

Managing the Multigenerational Nursing Team

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Abstract:

Today's workforce is more diverse in age than ever before. This study examined the generational profiles of two groups (the Silent Generation, and Baby Boomers vs. Generation X and Generation Y) in terms of the following variables: characteristics, communication styles, and significance of tasks. The purpose was to assist nurse managers to maximize departmental effectiveness by capitalizing on the unique characteristics of the multigenerational nursing team. A descriptive design was used to examine nursing staff perceptions of their generational profiles, communication styles, and significance of tasks. The convenience sample included registered nurses, nurse technicians and nursing secretaries from two departments, a medical-surgical and a critical care department (N = 62). The study provided participants with the opportunity to give their interpretations of their generational types. Similarities and differences of generational profiles were found between the two groups. There were no significant differences in communication style and significance of tasks between the two groups ($P > .05$). However, there were differences in expectations regarding commitment to the manager versus the organization and the type and timing of rewards for performance. All four generational groups had vastly different employment demands and different needs for orientation, training, advancement, benefits, perks, and retirement options.

Article:

FOUR GENERATIONS ARE working in today's health care organizations: the Silent Generation, born between 1922 and 1942; the Baby Boomers, born from 1943 to 1960; Generation X, born from 1961 to 1980; and Generation Y, born after 1981.¹ Today's nursing workforce consists of 24% of the Silent Generation, 47% of Baby Boomers, 21% of Generation X and 8% of Generation Y.² Their different expectations and experiences have affected how each age group approaches and reacts to situations.³

While differences between generations can have positive effects, it is the negative experiences that waste people's time, energy, and emotional resources. Workforce issues between nursing staff of different generations can often be unpleasant or unproductive, which may lead to work conflicts and interpersonal tension.⁴⁻⁶ Negative experiences result in decreased productivity and employee satisfaction.³

Although employees act and react differently to various situations and stimuli, generally those with similar backgrounds (gender, race, values, etc.) are inclined to share similar viewpoints, outlooks, communication styles, and expectations. They also tend to understand each other and experience a greater comfort level with

each other. The same is true of employees from similar generations. Research has clearly shown that generational membership is a key variable in the determination of behavior.³

The ideals, values, traits, goals, and characteristics held by generations are different from one another, however, differences play a significant role in how employees of one group relate to the others. Differences between generations include communication styles, expectations, work styles, values and norms, attitudes about work and life, comfort with technology, views regarding loyalty and authority, and acceptance of change.⁴⁻⁷ Each generation has its unique characteristics. The Silent Generation is loyal to those in authority and to the organization. Baby Boomers are characterized as workaholics and are more concerned about their work performance, promotions, and titles.⁴ Generation X seeks challenges, likes to work independently, is team-focused, demands technology, and resists authority. They prefer managers to be mentors and coaches and they like decisions that are made collaboratively between managers and staff.^{4,5} These generational differences frequently lead to interpersonal tensions and intergenerational conflicts. As a result, some health care organizations have initiated workforce demographic studies and studies by job category, age, skill, and communication. Providers are expanding their internal educational programs and aggressively working with their employees to fully understand each generation's perspectives, work habits, and communication styles. Acknowledging the differences among generations has become an increasingly important part of maximizing organizational effectiveness.⁴

Difficulties in understanding differences in work habits and communication styles of those in another age group are now common in the workplace. Misunderstandings and strife within an organization have a negative impact on employee's productivity. The organization suffers as valuable time, energy, and emotions are wasted dealing with interpersonal or team crises rather than managing the job.

An understanding of the characteristics of each of the members across the generational workforce can assist the nurse manager to uncover what motivates staff members. Measures can be taken by nurse managers to minimize negative outcomes that may result from generational differences. This study therefore explored the generational profiles of two groups (the Silent and the Baby Boomer Generations vs. Generation X and Generation Y) regarding communication styles and significance of tasks, to assist nurse managers to maximize departmental effectiveness, building on the unique characteristics and communication styles of the multigenerational nursing team.

The conceptual framework for this study was derived from Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory,⁸ in which it suggests that cyclical trends in people's attitudes toward religion, government, education, drugs, alcohol, conformity, materialism, wealth, disparity, and self-esteem reflect parents' overcompensation for the flaws they remember from their childhood. The generational theory describes the relationships among generations and predicts intergenerational conflicts.

METHODS

Research design

A descriptive design was used to identify the generational profiles of 2 nursing departments to assist the nurse managers to maximize departmental effectiveness through an understanding of the characteristics and communication styles of the multigenerational nursing team.

Setting and sample

The sample (N = 62) was drawn from a Medical-Surgical Department and a Critical Care Department at one of the four hospitals in a large health care system in a Southeastern city. The convenience sample included 42 registered nurses, 16 nurse technicians, and 4 nursing secretaries. All were able to speak and read English. The study was approved both by the University Institutional Review Boards committee and the Research Committee of the Health Care System. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects.

Instruments

A Generational Employee Survey Tool was developed by one of the authors [Hodgin KAH. Generational Employee Survey. Unpublished, 2001] to examine the generational profiles of staff members from each department and the communication styles of the participants. Questions related to job design were adopted from a tool developed by Don Clark with the author's permission [Clark D. Job Design. Instructional System Design Manual. Unpublished, 1995]. The instrument consisted of 22 questions asking about the characteristics of the respondent's generation, the significance of tasks and their communication styles. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the adopted Generation Employee Survey was 0.79.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample. $[\chi]^2$ and Independent t test were used to examine the differences between 2 generational groups (the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers vs. Generation X and Generation Y) on communication styles and significance of tasks. Analysis of the data was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 10.1).

RESULTS

The great majority of respondents were female (90.3%). Forty-five percent had 0 to 10 years of work experience, 42% had either 11 to 20 years or 21 to 26 years of experience, and 13% had 27 or greater years of experience. In the Critical Care Department, 52% of eligible subjects responded while the Medical-Surgical

Department had a participation of 48%. Sixty-seven percent of the subjects were registered nurses, 25.8% were nurse technicians, and 6.5% were nursing secretaries. Respondents identified themselves as belonging to the Silent Generation (6.5%), Baby Boomers (41.9%), Generation X (50%), and Generation Y (1.6%). Only 4 respondents said that they were in the Silent Generation and 1 in Generation Y. Therefore, for analyses, the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers were combined into one group and Generations X and Y into a second group.

Table 1 presents the profiles of the two groups (the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers vs. Generation X and Generation Y). The differences are noted between the two groups. The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers expected their retirement to be more of a daily struggle (20%) than Generations X and Y (6.3%). The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers rated computers as more complicated (26.7% vs. 15.6%) than Generations X and Y. The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers identified their motto as love (43.3% vs. 34.4%) and truth (36.7% vs. 15.6%), whereas Generations X and Y selected the motto persuasion (12.5% vs. 3.3%) and power (37.5% vs. 16.7%). Generations X and Y considered the positive attributes of their generations as more principled and idealistic (40.6% vs. 33.3%), whereas the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers considered their generations as more caring, savvy, diverse and caring (30% vs. 25%). The Silent Generation and the Baby Boomers rated the negative aspects of their generations as indecisive, guilt-ridden (30% vs. 12.5%) but bold, as well as unreflective (23.3% vs. 18.8), while Generations X and Y rated their generations as ruthless, selfish (40.6% vs. 36.7%), and pessimistic, as well as amoral (28.1% vs. 10%).

	Group 1 (Silent Generation, Baby Boomer)	Group 2 (Generations X and Y)
Expect my retirement to be:		
Golden years	66.7%	68.8%
Write a novel	13.3%	21.9%
Agonizing slide	0%	3.1%
Daily struggle	20%	6.3%
Learned to drive behind the wheel of:		
53 Packard	20%*	6.3%*
61 VW	40%*	3.1%*
78 Pinto	40%*	62.5%*
Grand Prix 28	0%*	28.1%*
Computers are:		
Frightening	13.3%	18.8%
Complicated	26.7%	15.6%
Part of life	56.7%	59.4%
Link to the outside world	3.3%	6.3%
Job opportunities when I was younger:		
Hard work	23.3%	12.5%
Pick many jobs	16.7%	25.0%
Pick low-paying temp services	13.3%	15.6%
Multiple job experiences	46.7%	46.9%
My generation motto:		
Love	43.3%	34.4%
Truth	36.7%	15.6%
Persuasion	3.3%	12.5%
Power	16.7%	37.5%
Positive attributes of my generation:		
Experts, caring	30.0%	28.1%
Principled, idealistic	33.3%	40.6%
Savvy, diverse	30.0%	25.0%
Rational, selfless	6.7%	6.3%
Negative attributes of my generation:		
Indecisive, guilt-ridden	30.0%	12.5%
Ruthless, selfish	36.7%	40.6%
Pessimistic, amoral	10.0%	28.1%
Bold, unreflective	23.3%	18.8%
Characteristics of my generation:		
Genteel, thoughtful	43.3%*	15.6%*
Prophetic, challenging	6.7%*	31.3%*
Roguish, individualistic	16.7%	15.6%
Optimistic, confident	33.3%	37.5%
What did you want to be when you grew up:		
Part of nuclear family	30.0%	15.6%
Make lots of money	43.3%	59.4%
Live with your parents	3.3%	0%
Have large families	23.3%	25.0%
Attitude toward authority:		
Do what you are told	23.3%	15.6%
Rebellion	23.3%	15.6%
Not interested	3.3%	15.6%
Obedient and wanting to interact	50.0%	53.1%
<i>Difference between generation on generation profile</i>		
Kind of affirmations that you prefer:		
Personal touches	36.7%	25.0%
Banners, public announcements	0%	12.5%
Equal recognition	30%	18.8%
Regular reinforcement	33.3%	43.8%

(continues)

	Group 1 (Silent Generation, Baby Boomer)	Group 2 (Generations X and Y)
Feedback concerning work performance:		
Honest and respectful	66.7%	40.6%
360-degree	0%	9.4%
Constructive	16.7%	15.6%
Immediate	16.7%	34.4%
Attitude toward job completion:		
Detailed oriented	40.0%	34.4%
Eager to find creative ways	16.7%	28.1%
Unfair to work a 70-hour work week	16.7%	6.3%
Freedom and flexibility	26.7%	31.3%
Commitment to employment longevity:		
Good	50.0%	21.9%
Moderate	20.0%	25.0%
Poor	6.7%	6.3%
Loyal to managers	23.3%	46.9%

*P < .05.

Table 1. The generational profiles of the two groups

The characteristics of each generation were viewed by the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers as less "optimistic and confident" (33.3% vs. 37.5%) compared with Generations X and Y. The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers said that when they grew up they wanted to be "part of a nuclear family" (30% vs. 15.6%), whereas the majority of Generations X and Y wanted to "make lots of money" (59.4% vs. 43.3%). Attitudes toward authority revealed that both groups valued obedience. The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers' attitudes toward authority were "do what you are told" (23.3% vs. 15.6%) or "rebellion" (23.3% vs. 15.6%), whereas Generations X and Y were "not interested" in authority at all (15.6% vs. 3.3%).

The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers preferred personal touches (36.7% vs. 25.0%), and wanted equal recognition (30.0% vs. 18.8%), whereas Generations X and Y preferred banners and public affirmations (12.5% vs. 0%). They also needed regular reinforcement (43.8% vs. 33.3%) and immediate feedback (34.4% vs. 16.6%). The majority of the Silent Generation would like to have feedback concerning work performance to be honest and respectful (66.7% vs. 40.6%). The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers group valued job completion that was "detail-oriented" (40% vs. 34.4%) and Generations X and Y valued "freedom and flexibility" (31.3% vs. 26.7%). Half of the subjects in the Silent Generation and Baby Boomer group said that they were good in terms of their commitment to employment longevity (50%) compared with 21.9% in the Generation X and Y group, who rated themselves as loyal to their work team but not necessarily committed to employment longevity. 46.9% of Generations X and Y said that they are loyal to their managers compared with 23% in the Silent Generation and Baby Boomer group.

The findings about communication styles and significance of tasks showed no significant differences between the two groups ($P > .05$). Communication styles included respect for coworkers and focused on problem solving strategies. Fifty-four percent of the subjects felt that they always listened to other employees using direct eye contact and appropriate body language, and 43.5% said that they sometimes listened to employees using these communication styles. Fifty-seven percent of the subjects said that they always communicated information in an honest and straightforward manner, and 42% responded that they sometimes communicated

in an honest and straightforward manner.

Fifty-five percent of the subjects said that they always recognized and respected co-workers and their contributions and showed trust in them. Forty-two percent said that they sometimes showed recognition and respect. Thirty-six percent always focused on problem solving to achieve the goals of the organization and profession, and 65% sometimes focused on problem solving. Sixty-four percent of the respondents stated that they always followed through on commitments, while 33.9% sometimes followed through on commitments.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated that the generational profiles of two groups had different perceptions regarding their expectations about retirement and using computer technology. They viewed their generations differently when selecting a motto. Other variables that were identified as differences between the two groups included positive and negative attributes of their generations, characteristics of their generations, attitudes toward authority, the type and timing of feedback concerning work performance, commitment to employment, related to longevity or loyalty to a manager. The major positive attributes identified by the Silent Generation and Baby Boomer group were principled, idealistic, experts, caring, savvy, and diverse. Almost half of the subjects in the Silent Generation and Baby Boomer group viewed computers as frightening and complicated. In Generations X and Y, participants perceived themselves as idealistic, which was considered a positive attribute for this generation. These two generations wanted freedom and flexibility plus immediate feedback in terms of job completion and performance. The findings of the study are consistent with the generational profiles revealed in other studies about the Silent Generation and the Baby Boomers and Generations X and Y.^{4,5,9,10} The congruence of these findings across studies has important implications for clinical managers.

Wieck et al ⁶ substantiated the findings of this study. They also found that nurses from different generations valued different traits in their leaders. Older workers wanted managers who were professional, had integrity, and empowered their followers. Younger generations wanted their leaders to be knowledgeable, good communicators, and also affirmative about their performance in order for them to improve their self-confidence. The younger group desired managers with good people skills who are able to motivate others. They wanted their leaders to be supportive, approachable, and receptive. They preferred managers who are team players. According to Wieck et al,⁶ unlike the older generations, younger workers want short-term employment or entrepreneurial opportunities and they want to maintain a balance between their home and their professional lives. Both generational groups valued honesty and a positive outlook in their leaders. Neither group valued leaders who are visionary or risk takers. Understanding the distinctive characteristics of each generation and each generation's expectations of their leaders will help nurse managers create an environment that supports multigenerational diversity and cultural differences in the workplace to build a well functioning team of staff members to deliver quality care to patients.

From the findings of this study, several tips for managing a multigenerational team are suggested in [Table 2](#).

Generations	Tips
The Silent and the Baby Boomers	They value their loyalty and commitment to the organization They want respect and honest feedback regarding their work performance They need a variety of methods regarding training and education to use technology, such as the computer, to meet their learning needs
Generations X and Y	They value their talents, creativity, expertise, and ability to learn new technology and their contributions to the workforce. They want flexibility and independence in terms of shifts and places of work They prefer prompt feedback and need positive reinforcement regarding their work performance They like public recognition, whenever possible They like to work independently and solve problems individually They want encouragement to use their critical thinking skills They like to work in teams that are cohesive and collaborative

Table 2. Tips for managing multigenerational team

In this study, there were no statistically significant differences between the generational groups in the area of communication styles and significance of tasks. Similarly, other studies of the different generations of nursing staff at work revealed substantial similarities among the generations in terms of work ethics, work styles, communication, and loyalty.^{9,11} However, the differences in attitudes about computers and other technologies, the timing and methods of providing feedback regarding job performance and their commitment to their managers rather than to the organization, should be factors that the nurse manager must consider when supervising staff from multiple generations.

SUMMARY

Nurse managers today face new challenges to successfully manage multigenerational groups. It requires nurse managers to understand each generation's different values and expectations in terms of characteristics, work ethics, attitudes toward their organizations and managers, and their attitudes toward authority. In the Kopperschmidt study ⁴ and our current study, the conclusions are that nurse managers should clearly communicate their expectations and those of the organization, they should acknowledge generational differences and honor each generation's work values. It is important for nurse managers to foster collegial relationships among staff members, and role model effective communication, to build a cohesive team that reflects the shared values of all the team members. Nurse managers should provide specific, measurable, accurate, relevant, and timely feedback to all team members, managing the team from an intergenerational perspective, being sensitive to each generation's expectations and needs.⁴

Each generational group needs different orientations, training, opportunities for advancement, benefits, and perks. A major task for nurse managers is to bring the nursing team together in a way that provides fair and equitable opportunities. To achieve this, nurse managers should accommodate employee differences by learning about and addressing their specific needs, such as the need for flexible scheduling. Nurse managers must address generational differences to foster an environment where nursing staff can openly discuss what people are looking for in a job, what makes work rewarding and what organizational factors attract and retain

multigenerational employees.

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