2.8: Generalizational Diversity

Generational diversity can be found in every health care organization. Each generation has its own set of values, views on authority, attitudes toward work, communication styles, and expectations of their leader and of their workplace (Stanley, 2010). Generational cohorts refer to groups of people who share birth years, history, and a collective personality as a result of their defining experiences (Kramer, 2010). Nurse leaders are challenged to embrace and respect a multigenerational staff while simultaneously developing and supporting a highly functioning and cohesive nursing team (Hahn, 2011). Familiarity with the characteristics and core values of each cohort can lead to better understandings of each other’s generational personality and enable individuals to work better as a team, increase productivity, and influence retention. Generational markers are events that affect members of a generation (Huber, 2014). There is a tendency among generational cohorts to view each other as having character flaws rather than to appreciate their cultural and generational differences (see Table 2.7.1 Generational Cohorts).

Generational Diversity Workforce

Four distinct generational cohorts make up the present nursing workforce: Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. Generation Z is the most recent generational cohort, yet less is known about them in the context of the workplace. The profiles of each generational cohort, set out below, allow us to understand their values, work ethics, attitudes toward authority, and professional aspirations (Kramer, 2010). Recognizing and respecting differences can promote a work environment that effectively meets the different needs, expectations, and behaviours of each generation, and leads to a cohesive work group.

Veterans (before 1946)

This cohort of nurses is quickly diminishing in the workforce, yet a few individuals remain. Veterans are experienced,
loyal, dedicated, and reliable nurses who value consistency; for them change does not occur easily (Hahn, 2011). This generational cohort grew up in political and economic uncertainty with life experiences that include the Great Depression and World War II. Authority figures are to be obeyed and achievement comes from hard work and following the rules. Due to their loyalty, duty, respect for authority, and hard work, this group values command and control leadership styles. Face-to-face or written communication is typically more effective than electronic communication technologies. Evidence of the Veteran generation’s work ethic is still apparent in the bureaucracies, policies, and practices of health care organizations today.

Baby Boomers (1946–1963)

The Baby Boomer generation is typically defined as including individuals born between 1946 and 1963 (Duchscher & Cowin, 2004). Baby Boomers were born after World War II and did not face the same harsh expectations to respect authority or to conform (Blythe et al., 2008). Consequently, Baby Boomers grew up in an era characterized by optimism, team orientation, opportunity, and growth (Hart, 2006; Solaja & Ogunola, 2016; Stanley, 2010). This generation’s core values include a strong sense of duty, involvement, health and wellness, and a strong work ethic equated with self-worth and fulfillment (Duchscher & Cowin, 2004; Hart, 2006; Solaja & Ogunola, 2016; Stanley, 2010; Weingarten, 2009).

Baby Boomers are considered to be workaholics, driven by material rewards, and critical of those with differing opinions from their own (Blythe et al., 2008; Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2010; Widger et al., 2007). Many Baby Boomers had secure jobs, material prosperity, and access to education (Stanley, 2010).

Currently, many Baby Boomers in the workforce have leadership roles in health care organizations (Solaja & Ogunola, 2016). However, these leaders are increasingly reaching or surpassing the age of retirement, and subsequently leaving the workforce.

Generation X (1964–1980)

Members of Generation X were born between 1964 and 1980 (Duchscher & Cowin, 2004). Central to Generation X is the focus on work to live. This group grew up in a time where double-income households were becoming more commonplace, divorce rates were on the rise, and family instability was experienced by many (Hart, 2006; Solaja & Ogunola, 2016). This group is dependent and self-directed (Hahn, 2011). At the same time, technological innovations, such as the introduction of the computer, began to play a transformative role in communications. Members of Generation X value diversity, balance, informality, global thought, the ability to multitask, and independence (Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008; Hart, 2006; Solaja & Ogunola, 2016; Weingarten, 2009).

One of the largest contrasts between Generation X and the Baby Boomer generation is their viewpoints on work: Generation X feel their work is only one part of their identity (Jovic, Wallace, & Lemaire, 2006; Wendover, 2002). A focus on questioning the status quo and questioning authority figures is commonplace, and they recognize job security as a thing of the past (Stanley, 2010). As a cohort they value feedback, and tend to be self-reliant and resourceful individuals who prefer to work alone rather than as part of a team (Hahn, 2011).


Individuals born between 1981 and 2000 are classified as members of Generation Y or the Millennials (Duchscher &
Cowin, 2004). Their lives have been significantly impacted by the availability and accessibility of information and instant communication through the internet and smartphones. Born to older parents who were involved in coaching their children in multiple after school activities, their experiences shaped the values of this generation, which include confidence, civic duty, morality, achievement, and sociability (Calhoun & Strasser, 2005; Duchscher & Cowin, 2004; Hart, 2006; Solaja & Ogunola, 2016). Overall, this group is considered to be quite distinctive compared to preceding generations: they are the youngest and largest group in the workforce; they have a higher level of affluence and education; and their members are more ethnically diverse.

As Generation Y enters the workforce, they bring with them a distinct work ethic. This ethic emphasizes completing work at one’s own pace and in one’s own style. Consequently, members of Generation Y require upper management to clearly define work expectations and deliverables, provide feedback, communicate resource allocation, and set timelines. This cohort values a flexible work schedule to achieve work–life balance. Like Generation X, Generation Y places higher importance on skill development while job security is less important (Bova & Kroth, 2001; Loughlin & Barling, 2001). Members of Generation Y have been found to be highly productive in their work, especially when they believe in its outcomes and the larger organization’s values and goals (Erickson, 2009). They are optimistic and sociable, and they embrace teamwork and diversity (Hahn, 2011; Stanley, 2010).


There is still some debate as to the exact birth year range of Generation Z; however, it is agreed that this cohort constitutes one of the largest yet to be entering the workforce (Wiedmer, 2015). As the majority of individuals within this generation have not yet entered the workforce, little is known about how they will perform.

**Comparison**

Overall, among Baby Boomer nurses, job satisfaction is generally high, and pay and promotional opportunities are of low concern (Blythe et al., 2008). This may be because the age of retirement is near, their seniority affords some level of protection during periods of organizational restructuring, and they likely hold full-time positions. Baby Boomers perceive their younger counterparts as less committed to the profession and arrogant (Blythe et al., 2008). Comparatively, Generation X nurses value education and skill development, which is indicative of a divergence from previous generations (Blythe et al., 2008). Among Generation Y nurses, more emphasis is placed on monetary compensation, prestige and recognition, and diverse career opportunities (McNeese-Smith & Crook, 2003). These younger nurses are less critical of their older counterparts and view themselves as self-reliant rather than arrogant (Blythe et al., 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generations</th>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Core Values</th>
<th>Work Values</th>
<th>Work Ethic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Veterans    | • The Great Depression  
• Pearl Harbor  
• World War II | • Hard work  
• Dedication  
• Respect for authority | • Financial security | • Defined by the clock (time)  
• Strong work ethic |

(Data Source: Table based on material from Clipper, 2012 and Hahn, 2011.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Key Events</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Additional Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>• Age of the Silver Screen • Civil Rights movement • President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, &amp; Dr. King assassinations • First lunar landing</td>
<td>• Peace and harmony (i.e., they are uncomfortable with conflict) • Acceptance of delayed reward</td>
<td>• Strong sense of duty • Teamwork • Peace and harmony (i.e., they are uncomfortable with conflict) • Immediate gratification and reward • Self-fulfillment and meaning • Visibility • Enjoy face-to-face interaction • Willing to work to get ahead (i.e., overtime)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>• Resignation of President Nixon • Watergate scandal • AIDS epidemic • Three Mile Island disaster</td>
<td>• Self-direction • Self-reliance • Work and play balance • Diversity • Action rather than words • Individual positive feedback</td>
<td>• Achievement of financial goals without sacrificing personal time • Get the job done and move on • Strive for work–life balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Y</td>
<td>• Columbine shootings • Oklahoma City bombing • Gulf War • Global War on</td>
<td>• Optimism • Diversity • Ambition • Can-do attitude • Flexibility</td>
<td>• Fun and meaningful work • Use technology to make work more efficient to free up time • Want meaningful jobs and work–life balance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Essential Learning Activity 2.7.1

You are a new nurse on the neurology unit in a large teaching hospital. You have noticed there are a lot of “older nurses” working on the unit and that the nurse manager is “older” as well. Many of the nurses your age have graduated within the last five years and want to work more effectively with all members of the health care team.

Working in pairs, identify how a Baby Boomer nurse manager can successfully bridge generational divides between the “older nurses” and Generations X and Y. What leadership strategies can the manager use to create a more positive workplace environment?