Brace Yourself
Here Comes Generation Y

Judith (“Ski”) Lower, RN, MSN, CCRN, CNRN

High patient acuity, short staffing, lack of civility, patient anxiety—these realities make for a highly stressful healthcare workplace. On top of that, a new generation has begun to enter the nursing workforce. Generation Y nurses are just starting their careers, joining the working nurses of Generation X, Baby Boomers, and Veterans. Generation Y is the most globally aware and racially diverse generation in history.

Each generation has its own characteristics, core values and attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses. Absorbing a new generation into the workplace can lead to or exacerbate conflict. Generation Y nurses have the tools, confidence, and tech savvy to take nursing to another level—but they pose challenges for healthcare facilities and nursing leaders. To create a healthy workplace with optimal communication and teamwork, we need to understand, embrace, and incorporate them into our profession.

Keep in mind that sweeping statements about any generation are stereotypes. While they may accurately describe many members of that group, they don’t hold true for all of them. I urge you to use my general descriptions as a backdrop, but to relate to each person as an individual.

Who’s in Generation Y?

No precise parameters have been pinned down for the birth years of Generation Y. Most experts use 1980 as the starting point and 2001 as the endpoint.

Even the generation’s name varies depending on who’s discussing it. Some people call it the Millenium Generation, Millennials, the Entitled Generation or the Echo Boom.

Why Should We Brace Ourselves?

Y’ers like to be entertained and stimulated. Highly adaptable and adept at multitasking, they get bored easily. They’re progressive thinkers, able to process information quickly. Eager to embrace change, they’re constantly looking for new approaches and seeking the next challenge. They also have high standards and excel at teamwork.

Although Y’ers respect older people, they’re not awed by them—or by anyone. Many have a sense of entitlement and expect others to

PRIME POINTS

• Today’s newly minted nurses have all the right stuff to help nursing advance. Can older nurses make the adjustments needed to retain them?

take care of things for them. They prefer community, patience, trust, and action to what they perceive as the Baby Boomers’ narcissist, argumentative bent. Yet their bosses and many of their coworkers are likely to be Baby Boomers, which could set the stage for generational clashes.

In the healthcare workplace, Generation Y nurses are most likely to pose a challenge for older colleagues in the areas of stressors, work schedules, orientation needs, performance appraisals, learning styles and preferences, technology mindset, and professional image.

**Stressors**

For Generation Y nurses, stressors may include lack of experience and organizational skills, as well as the need to cope with new situations. One study that examined their intent to stay in their current nursing jobs found that dissatisfaction with six factors—scheduling, coworker and physician relationships, professional growth opportunities, recognition, control, and responsibility—might lead them to resign. Another study found that the main sources of job dissatisfaction for nurses younger than age 32 are work/life imbalance, an organization not focused on patient needs, outdated medical equipment, and insufficient developmental opportunities.

**Work Schedules**

Fresh out of nursing school, Generation Y nurses may assume their work schedules will resemble those of their earlier years, when parents and schools “protected” them. They’re used to having flexible rules and taking part in decisions about their schedules (among other things). They want schedules that allow time for “life” and family. Some might request frequent schedule changes or might call in sick to get around what they see as an inflexible schedule. This can cause resentment among older nurses, who might view this behavior as evidence that Y’ers aren’t team players and haven’t “paid their dues” or earned the right to have their expectations met. Managers need to be especially flexible and creative when assigning 12-hour shifts, off shifts, rotating shifts, weekend work, and holidays.

**Orientation Needs**

I’ve heard some Generation Y nurses say they had no idea nursing would be so hard or that they’d be under such intense pressure, have so much responsibility, or feel so exhausted. Many have difficulty adjusting to a job defined by older generations—especially when it comes to attendance and schedules.

To help cushion the shock and acclimatize them into the work culture, healthcare administrators might want to begin orientation early for new Generation Y hires, bringing them in before their official start dates. Orientation should emphasize such issues as coming to work on time, how and when to call in sick, how to get vacation time, and whom to see when a work problem arises. It should also include time for debriefing so the new hires can express their feelings and share their experiences in a “safe” environment.

I’ve found that having new hires meet together every few months gives them a chance to bond, share, and learn from each other. Some facilities use a program similar to Big Brother or Big Sister to provide each new hire with a confidante, encourager, and sounding board.

(Just make sure this person isn’t the new hire’s preceptor or evaluator.)

**Formative Influences and Core Values**

The events, trends, and circumstances of a generation’s first 20 years shape its core values and social traits—and these in turn influence its attitudes, decisions, and preferences. For Generation Y, formative influences include:

- fall of the Soviet Union in 1991
- space shuttle Challenger tragedy of 1986
- Oklahoma City bombing of 1995
- HIV and AIDS
- Iraq wars
- September 11, 2001, terrorist attack and the subsequent anthrax scare and “war on terror”
- Columbine and other school shootings
- date-rape drugs
- casual Fridays, body piercings, shaved heads, tattoos, spiked and bleached hair, and low-rise pants
- ubiquitous technology, including computer games, cell

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phones, Internet, instant messaging, iPods, DVDs, and virtual reality
• 24-hour media, TV reality shows, and a sense that anyone can become a star
• scheduled and structured lives
• multiculturalism, diversity, political correctness, and globalization.

Performance Appraisals
Generation Y responds well to feedback and corrective suggestions. But many attended schools that emphasized success. As a result, many Y’ers perceive themselves as always doing well or at least never having failed. So if their first work performance appraisal contains anything other than praise and recognition, they may view it as their first “failure.” To avoid giving them this perception, supervisors should review and discuss work performance with them on an ongoing basis.

Y’ers take well to action plans and work hard to correct problems. They like to have a complete picture of what’s expected of them, which areas they’re making progress in, and what they’re doing well. But use caution when identifying goals for the next year. Many Y’ers are high achievers who set unrealistic goals. To help them attain work/life balance and avoid unrealistic goals, consider spreading out their goals over 2 years instead of 1 year.

The Generation Y nurse doesn’t like to disappoint preceptors and managers, and will struggle to continue in a unit that isn’t a good fit. To promote a win-win outcome, focus on “right fit” and “right time.” If she desires, let the nurse transfer to another unit for a year or two and then try again on the first unit, if that’s where she truly wants to work.

Learning Styles and Preferences
The good news: Y’ers love to learn and are good listeners. They grew up with multiple learning formats and most had good relationships with their teachers.

The bad news: They’re accustomed to structured learning environments, lots of technology, and fast-moving fun. Also, they’re not attentive readers and dislike having to sit and read. In addition, because they grew up with the Internet and are completely at ease with the online universe, they may have more current facts than their instructors.

Technology Mindset
To Generation Y nurses, some of the technological tools we use at the bedside may seem antiquated and non-user friendly. Y’ers may even complain these devices create redundancy and extra work. They may grow frustrated with having to do things in such an “old-fashioned” way—and in having their frustrations dismissed by older colleagues.

Instead of dismissing their complaints, let’s use their tech savvy and desire to fix things by assigning them to technology task forces. By making suggestions during the developmental and piloting phases of technology projects, they can help make the workplace better and more technologically advanced.

Teaching an Easily Bored Generation
How do we engage a generation with a short attention span that’s accustomed to fun, interactive learning using the latest technology? Author, speaker, and innovative educator Michele Deck has some ideas. She emphasizes that Generation Y is a TV generation used to getting information in snippets, with commercial breaks at least every 10 minutes. In teaching sessions, she suggests giving Y’ers a mini-break every 15 minutes by having them do something unexpected—stand up, tell a joke, get a reward (such as a piece of candy for a correct answer), hear a drum roll, or use a secret word. Which activity you choose isn’t as important as the distraction it provides.

Deck also recommends making teaching sessions fun by using unpredictable teaching methods, incorporating physical movement, repeating important information, and catering to Generation Y’s three preferred learning styles—listening, seeing, and doing.

Enhancing Interpersonal Skills
Because Generation Y grew up in a technology-rich world, it may come up short in interpersonal skills. When teaching Y’ers, start sessions with personal introductions in which they all share something about themselves.

Professional Image
Y’ers like to dress casually. Many have body piercings, tattoos, and multicolored hair and may react
poorly when colleagues and supervisors insist these things aren’t acceptable in clinical areas. Unit healthcare facilities loosen their dress codes, supervisors should insist that Y’ers follow the dress code.

Another area of potential generational conflict is Generation Y’s preference for having fun at work. Baby Boomers and Veterans may define fun at work as a planned party, whereas Y’ers define it as simply hanging out, chatting, and being silly. You might see Y’ers sitting around relaxing a lot. Don’t mistake this for doing nothing. This generation is quite informal and can think extremely well when relaxed.

Getting Generation Y Involved in the Unit

Y’ers are eager to participate in unit decision making because they grew up having their say in family decisions. But in some units and facilities, older colleagues might not let them participate until they’ve “paid their dues” or “earned their right” to do so. A more constructive approach is to welcome their new ideas and fresh perspectives.

Remember—Generation Y is the most adaptable and flexible generation. It likes to approach projects in teams. If a Y’er resists working on an individual project, this usually reflects fear of failure more than anything else. Provide Generation Y nurses with mentors and give them explicit directions and details about the project.

Why We Must Keep Them

Generation Y is the most educated and technologically literate generation

Generation Y Responds

Respect Differences, Admit Similarities, Says Gen Y Nurse

by Thom Schwarz, RN

E milie Wyble, MS, BSN, believes there are more similarities than differences between her Gen Y nursing colleagues and the Gen X’ers. Responding to Lower’s interview, Wyble said “I agree with a lot of what [Lower] said about Gen Y nurses, but I think a lot of what she said can be applied to all generations. All generations have something unique and beneficial” adding that her Gen Y peers “want to be part of the team and have the same goal [as Gen X’ers] of providing excellent patient care.”

Wyble knows from excellence. A 2005 honors graduate of the Medical College of Georgia majoring in nursing, she is working on her Master of Science degree in Nurse Anesthesia from Virginia Commonwealth University while simultaneously obtaining her CCRN, BLS, and ACLS certifications. Being ambitious and assertive are common traits among nurses of her generation, she says. “Our educators, parents, and even TV commercials have always told us that we can be and do anything we want. The slogan ‘Just do it’ permeated our everyday lives. We’re always looking for ways to improve and assert ourselves.” She adds, “We don’t feel happy, motivated, or a sense of loyalty in a work environment that doesn’t embrace us and support our goals.”

The 25-year-old critical care nurse acknowledges that she and her colleagues become bored easily, which results in a feeling that they are stagnating in their professional development. “This may be perceived as a lack of focus, self-discipline or even cockiness but we tend to thrive in chaotic, overly stimulating environments.” She defends this tendency however, stating, “As long as we are working effectively we don’t see any fault in this.”

Responding to the claim by older nurses that Y’ers aren’t team players and expect others to take care of things for them, she reflects on her training by those same Baby Boomers who instilled a sense of democracy in the Gen Y students when they worked on group projects in nursing school even while they instilled a sense of personal responsibility. “We’re ‘control freaks,’ it’s hard for us to let go and delegate. I was taught that I am responsible for my patient’s care. We value Gen X’ers’ knowledge and expertise but we also want the freedom to develop our own practice. We know that we need to prove ourselves but we also want to be
treated as equals when we are doing the same work. And we want to feel equally appreciated for it.”

Lower is correct in her assessment that Gen Y’ers are “very tech savvy,” says Wyble, adding that they are likely to adapt to all things electronic and automated very quickly. What’s more important, she says, is Gen Y’ers desire to assist their older coworkers, who weren’t raised in the computer age, to understand and safely, efficiently use this technology.

She responded vigorously, however, to older nurses who say that Y’ers need to pay their dues and haven’t earned the right to have their expectations met. “I’m big on equality,” she says, “I need (Gen X nurses) to recognize and respect the efforts I have put into my schooling and work, and to acknowledge that it is the quality of my work not the quantity of my years that count more. It bothers me when older nurses act as if I have not earned the rights and respect accorded to them, but at the same time they agree that I have earned the right to work in the same unit, on the same patients, shoulder to shoulder with them.” She quickly adds that she has benefited greatly from nurses with a few more years of experience. “We look at them as resources and we value their knowledge and experience. Teach me what you know! I have learned more than I expected in 2 years of clinical practice from older nurses who are nonthreatening and not condescending.”

When it comes to vacation and holiday scheduling, which Lower points as a possible sticking point between the generations, Wyble says she personally doesn’t mind working on those cherished holidays. “There’s no husband or children counting on me at home; I can appreciate how important it is to have off on those days.” But that doesn’t mean she abrogates her feelings that her time off is equally valuable. “I dislike when other nurses say to me, ‘It’s not like you have kids. What could you be doing on your time off that’s as important?’ My time is just as valuable to me as anyone else’s.”

Wyble agreed when Lower pointed to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as a crucial, formative event for her generation. “Watching the events of 9/11 reaffirmed that I wanted to do something positive with my life. There is so much hurt in the world, I wanted to address that in a healing way.”

She also agreed that Gen Y’ers can be high achievers who set unrealistic goals for themselves. “I know that I spread myself too thin; I can’t say no. It would help if before an older nurse asks me for more we take a look together at what I am already committed to. We enjoy challenges and the feeling of empowerment that comes with hard work, so we tend to see ‘No, I can’t take on another task or responsibility’ as an admission of our own weakness.”

Wyble agreed with Lower’s assessment that Y’ers might need help acclimatizing to the work culture that is different than their earlier years when parents and schools “protected” them. “We’re informal,” she agrees, “we don’t always realize what is expected of us and so it’s important to communicate those expectations from the start.” This includes what older nurses deem as casual or inappropriate dress—including tattoos and body piercings. “It’s increasingly difficult to regulate what anyone does with their body,” Wyble observes, “and although piercings can often be removed before beginning work, mandating ‘No tattoos’ may not be realistic anymore.”

An atmosphere of consistency in applying rules, mutual support and communication is paramount, says Wyble. “If we [Gen X and Gen Y nurses] support each other as a team and as individuals we’ll all increase our job satisfaction. If we ask questions and open doors to conversations, rather than make assumptions and negative interpretations about generations, understanding will follow.”
in history. Its skills can help advance our profession, and its sheer numbers can go a long way toward relieving the nursing shortage.

Instead of resisting the changes these new nurses represent, let’s keep our minds and hearts open. Let’s welcome them into nursing and do everything we can to encourage them to stay. CCN

Selected References
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