

# Creating a Bright Future: Identifying Supports for Millennial Nurse Leaders

Lauren Kalember, MSN, RN-BC, CCRN-K

**A**s a millennial leader, I am constantly questioning my ability to make decisions, set direction and mentor other leaders in my role. The question “Who am I to coach a leader 25 years my senior?” happens on a frequent basis, especially now that I am leading leaders. It is this daily case of imposter syndrome and my desire to support others that prompted me to understand better “What is it about millennials?”

## The generational workforce

A generation can be defined from a sociological perspective; people born in a range of years that share common beliefs, behaviors, and societal experiences (Gardner, 2016). Recent studies have shortened the years of the millennial generation from 1981-2001 to 1981-1996. Researchers felt it was imperative to delineate the importance of September 11th in the millennial generation. The political, economic and social factors that defined millennials through their formative years offer a clear distinction between them and their Generation Z successors (Dimock, 2019). Most notably, millennials entered the workforce during a recession, many with mass amounts of student debt. While this may not directly impact leadership, it may play a part in their motivation to succeed and desire to achieve high-level leadership positions.

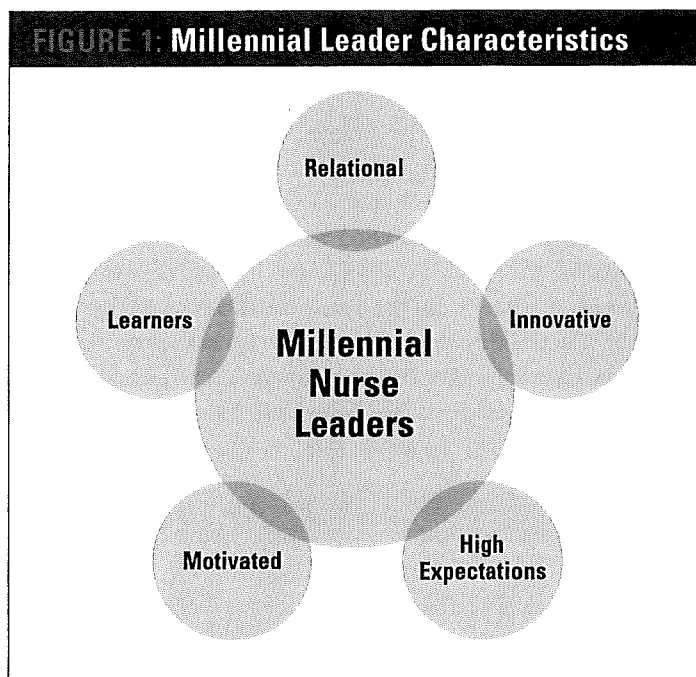
Three generations are in the nursing leadership workforce currently: baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials. Baby boomers hold the most leadership positions nationwide. With the impending retirement of this generation, we can anticipate the nursing leadership gaps replaced with millennials. The good news is that 36% of millennial nurses are interested in moving to positions of leadership (Faller, 2018). While we have a motivated group of millennial nurse leaders to fill the gap, an experience gap will be present.

For previous generations, positions of leadership were often obtained hierarchically and after years of tenure. With that came a pool of wisdom and experience that will soon be retiring. With the motivation for learning and knowledge acquisition, millennials will enter leadership with excitement and some foundational knowledge, but may lack the expertise to aid in decision-making, leadership and coaching.

Understanding the characteristics of millennials in nursing leadership and developing strategies to support can help with this transition.

## Millennial leader characteristics

An abundance of literature defines and outlines aspects of millennials in leadership (Figure 1).



### Relational

Millennials enjoy developing relationships. They are people-oriented, collaborative and value working with teams (Gardner, 2016). These qualities are encouraged in leaders; they are often vital in identifying and including stakeholders, eliminating silos and the development of conceptual thought. But these qualities also can be a barrier to moving projects and initiatives forward. At times collaboration and teamwork can lead to cycles of continuous feedback collection and approval that subsequently stymies a project. Offering support with deadlines, check-ins and frequent feedback can keep a project moving forward.

**FIGURE 2: Mentor Models**

**Traditional Mentor**

- Mentor = Senior Leader
- Mentee = New to leadership or role
- Objectives are knowledge dissemination from mentor to mentee

**Reverse Mentor**

- Mentor = younger generation leader
- Mentee = older generation leader
- Objectives are to promote knowledge dissemination, particularly related to technology, from mentor to mentee

**Intergenerational Mentor**

- No seniority mentor model
- Match generational skills with leader need

**Innovative**

This is where many millennial nurse leaders shine. Their vision and risk-taking idea generation (Harrison, 2017) can drive rapid and progressive change in the health care sector. Whether it be exploring ways to use technology to improve daily tasks or leaning in to the “what could be,” millennials’ strengths in innovation are a huge asset.

This strength does require some development and finesse. The literature suggests intentionally developing competencies to support innovation. Organizations can create thoughtful leadership orientations that promote the acquisition of these abilities. By doing this, they can support and develop innovation in nursing leaders.

**High expectations**

Millennials or those who work closely with them will find this characteristic familiar. One area where this plays out: the expectation of instant feedback and decision-making (Gardner, 2016). Because of this, it is not surprising to hear that e-mail culture at many institutions feels like a text-message culture. From a sociological standpoint, we can make many assumptions as to why this is happening, with social media being the biggest driver. The more important piece is to determine how to set and meet expectations with not only the millennial nurse leader, but all leaders. Providing clear expectations and boundaries about communication on weekends and after shift is essential. It also will support millennials’ desire to have work-life balance.

Millennials thrive on constructive criticism from which they can learn and develop (Kosterlitz & Lewis, 2017). Yearly formal performance feedback likely will not meet this need (Gardner, 2016). Identifying ways to provide informal feedback by using mentors, project managers and peers can fill this gap.

Millennial nurse leaders also will have expectations from the employer organizations. Millennials expect their jobs to provide them with meaning, challenge and flexibility (Defrank-Cole & Tan, 2017). Connecting the millennial with the mission and values of the organization, both professionally and personally, can help meet this expectation. Also, challenging them to create their vision for the specialty with which they work will help fulfill the expectations while encouraging engagement with the role.

**Motivated**

The external societal norms that many millennial nurses grew up with have impacted desire and motivation in the working environment. These norms include achievement through participation and an enhanced focus on competition. Millennial leaders feel pressure to succeed at everything they do (Gardner, 2016). In addition to the drive for success, millennial leaders are highly optimistic (Kosterlitz & Lewis, 2017), competitive (Defrank-Cole & Tan, 2017) and confident. A simple strategy to support motivated millennial nurse leaders is frequent and specific praise (Gardner, 2016). In addition to praise, identifying stretch projects for the millennial leader to engage in (with adequate coaching and support) will support the need for a challenge and success.

**Life-Long Learner**

Millennials are actively engaged in their learning and professional growth. According to Becker’s Review, 39% of millennials plan to pursue a master’s degree in nursing in the next three years (Faller, 2018). As a result, supporting advancing education for all leaders is pivotal in developing a highly educated nursing leadership pool. The knowledge is essential, as many millennial leaders will lean on knowledge, not extensive experience.

In addition to millennials’ motivation to learn, they learn differently as a generation. Traditional classroom-based pedagogy may not meet the need of millennial learners (Harrison, 2017). Millennial learners can benefit from the use of social media-like learning management systems, games, practical application activities and reflective practices. Investing in tools that support just-in-time learning for millennial nurse leaders will foster resourcefulness and the ability to learn and grow from experiences.

**Mentorship models**

Mentorship seems to be a common theme not only for millennials, but for new leaders. In the traditional mentor model, an experienced and tenured nursing leader provides wisdom, knowledge and feedback. While this model has much research and literature to support it, soon the millennial leaders will outnumber those with the expertise and wisdom to mentor. With that knowledge, other mentor models have been emerging (Figure 2).

The reverse mentor model, highlighted in publications such as the Voice of Nursing Leadership and in conference presentations, has been used successfully in the technology and financial industries. Reverse mentoring occurs when a newer/younger leader mentors a senior leader. This mentoring is typically used for the mentor to share skills and knowledge with social media and technology advances. This model leverages skillsets and characteristics of one generation, pairing it with the knowledge, wisdom and expertise of another to drive faster innovation and better outcomes.

The Hartford, an insurance company, implemented a reverse mentor model and experienced impressive results. Of 12 younger mentors who participated, 11 were promoted within the year. In addition to the promotion, two patents were filed, a policy change on personal electronic use was made and financial savings on a marketing campaign occurred—all successful outcomes of the model (Sloan Center on Aging and Work, 2013). The reverse mentor model created bidirectional knowledge sharing between the mentor and mentee to promote positive change within the organization. Also, the millennial leader was able to better network, gain exposure to stretch projects and feel more connected to the organization.

Another approach is the intergenerational mentor model, which operates on the premise that “everyone leads, everyone learns.” It focuses on targeted skill and knowledge acquisition between generations. This approach assesses the generational strengths of all ages within a workplace and matches the strengths with leader needs or gaps. The benefit of this approach is that it focuses less on seniority and more on the skills and needs of all leaders equally (Satterly, Cullen, & Dyson, 2018).

No matter the mentor model used, mentorship is integral in the development and support of not only millennial nurse leaders, but all nurse leaders. Mentorship offers bidirectional learning, increased networking, improves decision-making, creates a space for regular feedback and encourages knowledge sharing.

Support and development of millennial nurse leaders doesn't have to evolve from research and theories. In March, I gave a presentation for the Seattle chapter of the Northwest Organization of Nursing Executives on millennials in nursing leadership. The group was a mix of tenured nursing leaders and new-to-leadership millennials. Together, we created ideas that nurse leaders of any generation could use to support one another (Figure 3).

Much research, theory and evidence describes practice transition. When any generation of nurses, including millennials, enters new leadership roles, they will experience transition shock. Nursing professional development departments can

### FIGURE 3: Millennial Nurse Leader Support Strategies

- Give specific praise: What they did, what strength they demonstrated and why it matters. More than just a “good job.”
- Embrace continuous improvement and failing: allow them to try projects without having all of the answers.
- To support the desire for learning offer educational group workshops, webinars, and tuition reimbursement.
- Assess/explore top values and expectations. Determine what leader activities will help achieve their values.
- Say “yes, let's try it” more often.

create and support evidence-based nurse leader transition-to-practice programs. These programs can offer foundational knowledge, leadership support and mentorship for new nurse leaders. These departments' expertise in practice transition is arguably essential for leadership transition.

Millennials will soon outnumber any other generation in nursing leadership. They have specific strengths and characteristics which make them unique. Although health care organizations can and will find ways to address these characteristics, support for the millennial nurse leader is truly no different than for any other generation. Creating a safe support network allowing for bidirectional knowledge sharing, providing regular feedback for both motivation and growth and being open to ideas will help the millennial nurse transition to a leadership role. ♦

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Lauren Kalember, MSN, RN-BC, CCRN-K**, is a manager of nursing professional development at Seattle Children's Hospital. She also serves as the program director for the Association of Nursing Professional Development-Washington Affiliate.

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