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Research article

## Factors that lead Generation Y nurses to consider or reject nurse leader roles



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study examined factors that lead Generation Y nurses to consider or reject nursing leadership roles.

**Background:** Almost half of the current nurse leaders in the country are expected to retire by the end of the decade. Generation Y will soon comprise 50% of the nursing workforce and organizations look to them to assume leadership roles. Learning how to effectively recruit, motivate and retain Generation Y nurse leaders will be critical to the future of nursing.

**Methods:** This was a qualitative study that used a ConCensus™ process approach to collect the themes and factors of importance to participants related to nursing leadership roles. Three focus groups were conducted during 2013 and 2014 with 32 Generation Y Registered Nurses, not currently in leadership positions and born on or after January 1st, 1981.

**Key findings:** Feedback from current nurse leaders about their roles is primarily negative. The strongest incentive for Generation Y nurses to seek leadership roles is the potential to create meaningful change in healthcare. Fear of failure in the role and lack of work-life balance are significant deterrents to accepting a leadership role.

**Conclusions:** Generation Y nurses do see the value and importance of nursing leadership in making a difference in patient care but have concerns about the level of support that will be available to them as they assume these roles. Attention must be directed toward providing resources and strategies to develop skilled Generation Y nurse leaders in order to promote effective succession planning.

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### Introduction

Nursing leaders in the United States were challenged by the landmark report, *The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health* (Institute of Medicine, 2010) to embrace their role in the transformation of health care delivery. Planning for a different health care future will require strong nursing leadership. These opportunities and demands for leadership come at time when the nursing profession is experiencing massive demographic shifts in the workforce. For the past three decades, nursing has largely been led by nurses in the Baby Boomer cohort born between 1946 and 1960 (Hader, Saver, & Steltzer, 2006). This is now rapidly changing with the three million Baby Boomers turning 65 each year and

many beginning to retire (American Hospital Association, 2014). Recruitment to replace retiring nurse leaders is expected to be challenging. It is anticipated that by 2020, more than 50% of the nursing workforce will be Generation Y nurses born after 1980 (American Hospital Association, 2014). These nurses are the future of nursing leadership but some question whether they will be interested and/or prepared to step into leadership roles (Lund & Thomas, 2012).

As nurse leaders commit to address the challenges of an aging workforce and imminent leadership vacancies (Griffith, 2012; Sherman, Dyess, Hannah, & Prestia, 2013; Stanley, 2010; Thompson, 2008), there is an urgency to operationalize efforts to increase the pipeline of prospective leadership candidates. Learning how to effectively recruit, motivate and retain Generation Y nurse leaders will be critical to the future of nursing. This article presents data from a research study that was designed to examine factors that lead Generation Y nurses to consider or reject nursing leadership roles. The implications for current nurse leaders and health care organizations will be discussed.

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## Background

Currently, four generations are employed in the health care environment: The Veterans (Silent Generation) born before 1945, Boomers (Baby Boomers) born between 1946 and 1964, Generation X (Gen Xers, Gen X) born between 1965 and 1979, and Generation Y (Millennials, Gen Ys) born between 1980 and 2000 (Foley, Myrick, & Yonge, 2012; Hansen & Leuty, 2012; Lavoie-Tremblay, Leclerc, Marchionni, & Drevniok, 2010; Stanley, 2010). Each generation brings a specific set of values, beliefs and expectations to the workplace. Understanding what drives their decision to accept or reject leadership roles has many implications for effective succession planning.

Transitioning nurses into leadership roles requires a comprehensive understanding of a multi-generational workforce. Until recently, most of the senior administrative positions were held by the structured and traditionalist values of Veterans. Today many of those leadership positions are held by Boomers (Berkowitz & Schewe, 2011; Sherman, 2006). This general cohort is known for valuing their individuality, protesting authority, and 'living to work' (Boychuk-Duchscher & Cowin, 2004).

In contrast to Boomers who were raised knowing post-war prospects and job security; Generation X nurses value 'working to live' reserving their loyalty for principles rather than institutions (Stanley, 2010). Considered to be pragmatic and independent, Xers are known for appreciating outcomes over processes and valuing autonomy (Bell, 2013; Hendricks & Cope, 2013; Mhatre & Conger, 2011).

Characterized as technologically savvy, independent and optimistic, Generation Y is the newest generation of nurses to join the workforce. They value work-life balance and have grown to expect instant access to information and feedback (Berkowitz & Schewe, 2011; Smith, Malone, Agwu, & Clark, 2009). They are known as

adept multi-taskers and globally aware team players (Hutchinson, Brown, & Longworth, 2012). Members of Generation Y are often regarded as less loyal than their Xer colleagues. Mhatre and Conger (2011) propose from their work that what is sometimes characterized as disloyalty in this generational group may be their unwillingness to be loyal to an institution when it is perceived to be at the expense of their career growth and realization of professional goals.

Tulgan's (2011) research suggested the reluctance of emerging leaders to assume leadership positions stems from their observing leadership roles that are wrought with responsibility but without needed support. Generation Y view their organizational self-worth as a commodity worthy of courting at the onset of employment, and one which requires significant attention throughout their professional development (Tulgan, 2011). The key findings from Tulgan's work urge current leaders against approaching the transition of Gen Ys into leadership roles through traditional trial by fire methodologies citing support and mentoring as generational requisites.

Hershatter and Epstein (2010) suggest from their organizational work that directing and developing 'the next great generation' requires leaders to embrace this new generation's preferences for accommodations, structure and clarity. Generation Y will align themselves with companies who meet these fundamental needs. Loyalty for the Generation Y comes with a price tag. Hershatter and Epstein (2010) contend the cost of doing business with Generation Y requires nothing short of ongoing organizational support, opportunity for growth and mentoring (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008).

To date, there are no studies in the nursing literature that look specifically at the perspectives of Generation Y about leadership as a career goal in today's health care environment. In order to do more effective succession planning, a better understanding is

Concept	Focus Group Question Items
Responsibilities	From your perspective, what are the major role responsibilities of nursing leaders today?
Feedback	What feedback do you hear about nursing leadership as a career choice from nurses who are currently in leadership roles?
Incentives	What professional or personal incentives would there be for you in a nursing leadership role?
Fear	What would you fear most and what might stop you from considering a leadership role?
Ideal	What would the ideal nurse leader role look like?
Values	What do you see as essential values needed to ground the practice of nursing leadership?
Contributions	What contributions do you think you could make in a nursing leadership position?
Support	What type of support would you need to move into a nursing leadership role?
Qualities	What qualities would you look for in a mentor if you were considering a nursing leadership role?

Fig. 1. Focus group questions.

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