

Generations of Care: Mentorship in Nursing

Walker, K., & Kientz, E.

University of Oklahoma

The transition to practice can be difficult for new registered nurses for a variety of reasons. Seasoned nurses play a crucial role in mentoring and guiding novices through challenges in healthcare settings. Effective mentoring helps foster supportive environments and sets realistic expectations. A good transition can impact the intent to stay or leave the assigned unit. New nurses consistently identify preceptors and mentors as key facilitators of a positive onboarding experience. Mentorship is essential for both nurse development and organizational success. Today's nursing workforce includes four generational cohorts: Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–2000), and Generation Z (2001–2020). These groups bring diverse communication styles, values, and expectations to the workplace. Mentoring becomes a unifying force, bridging gaps and fostering collaboration between generations. By acknowledging and integrating each generation's unique perspectives and experiences, mentoring can address challenges, leverage strengths, and create more cohesive. This paper examines the influence of generational differences on mentoring needs within the nursing profession. It introduces a conceptual tool known as the Mentor-Mentee Integration Matrix to support customized mentorship strategies in multigenerational environments. The authors also share insights gained through real-world mentoring experiences and lessons learned in practice.

Keywords: Mentoring, nurse, nursing, generations, generational, workforce

Introduction

Over the past few decades, healthcare has grown increasingly complex. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, nursing has faced heightened levels of burnout, compounding an already critical workforce shortage. These challenges are intensified by a workforce spanning multiple generations, each with differing values, expectations, and communication styles. For new registered nurses (RNs), this complexity makes the transition into practice particularly difficult, often leading to high turnover, emotional exhaustion, and early departure from the profession (American Nurses Association [ANA], 2023; Robertson & Ferguson, 2024).

Experienced nurses play a critical role in guiding novices through this landscape. Mentoring helps to foster supportive environments, establish realistic expectations, and reduce feelings of isolation. A smooth transition can significantly influence team cohesion and increase a new nurse's intent to remain on their assigned unit (DeMaria et al., 2024; Tussing et al., 2024;).

Understanding generational differences is essential for developing mentorship strategies that retain and support nurses at all career stages. This paper explores how nurses' perspectives vary across generational cohorts and introduces a tailored approach to mentorship. By aligning mentoring methods with generational preferences, nurse leaders can promote job satisfaction, team

collaboration, and improved patient outcomes. Ultimately, responsive mentoring strengthens not only the nursing workforce, but the quality of care delivered to patients (Weingarten, 2009; Williams, 2023).

Literature Review

Within most workplaces, there can be up to five generations interacting with each other. Given the demands and rapid changes in healthcare, having a team that fosters an unencumbered exchange of ideas and thoughts promotes quality care and patient outcomes (Verret & Lin, 2016). In healthcare, nurses work alongside different generations. Having greater knowledge about each generation can help alleviate misconceptions and promote a more therapeutic environment of care (Pawlak et al., 2022). Generations commonly encountered include the Traditionalists, often referred to as the Silent Generation. Although most are retired, these individuals were born prior to 1946. In their lifetime, they witnessed prosperity with the radio and the Roaring 20s, as well as many sacrifices during World War I, World War II, and the Great Depression. This generation, by way of survival, is often very frugal. They are motivated by respect and recognition, whereby age equals seniority. Their communication style is personal, including handwritten notes instead of digital tools (Weingarten, 2009).

Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and

1964. They were shaped by the Vietnam War, Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements, Watergate, the moon landing, and cultural icons such as Chuck Berry and rock and roll. Their values emphasize optimism, competitiveness, and a strong work ethic (Tussing, Chipps, & Tornwall, 2024). Boomers often use the most efficient communication method available, including face-to-face conversations and phone calls (DeMaria, Page, Reuss, et al., 2024).

Generation X, born from 1965 to 1980, witnessed the AIDS epidemic, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the rise of personal computers and MTV. Many were considered latchkey children, returning to an empty home after school and caring for themselves due to limited adult supervision, often because their parents were divorced or both worked outside the home (Belle, 1999). This generation is often described as flexible, informal, and independent. Generation X nurses typically embrace diversity and place a high value on work-life balance (Weingarten, 2009; Tussing et al., 2024).

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, were born between 1981 and 2000 and now make up the largest segment of the workforce (DeMaria et al., 2024). This cohort was shaped by events such as the September 11 attacks, Oklahoma City bombing, and Columbine shooting. Millennials are open-minded, achievement-oriented, and competitive. They prefer communication through text, instant messaging, and email and value feedback, flexibility, and supportive relationships with managers (Tussing et al., 2024).

Generation Z, born from 2001 to 2020, grew up immersed in technology. Their worldview has been shaped by the Great Recession and a post-9/11 reality. They prefer informal, digital communication like texting or instant messaging. Gen Z nurses often self-identify as digital device experts and value independence, innovation, and transparency (Carnot, Karl, & Breda, 2025).

Mentorship is recognized as increasingly vital in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Well-organized and enduring mentorship provides foundational guidance and wisdom from seasoned professionals (Robertson & Ferguson, 2024; Krofft & Stuart, 2021). According to the American Nurses Association (ANA, 2023), mentorship in nursing is a dynamic, supportive relationship that fosters personal growth and career development. Mentorship contributes to reduced stress, increased satisfaction, broader professional networks for mentees, and renewed passion and insight for mentors. Several types of mentoring are described in the literature, including traditional, reverse, constellation, and reciprocal models. Agger et al. (2017) suggest that hierarchical, top-down traditional mentoring may no longer be optimal in multigenerational settings. These approaches typically pair senior mentors with junior mentees for unidirectional guidance. Reverse mentoring, a concept introduced by Jack Welch at General Electric, allows younger professionals to mentor senior colleagues, especially on technology

and new systems (Welch, 1999). Although still emerging in nursing literature, reverse mentoring has shown potential for reducing generational friction (Williams, 2023). Reciprocal mentoring takes this further by emphasizing mutual teaching and learning, creating more egalitarian relationships. Constellation mentoring, also known as three-generation mentoring, involves a mentee supported by both a veteran and a mid-career mentor (Webber, Grasso, & Burke, 2020). When implemented thoughtfully, these models promote inclusive, developmental networks that build professional satisfaction, psychological safety, and quality patient care (Stephenson, 2014).

Method

As we reviewed the literature and reflected on our own mentoring experiences, it became clear that one-size-fits-all approaches rarely meet the needs of today's multigenerational workforce (Tussing, Chipps, & Tornwall, 2024; Weingarten, 2009). Rather than conducting a traditional empirical study, our goal was to develop a practical framework to guide mentoring relationships that are responsive to generational differences. We approached this project from a conceptual and applied perspective, drawing on published studies, position statements, and real-world mentoring examples in nursing education and clinical practice (Agger et al., 2017; ANA, 2023; Baker et al., 2024). Our process began by outlining the core values, communication preferences, and workplace traits of each generational cohort currently represented in the nursing workforce (DeMaria et al., 2024; Pawlak et al., 2022). We then reviewed four types of mentoring models: traditional, reverse, reciprocal, and constellation. Each was considered in relation to generational dynamics (Webber et al., 2020; Williams, 2023; Welch, 1999). From this, we began to build a Mentor-Mentee Integration Matrix, a working guide that matches mentoring approaches with generational expectations and needs. The matrix remains a work in progress and is intended to be a flexible, living document that can evolve with new research and continued input from nurse leaders and educators. While not a research study in the traditional sense, this project reflects a systematic, thoughtful process aimed at translating generational insights into actionable mentoring practices that support both mentees and mentors in today's complex clinical environments (Krofft & Stuart, 2021; Robertson & Ferguson, 2024).

Findings

A review of the literature and reflection on mentoring experiences revealed several clear themes. First, while all nurses bring something valuable to the table, it became evident that each generation shows up to the workplace with its own preferences around communication, autonomy, and support. Baby Boomers tend to value loyalty and personal interaction. Generation X appreciates

flexibility and independence. Millennials often look for collaboration, feedback, and professional development. Generation Z expects quick responses and thrives in digital environments. Second, we noticed that traditional mentorship models do not always align with what newer generations are looking for. A one-way, top-down approach may feel outdated to younger nurses who value mutual respect and shared learning. Without thoughtful adaptation, this disconnect can lead to miscommunication or missed opportunities.

The review examined a range of mentorship styles, including reverse mentoring, reciprocal mentoring, and constellation models, and identified value in each. As no single model suits every situation, this led to the development of the Mentor-Mentee Integration Matrix. It serves as a flexible and practical guide that can supplement any mentorship approach. Whether nurse leaders are using a traditional or innovative model, the matrix is designed to guide consideration of generational traits and support more intentional, individualized mentor-mentee pairings. Ultimately, the findings point to the importance of tailoring mentorship to fit today's diverse nursing workforce. This is not just about selecting a model, but about understanding who is involved and what they need to thrive.

Discussion

What emerged from this work is the realization that mentoring across generations requires more than good intentions. It calls for awareness, adaptability, and a willingness to meet individuals where they are (Krofft & Stuart, 2021; Verret & Lin, 2016). The generational traits outlined in the literature are not intended to stereotype but rather to offer insight into how different life experiences and world events shape the way nurses engage in the workplace (Pawlak et al., 2022; Tussing et al., 2024). For instance, Baby Boomers often value a strong sense of duty and prefer traditional forms of communication, such as in-person conversations or telephone calls (DeMaria et al., 2024; Weingarten, 2009). Generation X nurses may appreciate autonomy and efficiency, whereas Millennials and Generation Z tend to expect rapid feedback and demonstrate fluency with digital platforms (Carnot et al., 2025; Tussing et al., 2024).

When generational expectations are misaligned, frustration may result. However, when mentors and mentees are thoughtfully paired with consideration for values, communication styles, and career stages, those generational differences can become strengths (Stephenson, 2014; Williams, 2023). In such contexts, mentorship models such as reciprocal and constellation mentoring can be especially effective. These models promote shared learning and mutual growth (Agger et al., 2017; Webber et al., 2020).

The Mentor-Mentee Integration Matrix introduced in this paper is not a rigid formula. Rather, it serves as a flexible framework for nurse leaders

and educators to consider when developing mentor pairings. The goal is to foster mentoring relationships that are supportive, sustainable, and developmentally meaningful across the span of a nursing career. As the nursing profession continues to evolve in the post-pandemic era, mentoring may become increasingly important for supporting retention, enhancing job satisfaction, and improving patient outcomes (Robertson & Ferguson, 2024; American Nurses Association [ANA], 2023). Although this paper does not present empirical findings, it provides a conceptual foundation for future evaluation, particularly in clinical environments where nurse turnover is high or where generational disconnects may affect team dynamics.

Conclusion

Mentorship remains a powerful tool for supporting nurses at every stage of their careers. In today's multigenerational workforce, tailoring mentorship strategies to align with generational needs is not just thoughtful; it is essential. Although no two nurses are the same, generational context provides insight into what motivates individuals, how they prefer to communicate, technological savvy, and the types of support that foster their professional growth (Tussing et al., 2024; Weingarten, 2009). While Generational Alpha (born 2010–2024) and Beta (2025–2039) are not yet in the workforce, having early awareness of their values may help shape future mentoring strategies.

This conceptual paper introduces a practical tool known as the Mentor-Mentee Integration Matrix. It is designed to guide mentorship pairing and structure by considering generational traits, communication preferences, and professional values. The goal is to provide nurse leaders with a flexible framework that aligns mentoring relationships with the realities of a dynamic and diverse workforce (Allen & Eby, 2007; Zachary, 2011). Strong mentorship not only improves retention and job satisfaction but also enhances confidence, collaboration, and clinical outcomes (Foster et al., 2015; American Nurses Association [ANA], 2023; Robertson & Ferguson, 2024).

By connecting generational theory with mentoring models such as reciprocal and constellation mentoring, this approach offers one pathway to achieving those benefits in practice. Intentional, relationship-based mentoring, informed by generational insight, has the potential to support new nurses as they enter complex systems and to provide seasoned nurses with meaningful opportunities to lead. Effective mentoring matters across career stages, especially during times of transition, professional burnout, or team development. Looking ahead, the matrix will be refined and evaluated in both academic and clinical settings. Deepening understanding across generations will strengthen teams, the profession, and the quality of patient care.

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Appendix A: Mentor-Mentee Integration Matrix

The matrix below is intended as a flexible, practical guide for nurse leaders, educators, and mentoring coordinators. It offers generational pairings with key characteristics to consider when establishing effective mentoring relationships. The descriptions reflect common generational traits, such as communication preferences, motivation styles, and learning needs and can help guide mentor-mentee matching and mentoring strategy selection.

Mentor → Mentee ↓	Baby Boomer	Gen X	Millennial (Gen Y)	Gen Z
👴 Baby Boomer	Emphasize shared values. Use face-to-face communication. Reinforce loyalty and consistency. Honor experience.	Promote independence. Offer structured feedback. Respect career knowledge. Engage as peers.	Support career growth. Provide feedback regularly. Take a coaching approach.	Clarify expectations. Acknowledge digital fluency. Provide check-ins and support.
👨 Gen X	Avoid micromanaging. Offer flexible support.	Focus on outcomes. Respect efficiency.	Encourage innovation. Stay approachable. Provide freedom to grow.	Use digital communication. Be concise. Offer timely feedback.
👦 Millennial (Gen Y)	Show openness. Learn from their experience. Respect traditional values.	Collaborate efficiently. Ask for guidance on leadership growth.	Create a team environment. Communicate often. Offer development.	Be tech-savvy. Support emotional well-being. Provide structure and access.
👧 Gen Z	Communicate clearly. Explain systems patiently. Be respectful.	Offer real-time feedback. Set clear communication	Encourage collaboration. Adapt to tools and flexibility.	Use informal communication. Provide structure and goal clarity.