



Strategic Planning for Gen Z (and Beyond) Start-Ups: Lessons from Haley's Strategic Family Therapy Model

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Abstract: Gen Z entrepreneurs are redefining the start-up landscape by prioritizing adaptability, inclusivity, and technological innovation. Unlike previous generations, their ventures emphasize systemic thinking, social impact, and iterative business models. Traditional strategic planning frameworks often focus on financial projections and hierarchical structures yet fail to account for the relational complexities of modern start-ups. Jay Haley's Strategic Family Therapy Model offers a unique perspective for start-up success by addressing systemic interactions, disrupting inefficiencies, and creating directive strategies for sustained growth. This chapter begins by examining the core consumer characteristics of Generation Z, as understanding their behaviors, preferences, and values is crucial for designing relevant and responsive business strategies. It then applies Haley's systemic approach to Gen Z start-up planning, using Creative Culture Exchange, a global creative marketplace, as a case study. By integrating systems thinking, adaptive strategy implementation, and relational power dynamics, Gen Z entrepreneurs can develop sustainable, resilient ventures that are responsive to emerging market needs.

Keywords: *Gen Z, start-up, entrepreneurs, Haley's strategic family therapy model*

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is undergoing a fundamental transformation with Gen Z founders leading businesses that emphasize purpose, inclusivity, and rapid technological evolution (Aguas, 2019). These entrepreneurs recognize that traditional business planning, which often focuses on competitive analysis and fixed strategic blueprints, does not align with the adaptive, innovative

demands of their industries. Instead, they embrace systemic thinking—acknowledging that a start-up functions within interconnected social, economic, and technological networks.

Jay Haley’s Strategic Family Therapy Model (Haley, 1976) provides a compelling framework for approaching start-up strategy through systemic interaction. Originally developed for clinical interventions in family dynamics, Haley’s model centers on understanding relational structures, identifying inefficiencies, and deploying directive strategies for adaptive change (Hanna & Ball, 2024; Lockhart, 2025). Applying these principles to entrepreneurship allows start-up leaders to navigate the challenges of innovation, sustainability, and stakeholder management with greater agility.

This chapter begins by examining the core consumer characteristics of Generation Z. Understanding how Gen Z thinks, spends, and engages with brands is critical not only for designing relevant products and services but also for shaping the foundational strategies of Gen Z-led ventures. These consumer insights provide valuable context for the ways Gen Z entrepreneurs approach strategic decision-making and how they leverage systemic thinking in their business models.

The author then explores how Haley’s approach to systemic thinking can enhance strategic planning for Gen Z start-ups, using “Creative Culture Exchange”, a digital marketplace designed to foster cross-generational collaboration, as a case study. By applying systemic methods to this start-up, the chapter illustrates how entrepreneurs can break stagnation, structure directive milestones, and ensure dynamic organizational growth—ultimately empowering them to design businesses that are adaptable, inclusive, and responsive to both internal and external challenges.

Key Points:

Gen Z entrepreneurs emphasize adaptability and systemic thinking in strategic planning.

Haley’s Strategic Family Therapy Model offers unique insights into adaptive, relational start-up management.

Traditional business strategies often fail to account for modern, interconnected entrepreneurial environments.

Figure 1.1 *Strategic Priorities of Gen Z Entrepreneurs*

Generation Z typically defined “as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents a cohort of true digital natives” (Rossi et al., 2025). This generation has grown up with constant access to the internet, smartphones, and social media, fundamentally shaping their behaviors and expectations as consumers. Their formative years have been marked by significant global disruptions, including economic recessions, accelerated climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences have cultivated a distinctive consumer profile that prioritizes practicality, technological integration, social awareness, and environmental consciousness.

Gen Z consumers often display a cautious and pragmatic approach to spending. Although many within this group are still financially supported by their families, the broader economic climate—particularly post-pandemic inflation—has heightened their financial awareness. Surveys indicate that nearly half of Gen Z plan to reduce non-essential purchases, while a majority are placing greater emphasis on managing their personal finances. This suggests a shift toward value-driven consumption, where affordability and necessity are prioritized over luxury or impulse buying (NIQ, 2024).

This generation’s digital fluency is unparalleled. Nearly all Gen Z individuals engage with social media, frequently relying on platforms like TikTok for product research and reviews. Their comfort with digital ecosystems extends to financial transactions as well, with Gen Z being significantly more likely than older generations to utilize mobile and online wallets. These habits not only streamline the purchasing process but also create opportunities for brands to engage with Gen Z consumers through tailored digital marketing strategies (NIQ, 2024).

Social awareness is another defining trait of Generation Z. Exposure to a more diverse social environment has fostered a strong commitment to inclusivity, with many rejecting conventional norms around gender and identity. A substantial proportion of Gen Z believes that traditional gender roles are outdated, and they actively seek out brands that reflect inclusive values in both representation and practice. This demand for authenticity and equity influences purchasing behaviors and brand loyalty (NIQ, 2024).

While environmentalism may not dominate Gen Z’s identity as strongly as often assumed, this generation has cultivated its own eco-conscious behaviors. Gen Z expects brands to demonstrate environmental responsibility and are willing to take action—such as boycotting companies—that fail to align with their sustainability values. This indicates that although climate

issues may not be central to every Gen Z consumer, there is an overarching expectation that businesses contribute meaningfully to environmental and social causes (NIQ, 2024).

Key Points:

Gen Z has grown up fully immersed in digital technology, making online platforms and social media central to how they engage with brands and make purchasing decisions. Economic challenges have shaped Gen Z into practical, financially cautious consumers who prioritize value and necessity.

This generation is highly connected, frequently using platforms like TikTok for product research and relying on digital wallets for transactions.

Gen Z values diversity and inclusion, favoring brands that reflect progressive social attitudes and authentic representation.

While not uniformly defined by environmentalism, many Gen Z consumers expect brands to take clear, responsible action on environmental and social issues.

Figure 1.2 *Key Consumer Characteristics of Gen Z*

1.2 Systems Thinking for Foundational Design

Understanding Gen Z's distinct consumer behaviors is not only essential for effective engagement, but also foundational to how emerging ventures—particularly those led by Gen Z—conceptualize and structure their business models through systems thinking. Systems thinking provides start-up leaders with a framework for understanding the relational dynamics that shape their ventures (Lockhart, 2025; Meadows, 2008). Haley's Strategic Family Therapy Model emphasizes systemic interactions—focusing on how individuals and groups influence one another within a shared structure. Gen Z start-ups benefit from viewing their businesses as ecosystems rather than isolated entities.

In the case of Creative Culture Exchange, the start-up's foundational design requires mapping relationships between key stakeholders. The platform's success depends on internal collaboration among founders and developers, as well as external engagement with creators, consumers, and investors. Haley's systemic approach allows start-up leaders to anticipate challenges by analyzing interconnected dependencies. For example, the interplay between creator incentives and platform sustainability requires balancing user benefits with revenue models.

A key advantage of systems thinking is its ability to highlight areas of misalignment that may impede growth. Entrepreneurs often operate with enthusiasm but must remain vigilant about how one decision affects various stakeholders (Sterman, 2002). By adopting a systemic approach, Creative Culture Exchange ensures its early business model accounts for both short-term viability and long-term expansion.

Key Points:

Systems thinking allows entrepreneurs to analyze relational dynamics within start-up ecosystems.

Haley's systemic approach emphasizes interdependent stakeholder relationships.

Identifying potential misalignments early in strategic planning enhances long-term adaptability.

Figure 1.3 *Applying Systems Thinking in Start-up Design*

1.3 Disrupting Unproductive Patterns

Start-ups often encounter stagnation when entrenched cycles prevent growth and innovation (Christensen, 2015). Haley's Strategic Family Therapy Model emphasizes targeted interventions to break such cycles and introduce adaptive strategies. In the context of entrepreneurship, these interventions involve disrupting unproductive processes that inhibit creativity or efficiency.

For CreativeCulture Exchange, early challenges included slow creator onboarding and limited community engagement. Rather than allowing these inefficiencies to persist, the founders applied Haley's intervention principles, introducing structured engagement initiatives. One such method was the implementation of interactive "Creative Challenges," designed to encourage participation while fostering collaboration. By creating external stimuli that disrupt stagnation, founders prompt action and engagement, ensuring that the platform remains dynamic and responsive to evolving user needs.

The ability to recognize and disrupt counterproductive patterns is essential for any start-up. Studies suggest that rigid operational models lead to organizational inertia, preventing necessary adaptation (Kotter, 2012). By proactively identifying areas of inefficiency and

introducing targeted interventions, Gen Z entrepreneurs can maintain momentum and cultivate an environment of continuous innovation.

Key Points:

Haley's intervention strategies offer a framework for disrupting start-up stagnation.
Counterproductive cycles hinder engagement and innovation in entrepreneurial ventures.
Structured intervention methods maintain adaptability and foster sustained business growth.

Figure 1.4 Strategic *Interventions to Break Startup-up stagnation*

1.4 Directive Strategies for Milestone Achievement

Haley's Strategic Family Therapy Model emphasizes structured interventions that guide individuals toward specific behavioral milestones (Haley, 1976; Lockhart, 2025). In entrepreneurial contexts, directive strategies can be adapted to help start-ups achieve growth-oriented benchmarks. These milestones provide clarity and alignment, ensuring that each phase of development progresses according to a structured plan.

For Creative Culture Exchange, directive strategies shaped three key milestones: a) the initial launch, b) early growth, and c) long-term scalability. The first milestone required developing an intuitive, visually engaging interface within six months, ensuring seamless usability for creators. The second phase focused on attracting 500 international creators, expanding the user base through targeted engagement efforts. The final milestone involved integrating immersive tools, including AI-assisted collaboration features, designed to enhance creative workflows over time.

Research indicates that milestone-driven planning enhances business success by providing measurable checkpoints (Locke & Latham, 2002). Without clear directives, start-ups may struggle with strategic ambiguity, resulting in delays and inefficiencies. By establishing structured pathways for execution, Gen Z entrepreneurs can ensure accountability, track progress, and adapt strategies based on changing market conditions.

Key Points:

Directive strategies provide structured pathways for achieving start-up milestones.

Haley's intervention framework supports goal setting and accountability in entrepreneurial ventures.

Milestone-driven planning enhances clarity, progress tracking, and adaptability.

Figure 1.5 *Structured Goal Setting for Scalable Startup Growth*

1.5 Navigating Power Dynamics in Collaborative Environments

Haley's insights into hierarchical relationships and systemic power structures offer valuable lessons for start-up leadership. Unlike traditional corporate settings that rely on rigid hierarchies, Gen Z entrepreneurs often favor decentralized models, emphasizing inclusivity and team-based decision-making (Johnson & Hackman, 2018). However, ambiguous leadership roles can create inefficiencies or lead to conflicts in collaborative environments.

At Creative Culture Exchange, founders recognized early on the need for clearly defined leadership responsibilities. One co-founder oversees cultural programming and strategic partnerships, while the other prioritizes technological development and user experience. Haley's model reinforces the importance of structuring roles in ways that strengthen collaboration rather than introduce unnecessary friction. A well-balanced leadership structure fosters accountability, ensuring that decision-making aligns with long-term goals.

Moreover, effective navigation of power dynamics extends beyond internal leadership. Gen Z entrepreneurs must also consider external partnerships and stakeholder influences, including investors, advisors, and community leaders. Research suggests that strategic alliances significantly contribute to start-up sustainability by providing access to resources and mitigating risks (Bellavitis et al., 2017). Therefore, Haley's framework for relational dynamics helps start-up founders maintain equilibrium between leadership responsibilities and external stakeholder engagements.

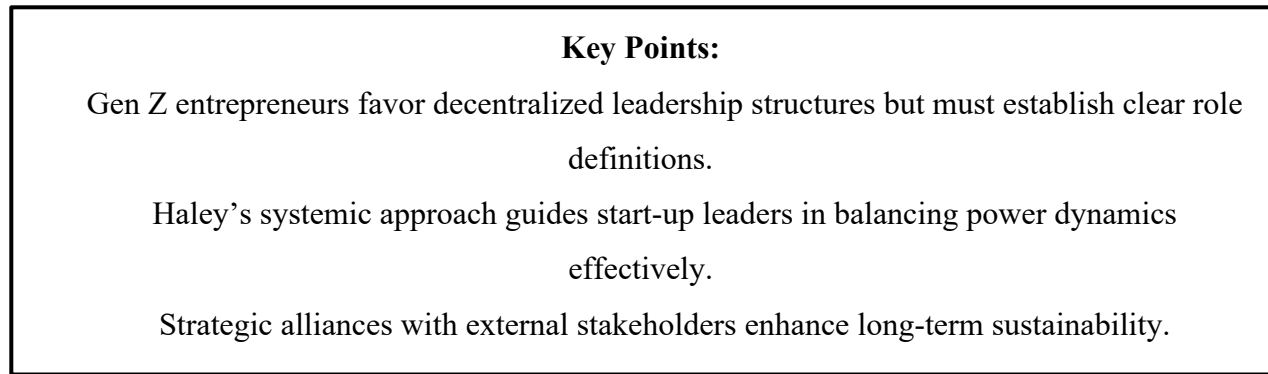


Figure 1.6 *Power Dynamics and Role Clarity in Gen Z Start-ups*

1.6 Reframing Challenges for Strategic Innovation

Entrepreneurs frequently encounter obstacles that, when reframed, can serve as catalysts for innovation rather than hindrances (Sarasvathy, 2001). Haley’s Strategic Family Therapy Model introduces reframing techniques to help individuals and organizations view challenges through alternative perspectives, shifting restrictive mindsets toward creative problem-solving.

For Creative Culture Exchange, limited financial resources initially seemed like a major constraint. However, rather than viewing funding shortages as a barrier, the team reframed this challenge as an opportunity to build grassroots, community-driven platform. By focusing on authentic creator engagement and leveraging user-generated content as a core growth strategy, the venture emphasized organic expansion rather than reliance on venture capital funding alone. This approach not only strengthened trust within the creator community but also enhanced long-term resilience.

The ability to reframe challenges plays a pivotal role in start-up success. Studies highlight that entrepreneurs who adopt an adaptive mindset are more likely to pivot effectively and seize emerging opportunities (Crnogaj & Rus, 2023). By shifting perspectives on obstacles, founders can discover alternative pathways to sustainability while maintaining alignment with their core mission.

Key Points:

Reframing transforms challenges into strategic opportunities for innovation.

Haley's systemic approach encourages entrepreneurs to shift perspectives on perceived barriers.

Adaptive thinking enhances entrepreneurial resilience and long-term viability.

Figure 1.7 *Reframing Limitations as Strategic Opportunities***1.7 Values-Driven Growth and Sustainability**

Gen Z entrepreneurs distinguish themselves by embedding ethical values into their business models, prioritizing sustainability, inclusivity, and social impact (Freeman, Harrison, & Zyglidopoulos, 2018). Unlike conventional start-ups that emphasize rapid scalability and profit maximization, Gen Z ventures frequently align strategic planning with long-term community development and environmental consciousness. Haley's systemic approach reinforces the importance of aligning business strategy with relational integrity, ensuring that growth supports stakeholders holistically rather than creating extractive, transactional models.

For Creative Culture Exchange, sustainability is embedded in both operational practices and community engagement initiatives. The platform allocates a percentage of revenue to global sustainability projects, reinforcing its commitment to responsible business practices. Additionally, mentorship programs for underrepresented creators ensure accessibility and inclusivity, fostering a diverse entrepreneurial ecosystem. Studies suggest that businesses that integrate ethical frameworks into their operations benefit from higher stakeholder trust and long-term resilience (Porter & Kramer, 2018).

A values-driven approach also enhances brand loyalty, as consumers increasingly prefer companies that align with their social and environmental values. Research indicates that Gen Z prioritizes ethical consumption, with 62% of young consumers favoring brands that demonstrate social responsibility (NIQ, 2024). By embedding sustainability and inclusivity into strategic planning, start-ups cultivate authentic connections with their audiences, ensuring that their businesses remain relevant and adaptive over time.

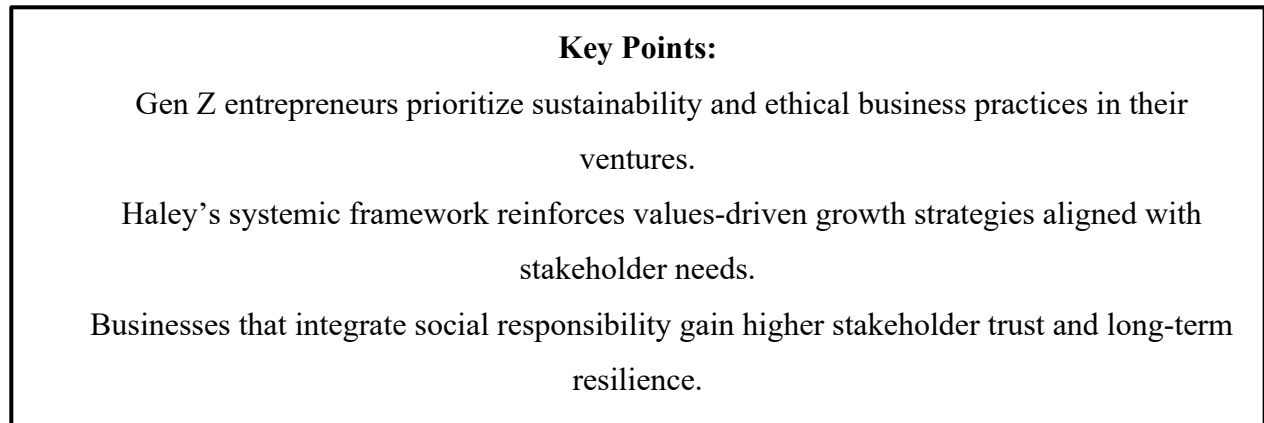


Figure 1.8 Embedding *Ethics and Sustainability in Starup DNA*

1.8 Feedback Loops for Continuous Evolution

Adaptability is a cornerstone of entrepreneurial success, and Haley’s feedback loop framework reinforces the necessity of iterative refinement in strategic planning. Gen Z start-ups operate in dynamic environments where consumer preferences, technological advancements, and market conditions shift rapidly. Feedback loops enable organizations to assess performance, make informed adjustments, and maintain alignment with stakeholder expectations (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

At Creative Culture Exchange, feedback mechanisms serve as integral components of platform evolution. Creator surveys, user analytics, and engagement metrics provide continuous insights into how features and initiatives resonate with the community. These insights allow founders to refine their strategies, ensuring that the platform remains responsive and innovative. Regular feedback cycles prevent stagnation, reinforcing systemic adaptability.

Research indicates that businesses that integrate structured feedback loops experience higher retention rates and customer satisfaction (Lakshmi & Ajay, 2024). Iterative learning fosters resilience, ensuring that start-ups respond proactively to emerging trends rather than reacting retrospectively. Gen Z entrepreneurs benefit from embedding feedback-driven adaptation into their strategic frameworks, reinforcing their businesses’ sustainability over time.

Key Points:

Haley's systemic framework highlights the importance of feedback loops in business evolution.

Iterative refinement enhances adaptability, ensuring strategic alignment with stakeholder needs.

Feedback mechanisms increase retention rates, customer engagement, and organizational responsiveness.

Figure 1. 9 *Using Feedback Loops to Drive Iterative Innovation*

2. Conclusion

Systemic Principles for Gen Z and Gen Alpha Start-Ups

Entrepreneurial ventures guided by systemic thinking embody resilience and adaptability. By applying Jay Haley's Strategic Family Therapy Model, Gen Z start-ups can transform relational complexities into strategic assets, driving meaningful innovation. CreativeCulture Exchange exemplifies the intersection of creativity, collaboration, and systemic planning, offering insights into the long-term sustainability of mission-driven businesses.

Strategic planning for Gen Z and beyond must acknowledge the fluid and relational nature of modern business environments. Haley's framework provides entrepreneurs with tools to identify inefficiencies, structure directive milestones, reframe challenges, and foster collaborative leadership. These principles ensure that emerging ventures navigate obstacles with purpose, sustaining values-driven growth and adaptability in evolving markets.

As entrepreneurship continues to evolve, the integration of systemic thinking will shape businesses designed to empower both current and future generations. Gen Z leaders not only challenge traditional start-up models but redefine success through inclusivity, sustainability, and relational integrity.

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