Challenges of a Multigenerational Nursing Workforce: Bridging the Generational Gaps

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Abstract

Currently, four generational cohorts are present in the nursing workforce. Integrating different age groups into the healthcare field poses many challenges to nurse managers; namely, staffing, professional communication, and productivity issues resultant of the diverse characteristics and core values of these generational cohorts. Needless to say, generational diversity influences nurses and nurse managers in more ways than staffing. It is imperative for nurse leaders to develop a profound understanding of the core values and needs of the individuals of these generations so that the meaning behind the professional behaviors exhibited by individuals can be appreciated. There are many valuable assets of each cohort. Knowledge of these positive attributes can effectively contribute bridging the gaps between generations and also increase the chances for nurses’ commitment to the job. Tending to the diverse needs of the individuals of all age groups will ultimately result in productive nurses that value a cohesive structure of communication.

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Currently, there are four very diverse generational cohorts represented in the nursing workforce (Sherman, 2006). Assimilating different age groups into the healthcare field facilitates integration of various perspectives and clinical experiences and can produce many benefits; namely, enhancing patient care. However, there are many challenges that nurses must face as a result of the dissimilar characteristics and core values of these generational cohorts. Now, more than ever before, it is imperative for nurse leaders to develop a profound understanding of the core values and needs of the individuals of these generations so that the meaning behind the professional behaviors exhibited by individual staff members in the workplace can be appreciated. Cognizance of this association cultivates a more viable working environment and improves the satisfaction of staff members. Inherently, another benefit of this understanding is an increase in the retention rate of nurses (Hahn, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to explore the influences of generational diversity within the nursing workforce and the subsequent impact on the current state of healthcare.

The Issue

The state of healthcare is continuously evolving. Simultaneously, the nurses entering this field are also evolving. According to Sherman (2006), is has been a past trend for nurses to retire or significantly cut back on their hours around the age of 50 to 55. However, due to governmental changes, altered retirement plans, increased life-expectancy and more, this pattern of employment has begun to change as a older nurses are now reentering the workforce (Sherman, 2006). As a nurse leader, it is important to respond appropriately to the challenges of the merging generations. It is expected that there will be multiple generations in this field for many years to come (Sherman, 2006). Although older nurses are reentering the nursing field,
there is still an emergent nursing shortage as many of the Veterans and Baby Boomers are retiring at a hasty speed. With the whirlwind of complications resulting from the current nursing shortage it is vital that nurses employ their greatest efforts to try and gain new nurses as well as retain current nurses. Nurse managers cannot lead their staff members with the notion that the nurses from each generation operate from a universal perspective. Managing with this approach will not address the expectations and priorities of each of the four generations present in the workplace. Instead, nurse leaders should facilitate a positive work setting by acknowledging the expected differences of the different generation groups as well as the differences of each individual (Hahn, 2011). Nurse leaders should establish management strategies by observing the strengths and weaknesses of each nurse to promote overall satisfaction and staff retention. Highlighting the positive attributes from each generational group will promote productivity and quality (Hahn, 2011).

**The Generations**

As previously denoted, there are currently four generations of nurses providing patient care. Sherman (2006) defines a generational cohort as being a “group that shares birth years, age location and important life events at critical developmental stages” (p. 2). The four generational cohorts are the Veterans, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. Never before has the work environment included four generations of nurses concurrently (Hahn, 2011, p. 119). One reason owing to the diversity of these generational cohorts is because on one end of the spectrum there are senior nurses who are approaching retirement; oppositely, on the other end of the spectrum are young nurse graduates from current innovative programs who are skilled in the technological advances being implemented into healthcare delivery systems today (Hahn, 2011). The challenge of recruiting and retaining nurses from many generational cohorts can be tackled
by having a rich understanding of the common characteristics possessed by the individuals of these cohorts and also ascertaining methods to emphasize each individual’s strengths. Without giving consideration to the differing values and attitudes of the nurses of different age groups, it is likely that a harmonious work environment will not be achieved.

**Veterans**

The Veteran generation is comprised of the older nurse population born between the years of 1925 to 1945 (Hendricks & Cope, 2012, p. 219). Although fewer in number than any other generation working in the healthcare field, some nurses of this population still practice nursing. However, the majority of nurses from the Veteran generation have already gained retirement status (Hahn, 2011, p. 119). These are the nurses who have experienced great wars and economic hardships. As a result, these individuals are known for valuing consistency and hard work. This generation is known for aspiring to be a part of the greater good. Nurses of this cohort are generally very reliable but not receptive to change. There is an undeniable expectation of respect for age, which can create conflicts in situations where the nurse manager is younger and less experienced than a senior nurse (Hendricks & Cope, 2012, p. 219).

**Baby Boomers**

Similar to the Veterans, the Baby Boomer generation is known for loyalty and hard work. The Baby Boomer population includes those born between the years of 1946 to 1964. According to theories, these individuals possess a very strong work ethic and associate work with self-worth (Hahn, 2011, p. 120). Baby Boomers grew up in times of prosperity following WWII and many have a subsequent sense of entitlement. Unfortunately, this generation is not willing to adapt to technology, posing major concerns with regards to modern day technology in hospitals (Carver & Candela, 2008). Nurses of this group are typically most receptive to gratification in the form

**Generation X**

In contrast, members of Generation X (1965-1976) are recognized for being individualistic and resourceful. This group is noted to be self-sufficient and independent. Generation Xers are much more adaptable to change and appreciate individual, positive feedback (Hahn, 2011). This group values quality of life and has no problem ensuring they attain it on their own. This attribute translates to an obvious desire to have a balance between work and home life (Carver & Candela, 2008). Since these individuals are independent, they are notorious for preferring to work alone and not as a team (Hahn, 2011). These members lived through the emergence of technology such as the television and witnessed the first launching of a space shuttle. Thus, one outstanding quality possessed by many members of Generation X is the undeniable willingness to adapt to the evolution of technology (Carver & Candela, 2008).

**Generation Y**

Perhaps the most divergent group of all is the Generation Y cohort (1977-1997). These are currently the youngest nurses in practice. Many theorists speculate that these group members need to be ‘babied’ because these individuals prefer working in groups and desire recurrent, constructive feedback (Carver & Candela, 2008). This is a generation that has always been surrounded by technology. It is part of their everyday life. These individuals are the most accepting group of multiculturalism (Hahn, 2011). Similar to the Xers, this generation requires a separation between work and personal life. However, Generation Y individuals differ from Generation X individuals in that they aspire to be part of the greater good, much like the Veteran generation (Hahn, 2011).
Implications

It is evident that these generational gaps place intense strains on staffing, professional communication, and productivity. Luckily, there are many valuable assets of each cohort. Knowledge of these positive attributes can effectively contribute to ensuring commitment to the job (Stanley, 2010). The first and most important strategy in effectively managing an appropriate nursing staff is to identify what generational cohort each individual belongs to. Then, a nurse leader can determine the needs of the staff members to facilitate the best all around workplace, stimulating productivity and efficiency (Carver & Candela, 2008). It is important to realize that not every individual should be stereotyped; it cannot be anticipated that an individual will represent the expected characteristics of the generational cohort in which they belong. Thus, a nurse leader must have an adequate understanding of the personal values and attitudes of each individual, utilizing these generational group theories as a benchmark (Sherman, 2006).

Conclusion

It is absolutely essential for nurse managers to gain a keen understanding of the core values and needs of the individuals of these generations. Only then can nurse leaders appreciate the meaning behind professional behaviors exhibited by individual staff members in the workplace. Awareness of this association can improve the satisfaction of the nursing staff, cultivating a more viable working environment. It is very important for nurse managers to place emphasis on providing a working environment that is appealing to the current nurses in order to promote job retention, yet also lucrative for younger nurses to enter. Tending to the diverse needs of the individuals of all age groups will ultimately result in productive nurses that value a cohesive structure of communication; thus, contributing to the overarching goals of the organization and improving overall happiness of the nurses (Carver and Candela, 2008)
References


