

Effectively manage a multigenerational staff

By Joyce Hahn, APRN, NEA-BC, PhD

Consider this scenario: Margaret (a baby boomer) is the charge nurse of a cardiac step down unit. There are six staff nurses on the day shift. Janice, who has been working in the unit the longest, is of the veteran generation and staunchly resists change. Courtney is a baby boomer—a real workaholic and a team player. Ryan has entered nursing as a second career and, typical of the generation Xers, enjoys working on his own. Lillian is also of generation X age and likes to work on her own, but is always willing to help her colleagues. Christine and Lauren represent the millennial generation and both are outgoing, obviously technologically savvy, and seek out learning opportunities. Margaret finds working with the day shift nurses can be at times both frustrating and challenging. Does this scenario sound familiar? Are you experiencing multigenerational management issues in your own unit?

The reality is that today's nursing workforce is made up of multigenerational staff members. Nurse managers and their staff may well hold different attitudes, beliefs, work ethics, and job expectations. For the first time in history, there are four distinct generational cohorts represented in the nursing workforce: the veterans, the baby boomers, generation X, and the millennials.¹ The generation gap isn't a new phenomenon in the workplace, but the increased number of generations working together creates more opportunities for misunderstanding.²

Understanding generational differences can be a source of creative strength and opportunity or a source of stifling stress and conflict.³ The challenge for the nurse manager is to embrace and respect the multigenerational diversity of the staff while developing and supporting a highly functioning and cohesive nursing team. The strategies described in this article are meant to add perspective and guidance for the nurse manager to create a work environ-

ment in which the older nurses feel valued and the younger nurses feel welcome.

Time to strategize

The differences between the generations can create many challenges and, at times, conflict in the workplace. These challenges are often associated with generational differences in the perception of job expectation and personal life goals. The age differences between managers and employees can further complicate the challenges of working with a multigenerational staff. Employing effective strategies can make all the difference in creating a healthy work environment.

♦ *Strategy 1: Self-assessment*

It's necessary to approach the discussion of multigenerational diversity with an open mind. You must first understand yourself before you can begin to understand and appreciate the diversity of others. Examine your own emotional competencies that define your personal style of leadership.⁴ Ask yourself as a leader what characteristics and attributes you expect from your staff. What are your job expectations for your staff? Are you a leader who actively listens before speaking? Do your staff members see you as a resource to resolve conflict? Are you a flexible leader? Review your own value structure. What balance between work and personal life do you maintain and what are your work-life balance expectations for your staff? Managing yourself successfully is the first step in relating effectively to your staff.

♦ *Strategy 2: Educate yourself*

Become educated about the general characteristics and core values of each generation (*Table 1*). Developing awareness, understanding, and knowledge are the initial steps to successfully working with your staff. Be mindful that generational group characteristics are just generalizations and aren't meant to be stereotypical or applied to whole populations. Each staff member is an individual person with unique traits and

Table 1: Generational characteristics and employment strategies

	Veterans (born before 1945)	Baby boomers (born 1946-1964)	Generation X (born 1965-1976)	Millennials (born 1977-1997)
Generational values	Hard working, respect for authority, disciplined, accepts delayed reward	Optimistic, team player, strong work effort, personal gratification, see men as bosses	Diverse, self-reliant, free agent, balanced, informal	Globally diverse, optimistic, achievement oriented, flexible
Generational strengths	Stable, detail oriented, loyal, hard working, reliable, practical, dedicated	Driven; team, service, and relationship oriented; optimistic	Accepting of change, capable of multitasking, technologically literate, self-reliant, creative, skeptical, balanced	Optimistic, capable of multitasking, very technologically savvy, outcome driven, accepting of a 24-hr workplace, hopeful, determined
Employment strategies				
Recruiting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Offer full-time, part-time, or special project employment. ◆ Let them know their age and experience is an asset. ◆ Using "please" and "thank you" goes a long way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Let them know their experience will be valued. ◆ Offer a warm, human work environment that's dynamic and looks for change agents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ This generation wants to have a life outside of work. ◆ Evaluate ideas by merit. ◆ Offer opportunities to move upward and broaden scope of skills. ◆ Be technology friendly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ This generation is most comfortable in large organizations. ◆ Offer a teamwork ethic and can-do attitude. ◆ Make sure advanced technology is available and education is supported.
Orienting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Offer a thorough and detailed orientation, including the big picture: past history, future company goals, and how they'll contribute. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Focus on the near future of the company. ◆ Focus on the challenges and opportunity to problem solve. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ This generation is self-directed; utilize the Intranet and contact lists. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Provide a mentor program. ◆ Offer a clear and structured orientation.
Managing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Be respectful. ◆ Provide stress-free training situations. ◆ Expect to train in technology. ◆ Use practical approaches when problem solving. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Train in strategic planning, budgeting, and coaching skills. ◆ Provide public group recognition. ◆ Reward the strong work ethic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Keep in mind that this generation may not be accustomed to teamwork. ◆ Utilize self-scheduling and self-governance team opportunities. ◆ Provide frequent feedback and recognition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Clearly define work expectations and goals. ◆ Remember that the gap between generation Xers and millennials may cause potential for conflict. ◆ Grow your training department.

personalities who may or may not represent her generation as a whole. Review your staff and consider what generational diversity exists in your own unit. Be aware of your personal generational category and reflect on the characteristics listed (Table 2).

◆ **Strategy 3: Embrace commonalities**
Although the generations have different values and needs related to their work environment, there are commonalities. Your staff members are highly educated and all are contributing working members of the

nursing profession. Your staff wants to feel valued and successful, and members of every generation want to avoid conflict. Recognition for a job well done is appreciated by all because everyone wants to feel appreciated and respected. Remember that each generation has its own set of strengths to bring to the unit.

◆ **Strategy 4: Create and maintain a culture of respect**

Feeling respected is a vital aspect of workplace satisfaction. Respect is a function of individual behaviors,

values, and perceptions that can be viewed as the ethical foundation for all employee relations.⁵ Respect appears in the American Nurses Association's *Code of Ethics for Nurses*. Principle 1 states, "The nurse, in all professional relationships, practices with compassion and respect for the inherent dignity, worth, and uniqueness of every individual."⁶ Statement 1.5 continues, "The principle of respect for persons extends to all individuals with whom the nurse interacts. The nurse maintains

Table 2: Generational self-discovery questions

Take a few minutes to answer these questions:

- ◆ What's your date of birth? What generational cohort do you belong to?
- ◆ What was your favorite movie growing up?
- ◆ What was your favorite children's character?
- ◆ What was your basic nursing education?
- ◆ Why did you choose nursing as your profession?
- ◆ What was your first nursing position?
- ◆ What's the first use of healthcare technology you remember seeing?

compassionate and caring relationships with colleagues and others with a commitment to the fair treatment of individuals...and to resolving conflict."⁶ A respectful culture can be created in various ways. Treating and viewing all staff members with mutual respect can be as simple as listening and not interrupting, maintaining eye contact, being polite in communication, and responding promptly to e-mails. Successful employees are employees who have their job expectations clearly communicated to them.

One way to foster respect between the generations is to bring staff together to discuss the topic of multigenerational diversity. Prepare a set of generation-based questions for staff members to individually answer and share with the group (*Table 2*). After the dialogue and sharing has opened the door for discussion, work respectfully with each other as colleagues using a template such as the generalized characteristics in *Table 1*. Understanding another's point of view and value set can result in a strengthened collegial team.

◆ **Strategy 5: Bridge the generational gap**

Developing innovative and new roles for your unit such as team

builder, change leader, and mentor helps address age and experience diversity, allowing for the development of a more functional multidisciplinary team. Recognize veterans, baby boomers, and generation X for their knowledge and contributions to nursing while meeting the coaching and mentoring needs of the millennials. Older nurses are influential when change is needed because they're viewed as having power due to seniority and years of experience. Encouraging younger nurses to speak out about new aspects of patient care can facilitate a creative learning atmosphere and culture within the organization that can help change outmoded ways of approaching problems.⁷

In a study analyzing the results of a national survey of RNs, respect from managers was found to influence retention.⁸ This same study found the highest ranked indicator of respect to be "managers involve nurses in the process of making key decisions that will affect nurses' ability to provide patient care." Unit-based self-governance can begin to transcend the generations by developing staff empowerment and loyalty to the unit and coworkers. Self-governance as a self-directive approach can make a huge difference in retention rates.⁹

Respect diversity

Remain positive in your outlook and move past the comfort zone of your own generation. Working with your multigenerational staff offers the opportunity to discover new and different ways of thinking and approaches to problem-solving. Respecting and valuing the multigenerational points of view can bring strength and cohesiveness to your unit. The bottom line is staff satisfaction. When your staff mem-

bers feel more positive about themselves, their colleagues, and the work environment, their respect for you and your management style will improve. The outcome will be a highly functioning and cohesive nursing team and your patients will benefit from your successful strategy implementation. **NM**

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