Intergenerational Issues in Nursing: Learning From Each Generation

Virginia (Ginger) Lipscomb, MHA, BSN

The nursing workforce is comprised of multiple generations, resulting in differences in communication, expectations, and work priorities. Better understanding of each generation’s point of reference will improve collaboration and foster collegial relationships.

Each generation is shaped by global events, family culture, parental influences, technology, and communication. A challenge occurs when all generations exist within one facility. Without understanding each generation’s frame of reference and communication preferences, the workforce may not function as a cohesive team, and conflict may arise among members. To tackle the challenge, nurses should have a certain level of understanding about each generation.

Popular culture has labeled the generations born since the 1900s (see Table 1). Each generation has been attributed with certain characteristics that enhance and challenge workplace roles and communication. For example, why do Baby Boomers (born from 1946–1964) have a difficult time relating to younger teammates? One consideration is the parental influences of the Traditionalists (born from 1900–1945) on the Boomers. Traditionalists withstood the Depression and world wars. As a result, their mantra to their own children, the Boomers, was work hard, save, be loyal to a company, and do not waste. Historically, hospitals have been hierarchical in structure, with the most experienced nurses (Traditionalists) placed in positions of leadership. Boomers were taught traditional family values at home and by the media, as television aired programs that taught them the satisfaction of a job well done. They became workers, and many were defined by their jobs and the successes they achieved. Today, Boomers sometimes are defined as driven overachievers who often feel that they pull an unfair load in the workplace and receive no respect or appreciation from younger nurses. Many Boomers are managed by younger, less experienced nurses (Swearingen & Liberman, 2004).

Generation X (born from 1965–1980), the children of the Boomers, grew up in a different world than their parents. Both parents (Boomers) often worked outside the home, and Generation X became “ latchkey children” who learned to be independent problem-solvers and self-focused. Television programs of the generation depicted nontraditional households, including blended families and single-parent homes. Society taught Generation X to be suspicious of strangers, lock doors, and be cautious. Generation X observed closely as companies “down-sized” or “reorganized,” leaving parents without jobs. Now many Generation X’ers are determined to place importance on family before work and may lack clear career paths. They are intent on learning marketable skills and having portable careers. For many, their first loyalty is to themselves and the career paths they choose (Weston, 2006).

Parenting issues often vary by generation. The parents of generation Y (born 1991–1999) tend to be late Baby Boomers and early Generation X who established their successful careers before having children. They arranged their work and personal schedules to attend their children’s activities. If both Generation Y parents worked, established infrastructures were in place, such as day care, preschools, and organized classes and teams. Unlike Generation X, Generation Y was not sent home alone and required to function independently. They grew up in a world of constant stimulation, multicultural marriages, and acceptance of diversity (Weston, 2006). Parents interceded when Generation Y failed, resulting in Generation Y knowing mostly success. Electronic innovations allowed Generation Y to obtain global news and instant messages. They embraced “texting,” becoming accustomed to abbreviated communication anywhere, anytime. Television influenced this generation through reality programs. Today, Generation Y prefers to work and problem-solve in informal groups (Lower, 2007). They are loyal to a company that provides them with the best schedule, the most money, and the latest electronic gadgets. Generation Y’ers often are multitaskers and likely to have more than one job at the same time. They may be slow to accept additional responsibility. Balance is the Generation Y mantra.

Assessing Generational Values

To explore intergenerational issues in nursing, a survey exempt from institutional review board approval was conducted at a 600-bed, acute-care, teaching medical center located in the Gulf South region of the United States. The sample of 77 recently hired nurses was 84% female and 16% male. Fifteen were Boomers, 26
were from Generation X, and 36 from Generation Y. The level of education of the participants was: RN or bachelor of science in nursing, 39%; RN diploma, 5%; RN associate degree, 27%; licensed practical nurse (LPN), 18%; master’s degree in nursing (MSN), 5%; doctor of nursing science (DNS), 1%; and other, 4% (because of rounding, percentages do not total 100).

The Index of Work Satisfaction (Stamps, 1997) asked participants to rank five elements of the work environment in order of priority: pay, autonomy, task requirements, organizational policies, interaction, and professional status. Baby Boomers and Generation X’ers ranked autonomy (independence and self-sufficiency) as their top priority (see Table 2). Both of these generations take pride in mastering clinical skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communicating face to face. On the other hand, Generation Y’s first priority was pay. Very confident and possessing high self-esteem immediately out of school, Generation Y may expect their pay, benefits (paid time off), and schedules (flexible) to be equal to those of experienced nurses (Lower, 2007).

Boomers and Generation X ranked interaction (contact and relations) as second in importance. Most nurses from these generations have excellent formal communication skills. They often are friendly, self-motivated, like individual recognition, and seek out physicians during patient rounds. On the other hand, Generation Y ranked professionalism (proficient and skilled) second on the survey. This may surprise Boomers and Generation X, who often view Generation Y as lacking certain professional behaviors (Lower, 2007). Boomers and Generation X pride themselves on demonstrating a level of expert knowledge, being dedicated to lifelong learning, and mentoring younger nurses. Generation Y’ers value professionalism but frequently behave in ways that may appear unprofessional to others. Traditionalists, Boomers, and Generation X believe that Generation Y is unprofessional with regard to appearance (e.g., casual dress, tattoos, body piercings); interactions with patients, families, and other caregivers (unskilled in face-to-face communication); and reluctance to learn from more experienced nurses (Lower, 2007). Generation Y respects older generations but is not awed by them (Lower, 2007). Generation Y behavior is perceived as rude by other generations; but to Generation Y’ers, they are behaving as they always have: wanting to be the center of attention, not afraid to express their opinions, close to their electronic devices, and comfortable in groups (Lower, 2007). Often, Generation Y becomes frustrated when they are viewed as less knowledgeable and their ideas are not given the same weight as those offered by their more experienced peers. Generation Y nurses are confident and often fail to understand that a nurse with more years of experience has skills that may take Generation Y years to develop.

Boomers ranked pay as their third priority. They often work extra shifts and stay late to exhibit their devotion and commitment. Generation X chose skills as their third priority. Not to be laid off or downsized as their parents were, Generation X works hard to master a variety of skills that will ensure employment in a difficult job market (Calhoun, 2005). Generation Y ranked autonomy as third in value. They are confident that their school knowledge will serve them well. Boomers and Generation X are concerned about Generation Y’s lack of critical thinking and their hesitancy to ask questions or for help. They view patient safety as a problem if Generation Y is too confident early in practice.

### Generational Adaptation to Team Cohesiveness

What can each generation offer the nursing team, colleagues, patients, and families so that everyone can be successful? First, each generation must learn to understand the other generations’ frames of reference, values, communication habits, and how they view themselves. “Generational savvy” allows nurses to successfully approach their team members, patients, families, physicians, and other caregivers with respect and understanding. Acknowledging generational differences encourages nurses to phrase questions, teach, and communicate in a way that other generations do not consider offensive. For example, if a younger nurse is talking on a cell phone in patient-care areas, an older nurse may say, “I realize that you are in the habit of checking the phone frequently for contact with family and friends. Older patients on

<table>
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<tr>
<th>GENERATION</th>
<th>BIRTH YEARS</th>
<th>COMMON CHARACTERISTICS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Traditionalists</td>
<td>1900–1945</td>
<td>Traditionalists are hard workers, like control, view nursing as a “calling,” have a personal commitment to organization, and view other generations as unprofessional and lacking respect for their wisdom and special ergonomic needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>1946–1964</td>
<td>Baby Boomers are independent, critical thinkers who are self-responsible and embrace professionalism. They view nursing as a career and perceive that they are carrying the largest workload and a lack of professionalism in younger nurses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>1965–1980</td>
<td>Generation X members were latchkey kids, are independent, inherited divorce, and came from blended families in which parents sacrificed time with kids to grow careers but experienced layoffs and downsizing, so they do not believe in job security. They are technologically competent. They avoid long-term commitment, “paying dues,” and hierarchical environments. They are task and career driven and have little allegiance to company. They view nursing as a wide variety of opportunities and are frustrated by a perceived lack of evolution in the work environment, processes, and professional practices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generation Y</td>
<td>1981–1999</td>
<td>Work-life balance is very important to Generation Y. They are entrenched in technology and open to teams, collective action, and idea sharing. Older parents included them in the family circle as contributing partners. They kept busy, and their opinions were valued. They expect quick and rewarding results, are not interested in processes, and expect a job to be fun and innovative. Many perceive nursing as a job rather than a profession or career. They experience negative attitudes and lack of respect for team contributions from older workers.</td>
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Table 2. Index of Work Satisfaction, Ranked Order, by Generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>BOOMERS (N = 15)</th>
<th>GENERATION X (N = 26)</th>
<th>GENERATION Y (N = 36)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Professional status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pay</td>
<td>Task requirements</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Professional status</td>
<td>Pay</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Task requirements</td>
<td>Professional status</td>
<td>Task requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Organizational policies</td>
<td>Organizational policies</td>
<td>Organizational policies</td>
</tr>
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the unit might view checking the phone as disrespectful and showing a lack of interest in their care. This is probably not your intent but may be their perception. I encourage you to check your phone only when in private areas where there are no patients or families.”

Boomers must educate themselves to understand the world of Generation Y. For example, the fact that many Boomers lack competency with electronics is frustrating to Generation X and Generation Y (Prensky, 2001). Older nurses who grew up without computers should acknowledge their lack of competency, partner with younger nurses, and learn how to use the latest technology during patient care. With the trends in health care, Boomers must become proficient with electronic charting and the latest care equipment. Conversely, Boomers’ clinical expertise is greatly needed in acute-care areas to educate and mentor younger, less experienced nurses.

Equally important, more experienced nurses should embrace the challenge of mentoring younger nurses. Mentors from the Boomers and Generation X should learn to accept that many Generation Y’ers may need further education to improve face-to-face communication skills. For younger nurses, the world of the hospital, patients and families, and communication with physicians and other healthcare disciplines is new. Additional education regarding nursing care rooted in caring behaviors (Watson, 1999) and relationship-based care would encourage Generation Y to exhibit more caring and respectful behaviors toward others during face-to-face communication and team dynamics.

Managers and educators must take generational differences and expertise into consideration when assigning preceptors to partner with new staff. The first thought should be to partner a more experienced nurse with a new staff nurse. However, if an experienced nurse is a Boomer who does not embrace and understand generational differences, such a partnership will be unsuccessful. Communication between the partners will fail, and the learning experience will suffer.

Conclusion

Good communication and team member relationships have a direct impact on patient outcomes. Hospital nurses are challenged simultaneously with caring for patients with complex cases while meeting satisfaction expectations. Excellent communication skills and demonstration of professional demeanor are high on the public’s list of expectations. When a team fails to clearly and concisely communicate, patient outcomes suffer. Hospitals must offer Generation Y additional education about face-to-face communication. Preceptors must expect competency in affective and behavioral aspects of patient care. While working with Generation Y, the three previous generations should respectfully challenge them, ask their opinions, and provide immediate feedback. Baby Boomers expect respect, face-to-face communication, and the full attention of those to whom they are speaking. Generation X wants older nurses to get to the point of the conversation, use e-mail, avoid micromanaging, and move past the notion of “paying dues.” Traditionalists value the chain of command, respect for experience, and appreciation for dedication (“Workplace generation gap,” n.d.).

Generational differences and misunderstandings often are a direct result of a team’s failure to understand the framework of values, beliefs, and work ethics of each generation (Swearingen & Liberman, 2004). Judgmental and preconceived ideas about team members and their behaviors cast a shadow over nurses of different generations. To generate positive patient outcomes and growth within a team, patient care areas must be an environment where differences in frames of reference are embraced, team members are appreciated for their talents, no one is judged by other team members, and all are respected for their contributions. Success in team dynamics occurs when all nurses acknowledge their responsibility for educating themselves about generational differences and promote changes in their team’s behaviors and perceptions.

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Author Contact: Virginia (Ginger) Lipscomb, MHA, BSN, can be reached at virginia.lipscomb@ololrmc.com, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org.

References