 1990). Second, communication symmetry likely amplifies the conversion of coaching into informational intent by aligning metrics and narratives, thereby reducing the misattributions that commonly derail learning in fast-moving commercial work (Men et al., 2020; Argyris, 1976). Third, negative relational cues such as public correction or transactional tone may suppress the coaching-to-needs link more sharply than positive cues elevate it; such asymmetry should be assessed explicitly in future designs to avoid overclaiming small improvements in hostile climates (Snyder, 2019; Gallagher, 2023). These conditions delimit the scope of the proposed need-supportive exchange coupling model and motivate the paper's propositions by specifying when routine coaching is most likely to yield durable engagement, stronger intentions to remain, and healthier well-being in Generation Z sales units (Gallup, 2024; Ryan et al., 2022).

Methodology

I conducted an integrative theoretical review to synthesize scholarship on SDT, LMX, coaching, communication climate, and Generation Z motivation to construct the need-supportive exchange coupling model (Snyder, 2019). The review drew on peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, and practitioner reports published between 2015 and 2025 that addressed employee motivation, relational leadership, and work design in sales or other performance-driven environments (Creswell, 2023). Searches were conducted in Scopus, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global using

combinations of terms such as “self-determination theory,” “leader-member exchange,” “autonomy support,” “performance coaching,” “Generation Z engagement,” and “sales motivation.” Items were included if they were written in English, met the date window, and offered empirical or conceptual insight into need satisfaction, exchange quality, or communication mechanisms linked to engagement and retention (Snyder, 2019). To ensure transparency, the search strategy, inclusion criteria, and citation trail were recorded during the review process (Creswell, 2023).

The selected sources were organized by the author into four analytic categories aligned with the paper’s theoretical aims: motivation and need support, leadership and exchange quality, communication and organizational climate, and generational and contextual considerations (Creswell, 2023). The motivation and need support category centered on evidence connecting autonomy, competence, and relatedness to adaptive functioning at work; the leadership and exchange quality category emphasized trust, respect, and obligation in dyadic relationships; the communication and organizational climate category examined symmetrical internal communication and intent signaling; and the generational and contextual considerations category summarized research on Generation Z preferences for purposeful development and credible feedback in sales contexts (Hart, 2025a; Men et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wang et al., 2018). To supplement database queries and avoid narrow sourcing, I performed backward and forward citation chaining on anchor articles within each category and maintained a decision log to preserve an auditable trail from search to inclusion (Snyder, 2019).

Synthesis proceeded through structured comparative reading and theory-driven memoing rather than statistical aggregation; I mapped constructs, relational mechanisms, and boundary conditions into a literature matrix that supported pattern matching across domains (Creswell, 2023). This interpretive synthesis emphasized convergent mechanisms that explain when coaching is received as informational guidance versus control and justified locating LMX as a moderator at the coaching-to-need-satisfaction juncture; it culminated in the five propositions that operationalize the model’s testable claims (Snyder, 2019). The resulting crosswalk links coaching cues, dyadic quality, and communication climate to autonomy, competence, and relatedness pathways that are theoretically expected to predict engagement, well-being, and retention intentions in sales units (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

This review was limited by language and publication scope because it included only English-language sources from major databases. Therefore, relevant non-English or gray literature may have been excluded and thus constrain generalizability (Snyder, 2019). Additionally, the temporal concentration of the publications after 2018 may reflect emerging rather than longitudinally stable trends in Generation Z motivation, suggesting the need for caution when inferring durability across cohorts and economic cycles (Creswell, 2023). To strengthen future work, researchers could preregister search protocols, apply formal quality appraisal tools, and employ multilevel meta-analytic techniques where datasets permit, thereby testing the robustness of need-supportive and relational mechanisms across industries and demographic segments (Snyder, 2019).

Conceptual Model Figure

The conceptual architecture is depicted in Figure 1, which situates LMX as a moderator at the coaching-to-needs juncture and positions symmetrical internal communication as a contextual amplifier.

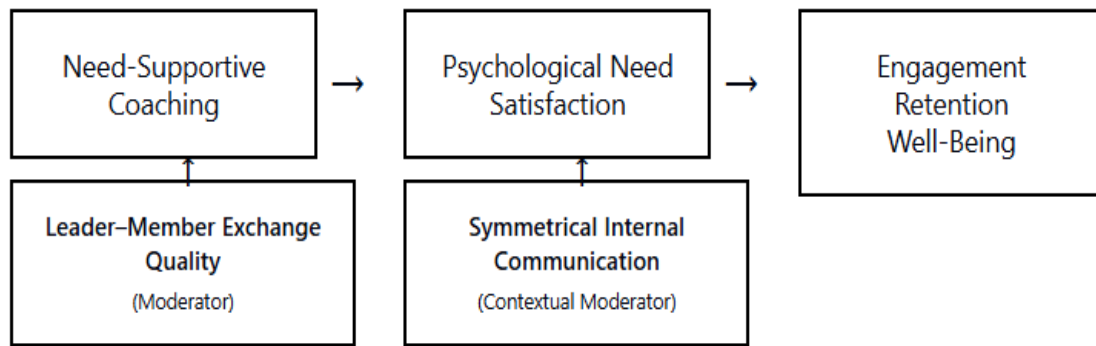


Figure 1. The need-supportive exchange coupling (NSEC) model

Explanation

Need-supportive coaching (autonomy, competence, and relatedness support) predicts psychological need satisfaction. LMX quality strengthens this relationship by amplifying the perceived informational intent of coaching. Psychological need satisfaction mediates the effects of coaching on engagement, retention intentions, and well-being. Symmetrical internal communication operates as a contextual moderator that reinforces interpretive consistency across dyads, promoting system-wide coherence.

Table 1. Propositions of the need-supportive exchange coupling model

Proposition	Theoretical Statement	Supporting References
P1	Need-supportive coaching is positively associated with psychological need satisfaction at work.	Olafsen & Deci (2020); London & Smither (2002)
P2a	Psychological need satisfaction is positively associated with engagement.	Ryan & Deci (2020); Wang et al. (2018)
P2b	Psychological need satisfaction is positively associated with well-being.	Ryan et al. (2022); Zampetakis & Arvanitis (2024)
P2c	Psychological need satisfaction is negatively associated with turnover intentions.	Grenier et al. (2024); Cummings & Worley (2015)
P3	Leader-member exchange moderates the coaching-to-needs link such that the positive association is stronger under high exchange quality.	Wang et al. (2018); Gallagher (2023)
P4	The configuration of high need-supportive coaching and high exchange quality yields the most favorable profile of engagement, well-being, and retention.	Men et al. (2020); Olafsen & Deci (2020)
P5	High engagement is most probable when need-supportive coaching, high exchange quality, and symmetrical internal communication co-occur.	Cummings & Worley (2015); Senge (1990)

Discussion

The five propositions derived from the need-supportive exchange coupling model collectively articulate how motivational and relational mechanisms interact to explain engagement, retention intentions, and well-being among Generation Z sales professionals. Each proposition isolates a distinct theoretical link in the model, and they progress from the direct influence of need-supportive coaching on psychological need satisfaction to the broader contextual amplifiers that determine its effectiveness. Taken together, these propositions translate the study's conceptual framework into specific, testable claims that clarify when and why coaching produces adaptive motivational states rather than compliance or disengagement. The following subsections discuss each proposition in sequence, outlining its theoretical rationale, expected outcomes, and implications for future empirical testing. A consolidated summary is presented in Table 1.

Proposition 1: Need-supportive coaching increases psychological need satisfaction

Need-supportive coaching should increase autonomy, competence, and relatedness because employees tend to interpret choice, clear rationales, and perspective taking as informational support rather than control in day-to-day performance dialogues (Olafsen & Deci, 2020). Empirical and conceptual work on feedback orientation indicates that when leaders frame guidance as learning fuel, employees are more receptive and less defensive, which positions coaching as the proximal lever for activating need satisfaction in fast-cycle sales contexts (London & Smither, 2002). Contemporary analyses of work motivation further suggest that needs-consistent coaching aligns with how Generation Z evaluates credibility and growth, making internalization more likely (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Together, these claims clarify the mechanism at the moment of message reception and justify the proposition's focus on coaching behaviors as the immediate antecedent of need satisfaction (Hart, 2025a).

Propositions 2a-2c: Psychological need satisfaction relates to engagement, well-being, and retention intentions

Psychological need satisfaction should be positively associated with engagement and well-being because it is associated with vigor, dedication, and adaptive functioning. By satisfying autonomy, competence, and relatedness, regulation becomes more internalized and autonomous, which energizes effort and focus and supports effective self-regulation, yielding vigor, dedication, and adaptive functioning that manifest as higher engagement and well-being (Olafsen & Deci, 2020; McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Roche & Haar, 2013; Zampetakis & Arvanitis, 2024). Psychological need satisfaction also reduces strain and withdrawal cognition in complex roles, and thus should decrease turnover intentions (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Evidence connecting supportive leadership with creative effort and sustained task focus reinforces the pathway from need satisfaction to the energized work states that matter in short-cycle selling (Wang, Xing et al., 2018). When competence and autonomy are affirmed, employees persist through performance volatility rather than disengaging (Zampetakis & Arvanitis, 2024). Cohort data indicating comparatively lower engagement among younger workers underscore the retention relevance of this pathway in sales units staffed by Generation Z (Gallup, 2024).

Proposition 3: Leader-member exchange moderates the coaching-to-need-satisfaction link

LMX should strengthen the positive association between need-supportive coaching and need satisfaction because high-trust relationships increase the likelihood that identical scripts are read as benevolent information rather than surveillance (Roche & Haar, 2013).

This moderator is theoretically meaningful because it relocates heterogeneity to the point of uptake, where the same words travel differently across dyads depending on felt respect and mutual obligation (London & Smither, 2002). Positioning the dyadic relationship as a contextual amplifier yields a falsifiable interaction and aligns with guidance on specifying boundary-spanning mechanisms that connect leader behaviors to motivational states in contemporary organizations (Jaakkola, 2020).

Proposition 4: Joint presence of need-supportive coaching and high exchange quality yields the most favorable outcome profile

The configuration of need-supportive coaching and strong LMX should produce the most favorable joint profile of high engagement, high well-being, and low turnover intentions because aligned messages and trusted relationships stabilize the perceived intent of feedback under pressure (Cummings & Worley, 2015). Classic internal communication theory indicates that credible, two-way meaning making strengthens the coherence of developmental cues, which makes progress narratives believable to early-career employees who closely scrutinize fairness and authenticity (Grunig, 1992). Ethical leadership arguments additionally suggest that transparent, benevolent conduct reduces cynical interpretations of control and supports the durability of improvement routines in performance-driven settings (Johnson, 2025). Taken together, these observations justify treating coaching and exchange quality as complements rather than substitutes in modern sales systems (Johansson & Heide, 2008).

Proposition 5: Symmetrical internal communication amplifies the mechanism

Symmetrical internal communication should amplify the coaching mechanism by aligning local feedback with unit-level narratives, reducing attributional ambiguity, and curbing punitive drift that can convert information into perceived control (Grunig, 1992). Quality management principles argue that clear standards and shared interpretation decrease noise in measurement routines, thereby improving the odds that coaching is processed as information rather than threat (Deming, 1986). Evidence linking cross-functional communication to performance adds a meso-level rationale for testing climate as an amplifier that stabilizes the coaching-to-need-satisfaction path across teams (Gondal & Shahbaz, 2012). Organizational change research further indicates that transparent, two-way channels are associated with stronger engagement during continuous improvement, which situates the communication climate as an actionable design lever for sales units (Men et al., 2020).

Boundary conditions and asymmetry

Two boundary conditions are likely to limit generalization. High-performance pressure can compress perceived autonomy unless competence scaffolds rise in parallel. This implies that empirical tests should co-manipulate autonomy cues and scaffolding to estimate effects under tight cycle times (Senge, 1990). Negative relational cues, such as public correction, may suppress the coaching-to-needs pathway more sharply than positive cues elevate it, suggesting asymmetric moderation that warrants equivalence bounds to prevent trivial suggestions from being overinterpreted in hostile climates (Snyder, 2019). Practical cautions about fear-based behaviors similarly indicate that leader anxiety and coercive oversight can erode psychological safety and blunt the very learning loops that coaching intends to activate (Hubbart, 2024). Ethical decision-making research also warns that control-heavy routines risk moral fading, which can further degrade engagement and retention over time (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2013).

Integrative implications

Addressing each proposition in turn clarifies how the model embeds psychological need satisfaction inside role-structured exchanges and communication climates so that identical scripts no longer appear equivalent in their motivational consequences (Argyris, 1976). Systems perspectives suggest that reliable performance requires coherent role expectations and reciprocal influence patterns (Katz & Kahn, 1978). That is consistent with the co-determination of internalization and outcomes by dyadic quality, unit climate, and coaching. For scholars, this framing supports using longitudinal and experimental tests that manipulate informational versus controlling frames while modeling cross-level communication effects and dyadic quality as interacting conditions for internalization (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2010). For practitioners, this research suggests that complementary interventions that couple autonomy-supportive coaching, trust building, and symmetrical communication are likely to produce more consistent energy, learning, and workforce continuity among Generation Z in sales roles (Auqui-Caceres et al., 2023; Grenier et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The need-supportive exchange coupling model advances a theoretical synthesis that explains how motivation and relational quality jointly determine engagement, retention intentions, and well-being among Generation Z sales professionals. The model clarifies the missing mechanism identified in the research problem by situating SDT's need satisfaction within the trust-based and communicative dynamics described by LMX theory. In doing so, it resolves the general problem of treating SDT and LMX as separate predictors and the specific problem of inconsistent motivational outcomes from standardized coaching scripts. The propositions derived from this framework offer a structured logic in which need-supportive coaching operates as the proximal antecedent of need satisfaction, and relational quality and symmetrical communication shape how that coaching is received and enacted.

For scholars, this conceptual model creates an agenda for rigorous empirical inquiry. Longitudinal, experimental, and multilevel designs can test how autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfaction fluctuate with variations in exchange quality and communication symmetry, providing a deeper understanding of motivation in dynamic sales contexts. Future studies might also examine how leader ethics, digital feedback systems, or cultural variation moderate these effects to extend the model's boundary conditions.

For practitioners, the findings suggest that sustainable engagement and retention among Generation Z workers depend less on extrinsic incentives and more on developmental interactions perceived as credible, fair, and growth-oriented. Leaders who combine informational coaching with trust-building and transparent communication convert feedback from a compliance ritual into an instrument of learning and energy renewal. By aligning motivational and relational infrastructures, organizations can transform routine coaching into a system of continuous performance development that supports both human sustainability and strategic adaptability in competitive sales environments.

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