

The generations at work: A conversation with Dr. Phyllis Kritek

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Generational diversity is a major source of conflict among the nursing workforce and a focus for the Center for American Nurses, LEAD Summit 2007, May 16-19, 2007, in San Antonio Texas. The conflict between Traditionalists (born between 1900-1945), Baby Boomers, (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X, (born between 1965 and 1980), and Generation Y, (born between 1981 and 1999), often results from their differences in beliefs, attitudes and life experiences.(Almost, 2006).

Dr. Phyllis Kritek is a nationally known speaker and authority on conflict resolution, organizational development, leadership development and globalization.and will be a featured speaker during the conference. She has authored the book, “Negotiating at an Uneven Table: Developing Moral Courage in Resolving Our Conflicts” used internationally as a resource on addressing conflicts among participants with uneven power bases. We recently spoke with Dr. Kritek about the etiology and the possible interventions with generational conflict.

- **How are the differences in generations manifested in the nursing workforce?**

Currently, the two major generations at work in nursing are the Baby Boomers and Generation X. Baby Boomers believe in building stellar careers and consider changing jobs as a deterrent to your career growth. While they believe in feedback, they believe there is a time and place for feedback with a fair amount of documentation to back it up. The most significant nexus of conflict, however, occurs between the Boomers, who are currently in charge and Generation X, positioned to accept the next cycle of leadership. Boomers invest in organizational loyalty and Gen X does not, largely because they came of age watching the downsizing of the 90s where organizational loyalty did not protect workers from loss of jobs and pensions.

Conversely, Generation X believes in building a portable career and think that changing jobs is necessary throughout a nurse’s lifetime. From their leaders and peers they desire feedback more frequently as a reaffirmation of how they are doing and not just at a set time and place. Their mobility is triggered by a sense that there are no further options for growth in a given situation, so increasing opportunities for self-development with feedback and mentoring is the most powerful factor encouraging them to stay at a given job

- **What is the primary source of conflict between each generation?**

I think the most dramatic difference I have witnessed in my workshops is the issue of each generation’s inability to speak to one another in a way the other party can hear. Each group believes they have something to say and they are distressed that they are not

being listened to and appreciated for how they are feeling or for what they know. Neither group knows how to comfortably talk about conflict.

Frustrations arise as a result and important communications lines are quickly severed. Sometimes, an issue is only addressed in two or three sentences before both parties shut down. They don't continue the dialogue out of frustration over the perceived lack of understanding and believe that their efforts to resolve conflict will be futile.

- **How is communication changing as Baby Boomers are entering retirement age?**

Baby Boomers are often reluctant to leave authoritative positions and Generation X is getting frustrated over the perceived inability of Baby Boomers to relinquish control. Demographically, they are outnumbered by the Baby Boomers and many believe that they will not have an opportunity to succeed until the Baby boomers retire.

As Baby Boomers are starting to retire, they are experiencing anxiety about heading towards the end of their careers. They initially thought they were putting in place processes for long lasting improvements within the nursing profession, Now that they are realizing that their efforts have not been always been as successful as they hoped, they are desperately attempting to correct or implement changes in processes as failure, for them, is not an option.

- **How can nurses work to engage and manage generational conflict?**

First, nurses need to understand and appreciate that generational differences are a source of conflict. Baby Boomers and Generation X nurses need to make this a part of their consciousness and awareness when interacting on a daily basis. Nurses are very capable communicators, but most communication skills they possess aren't utilized for their co-workers. They often tend to be more critical of their coworkers than of their patients, applying different standards and expectations in what are fairly common behaviors associated with conflict.-

Second, nurses could build bridges of communication if they forgo viewing the other generation as "good" or "bad". Focusing on listening to each other and learning from one another's- differences could create more appreciative dialog. It helps to slow communication down, in both directions, in order to find clarity in a conversation. For example, the question, "Can you tell me more about that invites dialog and signals an openness to accept the other.

Some of the workshops that I conduct involve taking apart a conversation and looking at the meaning from different perspectives. It is almost like learning a new competency in communication. It helps when a persons learn to focus on and reflectively observe their own personal communication style and not try to change how another person is speaking or on what they have to say.

It requires courage for one to look at their own way of communicating and admit that their methods of communicating are contributing to conflict. As nurses become more trained in the subtle nuances of the art of communication, they may not be so quick to jump to a conclusion without seeking a better understanding of the other person's intentions. When successful, the results can be tremendous. As nurses learn to harvest their collective wisdom across the generations, great things can be accomplished.

Almost, J. Conflict within nursing work environments: A concept analysis. *J Adv Nurs* 2006; 53:444-453.

Kritek, P.B. (2002). *Negotiating at an Uneven Table: Developing Moral Courage in Resolving Our Conflicts*. Wiley, John & Sons, Inc.