Generational Diversity

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Generational diversity has proven challenges for nurse leaders, and generational values may influence ideas about work and career planning. This article discusses generational gaps, influencing factors and support, and the various generational groups present in today's workplace as well as the consequences of need addressing these issues. The article ends with a discussion of possible solutions.
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Generational diversity, including workforce differences in attitudes, beliefs, work habits, and expectations, has proven challenging for nursing leaders.[1] The actual concept of the "generation gap" has been around for years. Generational values influence ideas about work and career planning. Generational gaps have always been a part of our world, bringing with them the potential for flash points or areas of disagreement.[1] The various generations have been categorized as veteran generation (also referred to as traditionalists or the mature generation), baby boomers, generation X, and millennial generation (sometimes described as the Net generation or generation Y). All 4 types are present in our workforce today.

Generational cohorts are groups of people who share birth years, history, and a collective personality as a result of their defining experiences. Generational profiles help us to understand and define values, work ethics, attitudes toward authority, and professional aspirations.

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◼ INFLUENCING FACTORS AND SUPPORT

This sharing of key life experiences has led to commonalties in values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of the world. For example, because baby boomers have a large peer group, they tend to be very competitive and may occasionally view the younger generation as "slackers." In contrast, millennials have been exposed to technology for their entire life; thus, they tend to be technologically wizards who view their predecessors as computer illiterates. The shared life experiences unique to each generational cohort also influence the teaching styles and learning preferences for each generation.[2]

The 4 distinct generations are divided into groups according to their birth year. These include veterans, baby boomers, generation X, and millennials. The generational characteristics of each cohort and their work-related characteristics are described next.

The Veterans (1925-1945)

The veterans grew up in difficult times with life experiences that included World War II and the Great Depression.[3] They are cautious and conservative who respect hierarchy, authority, and hard work ethic. Veterans value the lessons of history. When facing new challenges, they look to the past for insight into what has worked and what has not.[4] Seniority and organizational loyalty are important to the veterans. Sacrifice and hard work are rewarded. Most veterans have begun the transition to retirement, but there are still veterans present in all levels of nursing organizations. Veteran nurses are comfortable with communication systems that are inclusive and build trust. Face-to-face or written communication will be more effective than communication that involves the use of technology.[3]

The Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

The baby-boomer generation is the largest cohort in the nursing workforce and currently occupies many nursing leadership positions.[1] They have been called the most egocentric generation who grew up being individuals, independent, and creative. A strong work ethic is related to their self-worth and their evaluation of others. Significant numbers of baby-boomer nurses will be eligible to retire as early as 2010, and even larger nursing shortages are projected unless work is redesigned to retain this cohort in the workplace.[3]

Baby boomers prefer communication that is open, direct, and less formal. As a generation, they prefer group communication meetings, face-to-face, or telephone communication but will use e-mail if they are comfortable with computers. Baby-boomer nurses enjoy group participation and prefer being coached in peer-to-peer situations. They value lifelong learning as a way of improving their performance.[5] Baby boomers find public recognition for a job well done, along with perks, such as employee parking spaces, newsletter recognition, and professional award nominations to be motivating. Baby boomers tend to be "workaholics," service oriented and optimistic, and desire personal gratification who want to know the who, what, how, and why. Usually, work is a major part of their identity and is prioritized before family. Boomers live to work, not work to live! Boomers care about their work environment and value active participation in unit activities and team building. Boomers look to managers to publicly recognize and give credit to innovative ideas. Managers who personally acknowledge a boomer's outstanding job performance will satisfy their employee's expectations for supervisor support.[6]

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Generation X (1963-1980)

Generation X was the first generation where both parents were likely to work outside the home, came from "broken homes," and were raised as latchkey children. They believe in the work-life balance and self-reliance. Corporate culture loyalty and remaining in one place are not their main priority. Technology underwent major advances during their formative years and has become an important part of their lives. The generation X cohort is significantly smaller than the baby-boomer cohort. During the 1990s, the profession of nursing had significant problems attracting generation X members who saw nursing as not offering the career growth and entrepreneurial opportunities available in other jobs.[1] However, many generation Xers have now reentered nursing as a second career.

Generation X is the first generation to have television as part of their daily lives; a communication that involves technology appeals to them. They prefer the "bottom line" and dislike micromanagement. Generation Xers believe that recognition and career advancement should be based on merit. Unlike the boomers, Xers work to live, not live to work! Because of this shift in priorities, they have been described as pessimistic, selfish, and possessing no work ethic.[6] Generation Xers are the first work group to be introduced to the computer world and are comfortable with technology. Xers require honest and tactful communication reminding them that human interactions with patients have value and that even repetitive, menial tasks need to be done well.[5]

The Millennial Generation (1980-2000)

The millennials are the second largest generational cohort in the general population but the smallest cohort in the nursing workforce.[1] Violence, terrorism, abuse, and drugs are reality to them. Family represents safety and security. They seek a personal touch for support, understanding, communication, and feedback. Multiculturalism, technology, and the instant communication (cell phones, text messaging, and Internet) have always been part of their lives. Millennials have grown up with instant messaging and cellular phones. Preferring immediate feedback, e-mails and chat rooms are good mechanisms for providing communication updates for this generation.[3] Teamwork and team meetings are the preferred communication form compared with reading lengthy policies and procedures. Millennial nurses expect more coaching and mentoring than any other generation in the workforce. Optimistic and goal oriented, millennials want structure, guidance, and extensive orientation with internships and formalized clinical coaching and mentoring programs. Personal feedback and flexible scheduling are also highly valued by millennial nurses. Organizations can expect a high turnover of staff in this generation if their expectations and needs are not met. The millennial generation learns best by doing, collaborating, case studies, and simulations.

■ CONSEQUENCES OF NOT ADDRESSING ISSUES

Although nurses from 4 different generations work closely together, tension may occur as the different generational perspectives may result in misinterpretation and misunderstanding.[4] Multigenerational misunderstandings and biases

will increase without education of the historical perspective of the 4 generational cohorts currently in the workplace. This step is imperative, or unresolved conflicts could lead to staff turnover, nursing staff errors, unproductive nursing time, decreased staff satisfaction, and, most importantly, decreased patient satisfaction.

Differences in generational values, behaviors, and attitudes have the potential to create significant conflict in the workplace.[3] Two major sources of conflict in today's nursing environment are the perceived differences in work ethics among generations and the use of technology. Both generation X and millennial nurses respect the achievements of their baby-boomer leaders, but seek a work-life balance and are less accepting to overtime or schedule changes. Veteran and baby-boomer nursing leaders frustrate generation X and millennial staff if they are resistant or incompetent with technology advancements. Baby boomers also believe you must "pay your dues" before advancing in your career, and generation Xers usually do not visualize long-term employment with any one organization.[5]

According to Mangold,[2] there is very little research, nursing or otherwise, that has studied the recommended teaching methods for the millennial generation. The research conducted has shown that millennial nurses actually like being mentored by baby boomers. Mentoring, highlighting mutual team goals, generational values, and reminders that patient care is the top focal point will promote effective conflict resolution.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS OR INNOVATIONS (WHY LAY PUBLIC SHOULD BE INVOLVED)

Generation gaps occur in everyday life. The lay public as well as the nursing profession should recognize the characteristics of each generation. Awareness must focus on what each of the generations think about and how work is perceived. Providing opportunities to increase staff nurse involvement and collaboration among the generations can provide the framework to lead to positive change in the work environment. Establishing unit-specific advisory committees to share clinical work experiences, implement changes in the work setting, and encourage individual and group efforts at innovation are strategies that may increase peer cohesion, innovation, and autonomy in the workplace.[6]

Nurse leaders, educators, and staff play a pivotal role in creating a work environment that values generational differences and supports the needs of each individual. Accommodating generational preferences in areas such as coaching and motivating, communicating, and resolving conflicts will help to promote an environment of retention.[1] It is important that nurse leaders, educators, and staff recognize and act on generational differences in values and behaviors. Both the public and nursing staff rank characteristics of honesty, motivation, positivity, good communication skills, approachable demeanor, knowledge, and support as having high importance. Nursing staff and the public notice the nursing team's generational mix, age profile, and nursing behaviors. Both need to be cautious about generational stereotyping.

It is important that every employee is held to the same work expectations, organizational policies, and procedures. Nurse leaders should also consider individual employee needs and generational differences.[1] Understanding how to maximize generational diversity talents of each individual nursing staff member by addressing both their individual and generational needs is critical. The generational synergy model proposal focuses on contributions of each cohort, thereby reducing conflict in the workplace. Veteran nurses should be valued for the wisdom and organizational history who are comfortable with a traditional one-on-one coaching style and formal instructions on how to improve their performance, handwritten notes, plaques, and pictures. Baby-boomer nurses should be valued for their clinical, coaching, mentoring, and organizational experience. Generation X nurses should be valued for their innovative ideas, creative approaches, and design organization to nursing care delivery. Millennial nurses should be utilized in computer charting implementation and technology coaches.

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Nurses, as well as the public, have to view generational characteristics and beliefs not as right or wrong, but as different. Being aware of our generational prejudices and biases and consciously moving beyond them will assist greatly as we develop learning opportunities that cross the generations.[7]

CONCLUSION

Although one must always practice caution in overgeneralizing or categorizing groups of people, certain characteristics are shared by a common generational cohort (ie, each cohort has shared the same set of life experiences and undergone events in society at approximately the same point in development).[2] The concept of generational consorts is a generalization and should not be construed as "gospel" and the end wall. We, as nurses, must not overcategorize and label each other into any specific generational group. During the next 10 years, we will see large numbers of baby-boomer nursing leaders entering

retirement, and the generation X and millennial nurses will remain.

Although not always easy, staff growth and development are important in the generationally diverse nursing workforce. Following are summary recommendations for nursing leaders who are leading a multigenerational workforce and enabling that workforce to thrive and to meet tomorrow's healthcare challenges[1]:

- Seek to understand each generational cohort and accommodate generational differences in attitudes, values, and behaviors.
- Develop generationally sensitive styles to effectively coach and motivate all members of the healthcare team.
- Develop the ability to flex a communication style to accommodate generational differences.
- Promote the resolution of generational conflict so as to build effective work teams.
- Capitalize on generational differences, using these differences to enhance the work of the entire team.

The conscious effort of understanding generational traits allows us to coexist and comprehend the best that each generational perspective has to offer. The hardworking, loyal veteran; the idealist, passionate baby boomer; the technology-literate, adaptable generation Xers; and the young, optimistic millennial can coalesce into a powerful network of nurses with a remarkable ability to support each other and maximize their contribution to patient care.[4]

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