The 4-Generation Gap in Nursing
Laura A. Stokowski, RN, MS  |  Apr 11, 2013

Calling All Generations
A nurse manager, desperate for more staff, telephones 4 of her nurses to ask whether they will pull an extra shift.

- The first nurse says, "What time do you need me?"
- The second nurse says, "Call me back if you can't find anyone else."
- The third nurse says, "How much will you pay me?"
- The fourth nurse says, "Sorry, I have plans. Maybe next time."

According to Bonnie Clipper, author of *The Nurse Manager’s Guide to an Intergenerational Workforce*,[1] these different responses are typical of the 4 different generations of nurses currently working side by side in nursing.

In the same order as the responses above, these generations are:

- The "traditionalists" (also called the "veterans");
- The "baby boomers" ("boomers");
- The "X generation" ("Xers"); and
- The "Millennials" (also known as the "Y-generation" or "nexters").

Social scientists maintain that this is the first time in history that 4 generations of nurses have worked together. In previous years, earlier retirement from nursing and shorter lifespans kept the workforce to 3 generations. Recently, however, many nurses have continued to work long past the conventional retirement age of mid-60s, some well into their eighth decade of life.

However, because the youngest nurses of the traditionalist generation are now 71 years old, this generation is shrinking rapidly and will soon be replaced by a new, as-yet-unnamed generation of nurses born in this century.[2] Generational differences have become another type of diversity adding complexity to the nursing workforce.[2]

What Are Generations?
If you are averse to generalizations and stereotyping, you might resent being pigeonholed as belonging to a specific group defined largely by the year of your birth. However, if you have experienced the social phenomenon known as the "generation gap" in the workplace, you might appreciate a greater understanding of the intergenerational differences among your colleagues, from the youngest to the oldest.

A generation is defined less by age or time period than by having similar life experiences (people, places, major events, popular culture),[1] and the various characteristics and attributes common to its members.[5] "It is not a time constraint," says Clipper. "Time is one of the elements, but you also must consider shared experiences."

Generations typically span about 20 years, although shorter periods can encompass cultural differences.[4] People born around the same time tend to be affected by the same set of experiences, so age is one defining factor (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Characteristic of the 4 Generations[1]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millennials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clipper emphasizes that "It is important not to over-generalize about an individual based on his or her generation." Moreover, there is substantial overlap in generations, and some people even straddle generations. Those born near the dividing line between generations (called "cuspers") can understand, relate to, appreciate, and display the behaviors of both generations.[1]

When defining generations by their typical characteristics, it can be difficult to distinguish a generational effect from a cohort effect.[5] In other words, are the differences between the groups really reflective of generational values, or do they signify characteristics of people at different stages of their lives and careers?[5]

As a colleague, understanding generational differences is important to maintaining effective and satisfying relationships at work. Managers in particular must strive to appreciate these differences if they want to build high-performing teams, establish respect, and create harmony among their staff.[2] The pay-off is higher employee engagement and improved patient care.[1]

### The 4 Generations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditionalists</td>
<td>1925-1942</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Dedicated, hard-working, loyal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby boomers</td>
<td>1943-1960</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Optimistic, productive, workaholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Xers</td>
<td>1961-1981</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Cynical, independent, informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millennials</td>
<td>1983-2000</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Confident, impatient, social</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clipper emphasizes that "It is important not to over-generalize about an individual based on his or her generation." Moreover, there is substantial overlap in generations, and some people even straddle generations. Those born near the dividing line between generations (called "cuspers") can understand, relate to, appreciate, and display the behaviors of both generations.[1]

When defining generations by their typical characteristics, it can be difficult to distinguish a generational effect from a cohort effect.[5] In other words, are the differences between the groups really reflective of generational values, or do they signify characteristics of people at different stages of their lives and careers?[5]

As a colleague, understanding generational differences is important to maintaining effective and satisfying relationships at work. Managers in particular must strive to appreciate these differences if they want to build high-performing teams, establish respect, and create harmony among their staff.[2] The pay-off is higher employee engagement and improved patient care.[1]

### The 4 Generations

"It is natural for youth to be full of hope and full of confidence, and to think that the present is more important than the past, and it is natural for young nurses to think their elders who advise are croakers and wet blankets."[6]

This observation, expressed by a nurse in 1935, shows that generational differences in nursing are far from new. With 4 generations, however, we are now seeing much more than just the young vs the old. Clipper describes the experiences and characteristics of the 4 generations of nurses currently working together in healthcare settings.[1]

**Traditionalists (born 1925-1942).** The oldest cohort of workers still in the workforce grew up during the Great Depression and World War II, events that taught them about hard work, responsibility, and sacrifice. This group understands rules, is patriotic and loyal, and dislikes waste. They have a strong work ethic and look to their leaders for direction and guidance. They are likely to remain with the same employer for many years, are the least comfortable with technology, and are the most resistant to change.

**Boomers (born 1943-1960).** Currently the largest cohort in the workforce, boomers were shaped by the equal rights movement, the Vietnam War, presidential assassinations, and the "peace and love" movement. Boomers are the original "workaholics" and "overachievers," often defining themselves by the work they do and their success. They are independent, critical thinkers who seek financial security, promotions, and a sense of accomplishment and personal fulfillment from work. According to a survey conducted in 2008, boomers are the most productive of the generations.[7]

**Generation Xers (born 1961-1981).** The Xers are the smallest cohort in the workforce. Xers were influenced by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the AIDS epidemic, and MTV. They are the latchkey generation -- the children who went home to empty houses after school because both parents were working. Many are children of divorce. They are considered independent, assertive, and innovative.[7] This group is also well traveled and values individualism. Xers "work to live" rather than "live to work," and they tend to be less loyal to the organization and less tolerant of authority than previous generations. However, they are flexible and adaptable to change, and they embrace technology.

**Millennials (born 1983-2000).** The Millennials, a large and fast-growing cohort, grew up in the age of domestic and international terrorism, and the explosion in social networking and information technology. They tend to be protective and careful, yet also confident, expressive, optimistic, and -- according to a recent survey -- self-indulgent.[7] They are the least religious, best-educated, and most racially diverse of recent generations. The
millennials are strong networkers, sophisticated and street-smart. They like to work in teams but also crave instant gratification, feedback, and recognition. A disadvantage is their impatience: If they are unhappy, they will give up and move on to another job at another organization. With this group, maintains Clipper, "We need to engage them early, allow them flexibility, like allowing them to change units, so they don't get bored."

Intergenerational Communication

One of the most obvious and important differences in nurses from different generations is their communication styles and preferences.[8]

- Traditionalists prefer face-to-face discussions and staff meetings, and are less likely to use email or texting for communication.

- Boomers prefer face-to-face group meetings, and telephone calls for 2-way dialogue. Their style of communication is more open and less formal than the previous generation.

- Xers prefer email and texting, with direct and to-the-point communication; they dislike prolonged discussions.

- Millennials prefer fragmented, short, and frequent communication via text or Twitter. They like to share their opinions electronically as well as in person.

Nurses from different generations frequently diverge in how they give or accept feedback, whether it is praise or criticism. According to Clipper,[8] traditionalists like to hear feedback privately and tend to anticipate bad news. Boomers also prefer to receive criticism in private, one-on-one sessions, although praise can be given in front of peers.[8] Both traditionalists and boomers will work hard to improve any deficiencies brought to their attention. Xers tend to take criticism more poorly and may overinterpret what is said. Millennials, although accustomed to receiving a lot of advice, also have difficulty accepting constructive criticism, but they happily accept praise in front of their peers.

Getting Along: Mutual Understanding and Respect

Recent research has shined a spotlight on the critical importance of nurses' work environments and the outcomes of patient care.[9] Workplace environments are also a determinant of nurse job satisfaction across practice settings.[10,11]

Because the workplace environment is partly determined by the nature of collegial relationships among nurses, it is imperative to support and enhance these relationships. The danger of not doing so is that the coexistence of different generations in the workforce can be a source of workplace conflict, contribute to low job satisfaction, impede retention of staff, and have detrimental effects on patient care. The well-described problem of incivility in nursing can also be rooted in intergenerational differences.

According to Clipper, the goal of understanding generational differences is to create a workplace of "generational harmony."[2] The staff treat each other with respect and are accepting, rather than critical or dismissive of, generational differences. The first step is to appreciate the differences in each generation's frame of reference, values, communication styles, and other characteristics, to acquire "generation savvy."[12]

At the same time, however, it is helpful for nurses to remember that they have more in common than they have differences. All nurses, from old to young, chose nursing as a career and share a fundamental desire to deliver high-quality patient care and achieve professional satisfaction. All want to be respected by their peers and other professional colleagues.[3] All share a need for lifelong learning, a desire to work effectively as a team, and aspirations to improve the profession of nursing.

These shared goals are far more meaningful than whether one nurse has a tattoo and another must use reading glasses. The nurse who is burdened by having young children at home might assume that an older colleague has a less stressful life because her children are grown. But the older nurse could be taking care of aging parents, making the situations of these 2 nurses more similar than different in many respects. If nurses focus on their
similarities and common goals as much as their differences, mutual understanding and respect will follow.

A great way to enhance understanding among the generations is with intergenerational mentoring. Mentoring is, ideally, a 2-way street. A mentor shares, educates, and inspires, but also learns from the relationship. 

Although mentor and preceptor relationships might be smoother if both parties are from the same generation, pairing nurses from different generations can encourage learning about generational differences and similarities.

Managing a 4-Generation Staff

In *The Nurse Manager's Guide to an Intergenerational Workforce*, Bonnie Clipper reminds managers that in dealing with a multigenerational staff, they must realize that "one size does not fit all." The manager's role is to reduce generational conflict and promote a positive work environment by assessing the staff's generational mix, acknowledging generational differences, understanding differing expectations, and building on the strengths of different cohorts among his or her staff. "Spend time to learn what is important to motivate each individual, because there are nuances among the generations," says Clipper.

Managers must understand generational differences among their staff without resorting to stereotypes. "Try to think about the generations broadly, but don't over-generalize to each generation," cautions Clipper. "For example, if work-life balance is important to Xers, it might not be the most important thing to every Xer." She emphasizes the importance of managers "speaking the language" of their staff by appreciating the modes and frequency of communication that are most effective for each generation. Depending on the make-up of the staff, the manager must find the combination of communication methods (emails, texts, Web postings) that are most effective.

Managers have many responsibilities, from performance management and staff training to career advancement, recruitment, retention, and succession planning. The success or failure of a manager's effort depends on knowing how generational differences influence each of these areas. Generations differ in what entices them to pursue a nursing position, how they learn and respond to mentoring or coaching, and what keeps them satisfied and productive. At every stage, the manager must find what works for each generation. It can be an overwhelming task, but when armed with information, not an impossible one.

Retention of staff is an area that requires particular attention to generational differences. Members of each generation have different reasons for working, beliefs about work/life balance, aspirations for career advancement, and degrees of loyalty to the unit or organization. Successful strategies for meeting these generational needs flow directly from these differences (Table 2).

**Table 2. Meeting the Needs of Different Generations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>What They Want</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Traditionalists | Less demanding schedules (part-time; shorter shifts)  
Reduced stress or workload  
A job well done | Use a personal touch  
Provide traditional rewards  
Use as mentors  
Offer less physically demanding positions |
| Boomers | Recognition for experience and excellence  
Positive work environment  
Good pay and benefits  
Continuing education | Give public recognition  
Find opportunities to share expertise (precept, mentor)  
Promote "gradual retirement" |
Common ground. Although it is important for managers to respect intergenerational differences and match management approaches accordingly, some evidence suggests that nurses of all generations share fundamental desires about their professional lives. In a study of generation-specific incentives and disincentives, acute care nurses were asked to select the factors that would encourage or discourage their continued employment. The 2 most frequently selected incentives across all generations were a reasonable workload and manageable nurse-to-patient ratios.\[17\]

A Balancing Act

To some members of the nursing population, a few of the ideas put forth for treating generations differently might sound like pandering. For example, Clipper suggests that managers should fast-track impatient millennials through nursing education and into leadership positions to avoid losing them, acknowledging that older nurses might view this as giving into demanding younger nurses who haven't "put in their time."\[16\] She encourages nurses to abandon such old-school notions and replace career ladders with matrices that allow Xers and millennials to move upward, side-to-side, or take pauses for significant life events during their careers.\[13\]

Many nurses, at both the staff and managerial level, will react to the idea of respecting and accommodating these generational differences in nursing by suggesting that the younger generations should be the ones to change and adapt to the requirements of the profession. Clipper strenuously warns against this attitude, emphasizing that no one can change how nurses are "wired."\[15\] Even though people change and mature, the experiences that shaped them don't change, nor do individuals lose the characteristics that define them as belonging to a specific generation.

Clipper acknowledges the difficulty of the balancing act that is required to respect intergenerational differences while trying to accomplish the job of patient care in an environment of scarce resources. Leveraging individual and cohort strengths and finding common ground are the keys to generational harmony and productivity.

"It is possible, that in the very near future, we could have 5 generations of nurses working together," predicts Clipper. If this comes to fruition, generational diversity will become even more prominent and important in the nursing profession.

References


