

# Advice for millennial nurses

By Amanda Veesart, PhD, RN, CNE

## How do you become a great leader in a multigenerational workplace?

**GENERATIONAL** differences have been a popular topic for years, generating many articles and books. The first generational definition dates back to the 1950s when Mannheim published an article defining generations as groups of people who were born and raised in the same chronological years. Since then, many authors have published on generational core values, the differences concerning core values of each generation, and the challenges between generations.

Recently, the focus has been on the impact of generational differences in the workplace. Millennial nurses entered the nursing workforce about 20 years ago and have been a topic among healthcare organizations ever since. The literature is saturated with ideas, strategies, and solutions for recruiting and retaining Millennial nurses. However, little literature or guidance exists on how to become a nurse leader if you're a Millennial. Understanding the impact of common Millennial characteristics in the workplace is the first step to becoming an effective leader. Many Millennials have significantly different workplace needs, skills, and expectations from previous generations.

As a Millennial leader myself, I'd like to share tips for how those of our generation can become successful workplace leaders.

### Welcome to a workplace that doesn't understand you

Although some Millennial core values are similar to those of other generations (for example, morality and civic duty are reflective of the Veterans generation and work-life balance is similar to Generation X), the ones that differ can make Millennials seem like spoiled, unsatisfied brats. For example, the most common characteristic used to describe Millennials in the workforce is "job hopper." Research shows that most Millennials seek a job that offers flexibility, recognition, innovation, and an opportunity to make an impact on the world, and they're willing to move from one place to another to find it. Although changing jobs can boost your skills, other generations in the workplace may



view it negatively, seeing frequent change as a lack of commitment.

The first step to overcoming stereotypes about the Millennial generation is knowing that these differences are sometimes misunderstood. And it's good to keep in mind that nurses of all generations—not just Millennials—face challenges and misconceptions by others in the workplace.

### Understanding the misunderstandings

Here are some common statements or questions you can expect when pursuing a leadership role:

- You're not old enough, and you haven't put in your time to take on a leadership role.
- You're always looking for a different way to do things. Why do you want to change what we've always done?
- You seem to have more interest in leaving work early to go have fun versus staying to work extra hours. Why aren't you more loyal?
- You want to move up the career ladder too quickly and if you don't, you'll leave.
- You always want to make things more efficient by adding technology.



## Rules of engagement

- You grew up in the era when everyone got a trophy, so you always expect to win.
- You want more money but you don't want to work for it, so you're a job hopper.

The good news about these statements is that most leaders, not just Millennials, have heard one or more applied to them, so the intent behind the comment probably isn't personal. However, the comments may feel personal and can create tension in the workplace. Embrace each comment as a misunderstanding of core values, and don't assume everyone holds or appreciates the same values as you. This doesn't give someone permission to belittle you, but most of these types of comments are the result of misinterpretation of intentions or poor communication.

### Tips for Millennials on becoming a great leader

Use these tips to help you succeed on your path to becoming a nurse leader.

#### Brush that chip off your shoulder

Stereotypes have always existed in the workplace. The following comments are from published surveys:

- "Loyalty. Gratitude. Fortitude. They're dead, man."
- "You might want to laugh derisively the first time one of your youngest subordinates tells you he intends to work a mere 40-hour week so he can go scuba diving and learn a non-Indo-European tongue."
- "We're dealing with a lot of tender little egos. They have to be told they're loved quite frequently."

You may assume these comments are about Millennials. However, the first two were retrieved from surveys regarding Generation X, and the last was written in 1969 about Baby Boomers. This is a prime example of past generations experiencing the same criticisms as Millennials. As a Millennial leader, you must learn not to react defensively. If you take on a leadership role, expect criticism, but don't fear it.

#### Assess your emotional intelligence

The most successful leaders have an optimistic attitude, a desire to learn quickly, are open-minded thinkers, and balance emotions. Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and balance your own emotions. Although not supported by research, Millennials are assumed to lack communication, conflict resolution, empathy, and leadership skills. A recent EI study showed Millennials demonstrate high emotional stability with regard to interpersonal relationships but score lower than other generations on self-awareness and emotional mentoring. Don't confuse EI with intelligence quotient (IQ). The ability to score well on an IQ test doesn't mean that you have high EI. Good EI requires ongoing assessment of yourself and your interactions with others.

Follow these rules for leadership success.

#### Leadership is a privileged and earned position

Parents of Millennials consider them the most important assets in their lives. As a result, Millennials believe themselves to be a special workplace commodity, which can lead to expectations of special treatment. The result? Millennials may be perceived as spoiled. Successful leaders don't consider themselves special; instead, they feel privileged to lead. To become an effective and accepted leader, you must prove your worth. In the past, years of service were used to prove worth. As a Millennial, you'll have to prove your ability without a long history of experience. This can be a challenge, but it's essential to success.

#### Learn the true definition of leadership

Effective leadership requires willing followers. Some leaders try to force ideas or solutions, which can lead to push-back. Leaders who dominate decision-making end up with partial team commitment or downright defiance. Your task is the respectful recruitment of willing followers. And for Millennial leaders, respect must be given as much as received. That doesn't mean agreement with all processes, but it does require delicate precision when recommending change. Giving people something to aspire to will result in followership. Remember, how well followers follow is just as important to an organization as how well leaders lead.

#### Make a commitment

Millennials have been characterized as job hoppers. Judging all Millennials based on a small group may seem unfair, but it is what it is. Everyone you encounter must know that you're committed to the organization and your job. Commitment can't be just verbal; you must show your commitment with your actions.

#### Be visible

Whether an organization is doing well or not, leaders must be visible. During turmoil or crisis, most members of the organization seek leaders for guidance. Your visibility provides the team with security and assurance that you're in the battle with them, even during late hours. You'll also need to know when not to be visible. For example, an open-door policy can create a culture of dependence. Allow your followers to make everyday decisions without your input, and don't give unsolicited advice on routine tasks. Retired Lieutenant General Russel Honoré once said, "Followers do not judge their leaders on where they come from or necessarily what they look like. They score leaders on character and presence."

### Learn the generational differences

The unique experience of each generation can create differences in values, gender issues, cultural biases, and team building. Millennials are the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in American history. And in some cases, they're the most educated generation in

the workplace and may even possess higher degrees than older supervisors, creating a point of contention. Understanding the differences between the generations will enhance your ability to advance quickly into a leadership position.

Certain core value differences, such as drive, are more important than others to understand in the workplace. Although not true for all Millennials, many were taught to acquire almost anything they want very quickly. In contrast, many Baby Boomers were taught to think thoroughly about all major decisions before moving forward. These differences in drive can be a barrier in the workplace. Moving too quickly may undermine a colleague's ability to think through projects, create feelings of resentment or loss of autonomy, and ultimately, undermine his or her confidence. Knowing this difference may exist, and also understanding that individuals within each generation vary, should inspire a leader to slow the pace of decision-making to allow all participants an opportunity to process each component. With five generations in the nursing workforce, leaders need to meet the expectations of each generation to ensure organization success.

### Understand the rules of engagement

All leaders, regardless of age, generation, or experi-

ence, have a set of rules for the workplace—the rules of engagement. These rules have existed for decades, and Millennials won't change them. Rather than challenge the status quo, accept that the rules exist and follow them to help you advance at work. (See *Rules of engagement*.)

### Position yourself to lead

Understanding the challenges you may encounter as a Millennial is key to advancing into a leadership role. Use good judgment and always be true to yourself, while also consistently learning how to improve your skills. Frequently, a leader isn't in front of the pack but is willing and able to move to the front if needed. Position yourself to be a great leader and be ready when opportunity knocks. ★

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