

# A Study on the Influencing Factors of Followership Among China's New Generation Employees

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**Abstract:** As the post-80s, post-90s, and post-00s generations—referred to as the new generation of employees—have become the main workforce in organizations, their unique values and behavioral patterns have posed challenges to traditional management approaches. Followership, defined as the psychological and behavioral manifestation of employees' active support for leaders and organizational goals, plays a significant role in team cohesion and organizational effectiveness. This study focuses on the new generation of employees and constructs a multidimensional analytical model integrating followership theory and social exchange theory, which encompasses leadership style, organizational support, work values, and individual traits. A mixed-method research approach was adopted, using a single case study of a private higher education institution in Yunnan Province. Empirical analysis was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 12 current and former new-generation faculty and staff members, document analysis, and participant observation. The findings reveal that followership among new generation employees is currently constrained by several factors: an inadequate organizational support system, a disconnect between leadership communication and behavioral patterns, a lack of well-designed work and development opportunities, and insufficient activation of individual potential. In response to these issues, this study proposes countermeasures in four areas—improving leadership behaviors, enhancing the support system, redesigning job structures, and activating individual potential—aiming to provide both theoretical and practical references for enhancing followership among the new generation of employees.

**Keywords:** new generation employees; followership; influencing factors; private higher education institution; mixed-methods research

## 1. Introduction

With the popularization of higher education in China, private higher education institutions have expanded continuously and have become an important force in the national higher education system [1]. However, amid rapid development, these institutions face a series of urgent challenges, among which talent turnover is particularly prominent. Talent is one of the most valuable resources for private higher education institutions, and its loss directly hinders their long-term development [2]. At the same time, the new generation of employees—those born in the 1980s and later—has gradually become the main component of the faculty and staff in private higher education institutions. Their unique values and behavioral patterns pose challenges to traditional management approaches. In the context of private higher education institutions, the issue of insufficient

followership among new generation faculty and staff is particularly pronounced, manifested in unclear career development pathways, poor leadership communication, and lack of job autonomy, which directly weaken their organizational identification and work engagement, thereby exacerbating talent turnover. How to effectively stimulate the followership willingness of this group has become a practical challenge that private higher education institutions urgently need to address. This study takes a private higher education institution in Yunnan Province as a case study to systematically explore the influencing factors and mechanisms of followership among new generation employees, aiming to provide theoretical references and practical suggestions for stabilizing the faculty and mitigating talent turnover.

### *1.1. Research Background*

Driven by the deep restructuring of the global economy and the rapid advancement of digital technologies, the internal and external environments faced by various organizations have undergone fundamental changes. Alongside this process, the new generation of employees—those born in the 1980s and later—has gradually become the backbone of the labor market. Growing up in an era characterized by relative material abundance, widespread information technology, and diverse value systems, this group exhibits significantly different career perceptions, work motivations, and behavioral patterns compared to previous generations of employees. They place greater emphasis on self-actualization, work-life balance, organizational fairness and justice, as well as autonomy and voice in the workplace. This profound shift in values poses serious challenges to traditional management models centered on authority compliance and hierarchical control. In the field of higher education, private higher education institutions, as an important component of China's education system, are likewise experiencing pressures to transform their management practices in response to the large-scale influx of new generation faculty and administrative staff [3].

In organizational management practice, followership, as an important behavioral construct of employees, has attracted increasing attention from both academia and industry. Followership goes beyond passive execution of instructions; it encompasses employees' emotional identification with leaders and organizational goals, as well as their willingness and behaviors of voluntary compliance and proactive contribution. Effective followership can translate into strong team cohesion, outstanding organizational execution, and sustained innovative vitality. However, many organizations today still fail to fully understand the unique psychological needs and behavioral logic of the new generation of employees when managing them, leading to frequent problems such as insufficient followership willingness, low work engagement, and rising turnover rates. In the context of private higher education institutions, this issue is particularly prominent: new generation faculty and staff increasingly complain about unclear career development pathways, poor leadership communication, and lack of job autonomy, which directly affect their work enthusiasm and intention to stay. Therefore, deeply exploring the key factors influencing followership among the new generation of employees and systematically revealing its mechanisms is of urgent practical significance for organizations to optimize management strategies, unlock human resource potential, and build sustainable competitive advantages.

This study has significant theoretical value and practical implications. At the theoretical level, focusing on the new generation of employees—a group with distinct generational characteristics—expands the boundaries and contexts of followership research. By integrating leadership theories, organizational behavior, and social exchange theory to construct a multidimensional interactive analytical framework, this study contributes to a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of the formation mechanisms of followership. Empirically validating the influence pathways among various factors provides new empirical evidence for the development of relevant theories. At the practical level, the findings offer clear and actionable management insights for private higher education institutions that are undergoing management transformation and generational transition. These insights can help institutional administrators optimize leadership styles, improve organizational environments, and design incentive systems in a targeted manner, thereby effectively stimulating the followership willingness and proactive behaviors of new generation faculty and staff, and promoting the collaborative development and shared growth of both employees and the institution.

### *1.2. The Objective of the Study*

This study aims to systematically explore the key influencing factors and mechanisms of followership among the new generation of employees, and to propose targeted management countermeasures through empirical analysis. The specific objectives are as follows: first, to analyze the key factors influencing followership among the new generation of employees, with a focus on a private higher education institution in Yunnan Province, China; second, to reveal the direct effects of various factors on followership among the new generation of employees, as well as the interactions among some of these factors; third, to analyze the current state and major problems of followership among the new generation of employees; and fourth, to propose corresponding management countermeasures, providing practical references for private higher education institutions to enhance followership among their new generation faculty and staff.

Overall, this study seeks to identify the key influencing factors and mechanisms of followership among the new generation of employees in Chinese private higher education institutions, and to explore potential solutions for enhancing followership willingness, stabilizing the faculty, and mitigating talent turnover. The findings of this study have reference value for private higher education institutions in China and other organizations facing generational management transitions in addressing the challenges of managing the new generation of employees.

## **2. Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on a private higher education institution in Yunnan Province, China (referred to as University Y). The study aims to explore the influencing factors of followership among new generation employees in private higher education institutions, with particular attention to the mechanisms through which four dimensions—leadership style, organizational support, work values, and individual traits—affect followership. To this end, a mixed-methods research approach will be adopted to analyze data collected from primary sources, including semi-structured interviews with current and former faculty and administrative staff, as well as secondary sources, including existing literature and internal institutional documents. Thematic analysis will be employed for data analysis to identify common themes and patterns from the interview data. The study will also propose actionable countermeasures to promote followership among new generation employees in private higher education institutions, with a specific focus on University Y. A limitation of this study is its reliance on a single case study, which does not allow for direct generalization to other private higher education institutions in China or other countries. Nevertheless, the findings may provide useful insights and recommendations for other private higher education institutions facing similar challenges in managing the new generation of employees. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature on followership and talent turnover among new generation employees in private higher education institutions, and to propose practical and feasible solutions to this issue. The findings of this study can inform policy decisions and support the development of sustainable teaching and management teams in private higher education institutions in China and beyond.

### *Research Significance*

This study has significant theoretical value and practical implications.

At the theoretical level, first, by focusing on the new generation of employees—a group with distinct generational characteristics—this study expands the application boundaries of followership research in the contexts of generational differences and private education organizations. Second, by integrating leadership theories, organizational behavior, and social exchange theory to construct a multidimensional interactive analytical framework of “leadership style—organizational environment—individual characteristics”, this study contributes to a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of the formation mechanisms of followership. Third, through empirical validation of the influence pathways among various factors, this study provides new empirical evidence for the applicability of social exchange theory and followership theory to the new generation cohort.

At the practical level, the findings offer clear and actionable management insights for private higher education institutions that are in a critical period of management transformation and generational transition.

Institutional administrators can use these findings to optimize leadership styles, improve organizational environments, and design incentive systems in a targeted manner, thereby effectively stimulating the followership willingness and proactive behaviors of new generation faculty and staff, and promoting the collaborative development and shared growth of both employees and the institution.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. New Generation Employees

New generation employees generally refer to the workplace cohort born after 1980, who have grown up in the social context of deepening reform and opening-up, the establishment of a market economy, and the rise of the internet. This group mainly includes the post-80s, post-90s, and post-00s generations who have gradually entered the workforce [4]. This group exhibits the following distinctive characteristics: first, they have generally received higher education, possessing rich knowledge and strong learning abilities; second, they hold diverse values, value individuality and freedom, and pursue work-life balance; third, they demonstrate high occupational mobility, with their loyalty to organizations based more on personal development and value identification; fourth, as digital natives, they are adept at using information technology and demand immediacy, transparency, and interactivity in communication; and fifth, they emphasize the intrinsic meaning of work and personal growth, showing low tolerance for simple, repetitive, and unchallenging tasks [5].

#### 3.2. Followership

Followership represents an essential pole in the leader-follower interactive relationship. This study defines followership as the comprehensive capacity of an individual within an organizational context to voluntarily and proactively accept, support, and assist leaders in achieving organizational goals, based on rational evaluation and emotional identification, while demonstrating sustained psychological commitment and active behavioral engagement in the process [6]. It encompasses the following three core dimensions.

(1) Affective Loyalty: Emotional attachment, identification, and affection toward individual leaders or the organization.

(2) Normative Compliance: Obedience and cooperation demonstrated out of recognition of organizational rules, professional ethics, or role obligations.

(3) Willingness for Sustained Engagement: The willingness to exert extra effort for the achievement of team and organizational goals, and the intention to maintain long-term contribution.

For new generation employees, their followership places greater emphasis on a kind of “rational followership”—that is, a proactive choice based on mutual respect, fair exchange, and shared growth [7].

#### 3.3. Transformational Leadership

Burns first proposed the concept of transformational leadership, defining transformation as the ability of a leader to motivate followers to achieve organizational goals rather than focusing on self-interest [8]. Later, many scholars conducted research based on Burns’s work. Bass’s theory of transformational leadership provides a profound explanation of leadership, suggesting that transformational leadership is a normative leadership theory that indicates how leaders should behave. He analyzed transformational leadership theory from four dimensions: individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. Employees feel admiration, loyalty, and trust, with attention paid to both the influence on employees and the influence of leaders. Bass’s transformational leadership enables followers to transcend their own self-interests, go beyond themselves, and help organizations achieve long-term goals [9,10]. Bass’s theory of transformational leadership is also recognized as one of the most important, popular, and widely used theories of transformational leadership in the world [10]

In this study, transformational leadership refers to a leadership style in which leaders, by articulating an inspiring organizational vision, stimulating followers’ higher-order needs, encouraging critical thinking and innovation (intellectual stimulation), and providing individualized attention and support to followers

(individualized consideration), motivate followers to transcend short-term personal interests and exert greater effort toward achieving collective goals [11]. This leadership style, characterized by its emphasis on empowerment and meaning-making, is considered highly congruent with the value demands of the new generation of employees.

## 4. Guiding Theories

### 4.1. Followership Theory

The development of followership theory has evolved from a “leader-centered” paradigm to a “leader-follower interactive” paradigm. Early research was heavily influenced by the leader-centered paradigm, viewing followers as passive recipients whose role was merely to obey and execute leaders’ instructions, thereby neglecting followers’ agency in organizational processes. In a commentary published in the *Journal of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, scholars such as Uhl Bien pointed out that in the early leader centered paradigm, followers were seen as passive participants who simply obeyed the leader's direction and goals. At this stage, followers are essentially equivalent to blind obedience and compliance, lacking independent theoretical status [12].

With the deepening of organizational behavior research, scholars gradually recognized that followership is not simply a passive role but a dynamic process in which followership and leadership mutually construct and influence each other. Modern followership theory explicitly states that followers are active roles capable of influencing leadership processes and organizational outcomes. This theory emphasizes that effective followership is key to organizational success, and that proactive followers can compensate for leaders’ shortcomings and drive organizational change and innovation. Kelley was an early scholar who developed a typology of followers, proposing that followers can be categorized into different types, including passive, conformist, pragmatic, alienated, and active followers, among which active followers are capable of independent thinking, active participation, and demonstrate high commitment to organizational goals. Carsten et al. further pointed out that followers are not completely passive in their interactions with leaders but can influence leaders’ decisions and the direction of organizational development through their own behavioral choices [13]. Uhl-Bien et al. summarized followership research into two main paradigms: “reversing the lens” and “co-creation”. The former shifts the research focus from leaders to followers, while the latter emphasizes that leadership and followership are two sides of the same coin, jointly constructing organizational outcomes. This theoretical shift underscores that effective followership is key to organizational success, and that proactive followers can compensate for leaders’ shortcomings and drive organizational change and innovation [12].

In terms of follower typology research, Kelley’s follower typology remains an important theoretical foundation. Sunwoo et al. used Hyundai Motor Group as a case study, identified three characteristics of follower perception within organizational culture based on Kelley’s follower typology: high organization, speed, and dedication [14]. The study further pointed out that with the influx of the new generation of employees, the traditional passive and obedient type of followership is shifting toward an active and participatory type of followership characterized by critical thinking. This finding has important implications for understanding the followership behaviors of the new generation of employees.

### 4.2. Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory was systematically articulated by Blau in his seminal work *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. Its core proposition is that social interactions between individuals are essentially exchange processes based on the principle of reciprocity [15]. Unlike purely economic exchanges, social exchange is built on trust and long-term relationships, and the content of exchange includes not only material resources but also socio-emotional resources such as affection, respect, recognition, and support. The “norm of reciprocity” proposed by Gouldner further pointed out that individuals develop a sense of obligation to reciprocate after receiving help or goodwill from others, and this norm constitutes the foundation of Social Exchange Theory [16]. Cropanzano et al. identified three core elements of social exchange relationships: the initial action initiated by one party, the reciprocal response of the other

party based on reciprocity, and the relationship formed as a result [17].

In organizational contexts, ongoing social exchange relationships exist between employees and both organizations and leaders. The concept of “perceived organizational support” proposed by Eisenberger et al. is directly derived from Social Exchange Theory, suggesting that employees interpret supportive treatment from the organization as an evaluation of their contribution and concern for their well-being, thereby generating reciprocal behaviors [18]. In the field of leadership research, Feng and Adams applied leader-member exchange theory to the higher education context, finding that high-quality exchange relationships help stimulate followers’ positive work states [19]. Khan et al., based on Social Exchange Theory, explored the impact of proactive followership behaviors on leaders, demonstrating that followers are not passive recipients but can influence leaders’ cognition and behaviors through proactive actions—a manifestation of the reciprocity mechanism in social exchange relationships [20].

Social Exchange Theory provides the core explanatory mechanism for this study. It powerfully explains why transformational leadership behaviors and organizational support can stimulate followership among new generation faculty and staff in private higher education institutions: when institutional administrators provide development opportunities, respect, care, and autonomy to new generation faculty and staff, the latter develop a sense of obligation to reciprocate based on the principle of reciprocity, and consequently respond with proactive followership, high work engagement, and sustained retention as positive behaviors. This theoretical perspective is highly consistent with this study’s characterization of the “rational followership” feature of new generation employees—new generation faculty and staff continuously evaluate the resources provided by the organization against the costs they themselves incur, and only when they perceive fairness and support will genuine followership willingness emerge. Thus, Social Exchange Theory, together with Followership Theory and Implicit Followership Theory, mutually complement each other and collectively constitute the theoretical foundation of this study.

#### *4.3. Implicit Followership Theory*

Implicit Followership Theory (IFT) originated from implicit personality theory in cognitive psychology and was first systematically proposed by Sy [21]. This theory suggests that individuals (including both leaders and employees themselves) possess cognitive structures or schemas in their minds regarding “what an ideal follower should be like”. These implicit schemas, derived from individuals’ socialization experiences and cultural backgrounds, subconsciously influence their interpretation, evaluation, and responses to others’ behaviors [21]. Sy through empirical research, identified two main dimensions of implicit followership schemas: the follower prototype (positive characteristics such as diligence, good citizenship, and compliance) and the follower anti-prototype (negative characteristics such as submissiveness, incompetence, and insubordination).

When employees perceive that leaders’ behaviors align with their internal expectations of a “good leader” (i.e., matching employees’ “implicit leadership theory”), and simultaneously, leaders’ expectations of employees align with employees’ self-perception of being a “good subordinate” (i.e., matching employees’ “implicit followership theory”), the superior-subordinate relationship becomes more harmonious, and employees’ proactive followership behaviors are more easily stimulated. Conversely, if leaders exhibit “anti-prototype” characteristics such as control and distrust, employees’ followership willingness is suppressed. Carsten et al. further pointed out that followers are not completely passive in their interactions with leaders but can influence leaders’ decisions and the direction of organizational development through their own behavioral choices [13]. Albarello et al. based on Implicit Followership Theory, explored how the congruence between follower prototypes and gender stereotypes affects evaluations of followers, demonstrating that individuals’ cognitive schemas of “ideal followers” significantly influence their interaction behaviors [10].

Implicit Followership Theory deepens the understanding of the mechanisms underlying followership from a cognitive perspective and holds significant theoretical guidance for this study. For new generation faculty and staff in private higher education institutions, their implicit schemas regarding the “ideal leader” and “ideal followership” directly affect their evaluations of administrators and their own followership behavior choices. When new generation faculty and staff perceive that administrators possess “good leader” characteristics (e.g.,

fairness, trust, care), and when administrators' role expectations align with their self-perceptions, their followership willingness becomes stronger. This theory complements Social Exchange Theory: Social Exchange Theory explains the reciprocal motivational mechanism of followership behaviors, while Implicit Followership Theory reveals the internal psychological foundation of new generation employees' value expectations and cognitive evaluations. Together, they provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the formation of followership among new generation faculty and staff in private higher education institutions.

## 5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, primarily qualitative, comprehensively employing literature review and single case study methods. The single case study includes semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. This approach is particularly suitable for investigating complex phenomena within specific contexts and gaining in-depth understanding of the underlying mechanisms and processes [22]. This study selects a private higher education institution in Yunnan Province (University Y) as the case object. In this institution, faculty and staff from the post-80s and post-90s generations account for over 70% of the workforce, making it a typical educational organization where new generation employees are concentrated, which effectively reflects the real-world context of the research topic.

In terms of data collection, this study is based on semi-structured interviews with a sample of current and former faculty and administrative staff of University Y. The interviews focus on understanding their work experiences, perceptions of institutional management and leadership styles, perceptions of organizational support and development opportunities, attitudes toward the institution, and reasons for staying or leaving. In addition, this study collects internal institutional documents (such as management regulations, title evaluation procedures, etc.) and conducts participant observation to achieve data triangulation. Thematic analysis is employed for data analysis, identifying common themes and patterns related to followership from the interview data through systematic coding.

The limitation of this study is that, being based on a single case study, the findings cannot be directly generalized to other private higher education institutions in China or other countries. However, the results of this study may provide useful insights and recommendations for other private higher education institutions facing similar challenges in managing the new generation of employees, and lay the foundation for subsequent related research.

## 6. Findings and Conclusions

### 6.1. Findings

Based on field research at University Y, analysis of internal documents, semi-structured interviews with 12 current and former new generation faculty and staff members, and participant observation, this study systematically analyzes the current characteristics and constraining factors of followership among new generation employees at this institution. The main findings are as follows:

(1) Followership among new generation employees exhibits composite characteristics of "high initial enthusiasm, strong rational evaluation, and emphasis on growth feedback".

Overall, new generation faculty and staff at University Y generally possess high initial enthusiasm for the educational profession, demonstrating a strong sense of responsibility and proactiveness in classroom teaching, student advising, and curriculum development. Some respondents reported receiving positive feedback from students and a certain sense of professional achievement in their work, which constitutes the foundation of the "affective loyalty" dimension. However, in terms of the deeper manifestations of followership, new generation faculty and staff generally exhibit characteristics of "rational followership". Their followership behaviors depend not only on emotional identification with the institution's mission but also, to a high degree, on continuous evaluation of leadership behaviors, organizational support, and personal development benefits. Regarding "normative compliance", faculty and staff are able to conscientiously complete basic tasks but often display obvious skepticism or passive resistance toward management systems that are procedurally complex, excessively formalistic, or lacking in rationality. Regarding "willingness for sustained engagement", although

they can actively engage in priority tasks with high focus and effort, they are cautious about long-term, low-reward, high-intensity extra work, and their willingness to engage is closely related to perceived meaning in work, perceived growth opportunities, and leadership recognition.

(2) Insufficient “intellectual stimulation” in leadership style limits proactive followership among faculty and staff.

Among middle managers at University Y, some exhibit certain transformational leadership characteristics, such as granting autonomy to young faculty in teaching reform and demonstrating humane care in team building, which to some extent promotes the establishment of trust in superior-subordinate relationships. However, there is a general lack of “intellectual stimulation”. Managers tend to execute instructions from higher authorities and maintain existing order, rarely encouraging faculty and staff to offer critical opinions or pursue breakthrough teaching and research innovations. This directly limits proactive followership and creative contributions among faculty and staff.

(3) “Developmental support” and “emotional support” from the organization are severely insufficient.

University Y provides basic social security, title evaluation pathways, and a certain level of training opportunities for faculty and staff. However, interviews reveal that faculty and staff generally report severe deficiencies in “developmental support” and “emotional support”. Specific manifestations include: promotion criteria for professional titles emphasizing seniority and quantity of research output while paying insufficient attention to teaching ability and service quality; a lack of systematic and personalized career development training; and, under conditions of high work pressure, an absence of institutionalized mechanisms for caring for and addressing the mental health of faculty and staff. These factors significantly affect the long-term sense of belonging and followership willingness of faculty and staff, particularly those with high levels of education and high potential.

(4) Rigid job design and suppression of individual potential exacerbate the risk of talent turnover.

New generation faculty and staff generally value job autonomy, growth opportunities, and a sense of meaning. However, against the backdrop of rapid expansion and increasing evaluation pressure at University Y, teaching and administrative tasks have become increasingly complex, and formalized tasks have increased, leading to job content in some positions becoming mechanical and repetitive, thereby weakening faculty and staff’s intrinsic motivation and the creative component of proactive followership behaviors. Simultaneously, highly proactive employees lack empowerment and platforms to demonstrate their abilities. There is a clear mismatch between employees’ career expectations and the actual organizational provisions, further exacerbating the decline in followership willingness and the tendency toward turnover.

## 6.2. Conclusions

Synthesizing the above research findings, this study draws the following main conclusions:

First, followership among new generation employees is a complex construct driven by multiple factors. It does not stem solely from the authority of leaders or organizational coercion, but is deeply embedded in an interactive ecosystem composed of four dimensions: leadership behavior, organizational environment, work itself, and individual traits. Transformational leadership behaviors, through inspirational vision and individualized consideration, can effectively win the emotional identification of new generation employees. A fair, supportive, and growth-focused organizational environment provides the foundation for them to confidently engage in followership. Meaningful, autonomous, and challenging job design serves as key fuel for stimulating intrinsic followership motivation. Employees’ own proactive personality and positive career growth expectations act as the internal engine that transforms external opportunities into sustained followership actions.

Second, private higher education institutions currently face systemic challenges in enhancing followership among new generation employees. These challenges are primarily manifested as: an organizational support system that emphasizes material rewards over development, unidirectional leadership communication that is disconnected from actual behaviors, rigid job design with narrow growth platforms, and individual potential that remains insufficiently activated. These issues are interrelated and collectively constrain the elevation of followership to higher levels.

Third, the core of enhancing followership among new generation employees lies in shifting from a “control”

mindset to an “empowerment” mindset. Specifically, it is necessary to improve the organizational support system centered on career development, optimize leadership behaviors and communication mechanisms aimed at mutual trust, reconstruct job design and growth platforms oriented toward stimulating intrinsic motivation, and establish empowerment mechanisms focused on activating individual potential. Only by doing so can private higher education institutions establish deep followership relationships with new generation employees based on value identification, mutual respect, and shared growth.

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis of the current state of followership among new generation employees at University Y and the diagnosis of existing problems, this study proposes the following systematic countermeasures and recommendations:

### (1) Improve the Organizational Support System to Solidify the Foundation of Followership

Construct a “map-style” career development management system. Universities should develop a clear “Career Development Path Map for Faculty/Administrative Staff”, displaying both vertical professional title promotion ladders and horizontal competence development pathways (e. g., teaching masters, dual-qualified teachers, educational administration, social services). Promotion criteria should be shifted from emphasizing research output to a comprehensive assessment of “teaching + research + service + values”. Implement Individual Development Plans (IDPs) to provide customized training, mentorship, visiting scholarships, and other resources for each new generation faculty or staff member.

Establish a multi-level employee care and mental health support network. Introduce an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to provide professional psychological counseling services. Regularly organize workshops on stress management and burnout prevention. Train managers (deans and department heads) in basic psychological counseling skills, foster an open and inclusive team culture, and enhance faculty and staff’s psychological safety and sense of organizational belonging.

### (2) Optimize Leadership Behaviors and Communication to Rebuild Trust Relationships

Promote “coaching-style” leadership and structured two-way communication. Provide training for middle managers to facilitate their transformation from “commanders” to “coaches”, emphasizing listening and inspiration. Institutionalize channels such as one-on-one in-depth conversations, faculty forums, and anonymous suggestion platforms to ensure that faculty and staff opinions receive timely feedback and are addressed in a closed-loop manner, thereby enhancing their sense of participation and identification.

Strengthen leader “consistency” and “fairness”. Through leadership workshops, 360-degree assessments, and other methods, help managers recognize and correct their own behavioral deviations. Make decision-making criteria regarding resource allocation, performance evaluations, and title recommendations transparent and proceduralized, reduce arbitrary discretion, and use institutional fairness to safeguard leader impartiality, thereby consolidating the legitimate foundation of leader authority.

### (3) Reconstruct Job Design and Growth Platforms to Stimulate Intrinsic Motivation

Implement job redesign and flexible empowerment. Regularly conduct job diagnostics for teaching, research, and administrative positions. Enhance job meaningfulness through job enrichment (adding responsibilities for teaching innovation and curriculum design) and job enlargement (adding cross-disciplinary collaboration and social service tasks). Grant faculty and staff greater autonomy in teaching models, student evaluation, and small-scale teaching research projects, provided that clear goals are established.

Build an open and transparent internal talent market and project platform. Create an internal project bidding platform to encourage faculty and staff to participate in cross-departmental and cross-college projects such as teaching reform, evaluation optimization, and industry-education integration. Provide opportunities for job rotation, temporary assignments, and visiting scholarships to make faculty and staff career development paths diverse and visible, thereby stimulating intrinsic motivation for growth.

(4) Activate Individual Employee Potential to Achieve Mutual Growth of People and Positions Identify and create “pioneer” roles and incentive mechanisms. Proactively identify faculty and staff with high proactive personality traits. Create special roles for them by establishing initiatives such as “Teaching Innovation

Incubators”, “Process Optimization Teams”, and “Young Faculty Leadership Programs”. Provide dedicated resources, senior mentor guidance, and recognition rewards, giving their proactiveness a dedicated outlet for expression and transforming successful experiences into organizational assets.

Conduct systematic career dialogues and expectation management. Treat career planning as an ongoing management activity. Managers should regularly engage in formal career dialogues with faculty and staff, helping them set reasonable short-term and medium-term goals while transparently communicating the potential opportunities and resources the institution can provide in the foreseeable future. Manage expectations through dynamic communication, closely aligning personal aspirations with institutional development, and strengthen the bonds of followership through shared progress.

## **8. Research Contributions and Limitations**

The theoretical contributions of this study are as follows: it focuses followership research on the new generation of employees, expanding the application boundaries of followership theory in the context of private higher education institutions; by integrating leadership theories, organizational behavior, and social exchange theory, it constructs a four-dimensional interactive analytical framework of “leadership behavior—organizational environment—work itself—individual traits”; through empirical analysis, it validates the influence pathways among various factors, providing new empirical evidence for the applicability of social exchange theory and followership theory to the new generation cohort. The practical contributions of this study lie in providing actionable management insights for private higher education institutions to optimize leadership styles, improve organizational environments, and design incentive systems in order to stimulate the followership willingness of new generation faculty and staff.

This study also has certain limitations. First, it adopts a single case study design, which limits the generalizability of the findings; the results cannot be directly generalized to other private higher education institutions in China or other countries. Second, the interview sample size is relatively small and may not cover all types of faculty and staff. Third, it adopts a cross-sectional design and cannot dynamically track the evolution process of followership. Future research could employ multi-case comparisons or large-scale questionnaire surveys to further validate and extend the findings of this study.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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