

Millennial Nurse Manager: Leading Staff Nurses More Experienced Than You

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This retirement of baby boomer nurses will not only deplete the number of staff nurses at the bedside but, will also affect the nurse manager pool. In the next few years, millennial nurses will make more than half of the nursing workforce and with this growing void of nurse managers, it is becoming a reality that millennial nurses will be and are beginning to take on nurse manager roles.

A hot topic among nurse leaders is the retirement of baby boomer nurses and the impending knowledge and skill gap that will open as a result. This retirement of baby boomer nurses will not only deplete the number of staff nurses at the bedside but, will also affect the nurse manager pool.¹ In the next few years, millennial nurses will make more than half of the nursing workforce,² and with this growing void of nurse managers, it is becoming a reality that millennial nurses will be and are beginning to take on nurse manager roles.³ Although becoming a nurse manager may be a scary venture for a younger nurse, there is evidence to show that millennials want to be in leadership roles and will take the opportunities if they arise.⁴ With these current realities, it is imperative that millennial nurses are provided with the essentials for success as nurse managers.^{3,5}

I began my nursing career working in a burn intensive care unit. Early on working in this department, I expressed an interest in leadership. I had an empowering nurse manager who was very supportive and provided opportunities for growth and development. For example, I was assigned as a relief charge nurse within 1 year of working in the department, became a pod leader in our unit-based council, and led in a process improvement project. I also enrolled in a master's degree program with a focus in health care leadership to hone in on the knowledge and skills for the path that I wanted to take.

With only 2 years of nursing experience and at the age of 28, I was promoted into a management role. I had feelings of fear and trepidation; I did not know what to expect or how I would fare as a manager leading nurses of other generations with more experience than me. My nursing staff comprised about 20% baby boomers, 45% Generation Xers, and 35% millennials, with an average of 12 years of nursing experience ranging from 1 year through 35 years. I asked myself, "Am I old enough to do this?" "Do I have enough knowledge

and experience to lead these nurses?" and "Will they respect me?" There was quite a lot of chatter among staff, "How can she possibly manage this unit?" "She is not ready for this." Those words were difficult to hear, but I understood why they would say that because I shared the same doubts. This, however, did not deter me from getting into a management role. I set off into this role with pride and excitement, and told myself "I can do this." The purpose of this article is to provide 7 key strategies that helped me to be successful as a new millennial nurse manager. Although each individual's journey is unique, I believe these strategies can help other millennials be successful as nurse managers and to not be afraid to take on nurse manager roles.

1. BE AN ACTIVE LEARNER

As a nurse manager, you are surrounded by many opportunities to learn, such as, mentorship, academic education, reading books, listening to leadership podcasts, etc. You have to seek those opportunities, be a sponge, and absorb as much knowledge as you can. Having a mentor is vital for success and learning.^{3,5,6(p208)} Your mentor should be a seasoned leader in whom you can trust.^{6(p208)} You can have more than 1 mentor, but I have found it beneficial to have at least 1 who is a formal mentor with whom I can always count on to provide guidance at any time. My mentor has been my sounding board, who helped me navigate the leadership maze and how to best lead nurses of older generations. My mentor helped me on how to have crucial conversations with staff through role play and guided me in writing a business case for requesting additional staffing for my department.

Mentored onboarding in the practice setting has been identified as crucial for leadership success.³ If not provided to you, you can share the American Organization for Nursing Leadership (AONL) Nurse Manager Competencies⁷ with your director. These

competencies can be used to develop a plan for your training and role development.³ Sharing these competencies can be a reverse mentorship opportunity between you and your director.⁸ You would basically be teaching your director how they can provide you structure for your training and development.

I obtained a master's degree to advance my knowledge and skills in leadership, and for forward mobilization of our profession. Although advancing academic education is not a requirement for the nurse manager role, it is recognized as vital for leadership development and successful role transition.⁵ Graduate education in leadership delves deep into those topics related to the AONL nurse manager competencies such as finance, human resource management, and strategic planning.^{5,7} There are many leadership podcasts that can be found online or through phone applications such as Ted Talks or YouTube, etc. These podcasts vary in content, length, and depth but provide impactful lessons related to leadership and management. I have also read several leadership books; one example is the book *From Staff Nurse to Manager: A Guide to Successful Role Transition*.⁹ I read this book in my first month of formal leadership; it served as a practical guide on how to change my mindset from a bedside nurse moving to a nurse manager role. One of my mentors advised me that each year I read at least 1 non-nursing leadership book, I have found this has profoundly broadened my perspective on leadership and management.

2. BE CONFIDENT AND ENTHUSIASTIC

It is very easy to get stuck on the fact that you have very few years of nursing experience, therefore, you are not well equipped to be a nurse manager. This is a fallacy, and you should get that thought quickly out of your head.^{6(p211)} Hancock states, "The journey to formal leadership often begins when someone recognizes a staff member's potential."^{10(p59)} You have to realize that someone with more experience than you recognized your potential and they believed in you. Be confident in your abilities, the education you received and your few years of experience, these are the basics needed to be a nurse manager.¹¹ The skill set of a nurse manager differs from that of a bedside nurse and has to be learned.^{9(pp3-5),11} Acknowledging that you do not know everything and being enthusiastic to learn will help you grow as a nurse manager and will even build credibility and trust with your staff.^{6(p109),11}

3. BE RESPECTFUL AND OPEN-MINDED

It is a fact that as a millennial nurse manager, you will be leading nurses with more experience than you. It is important that you respect your staff and the knowledge and experience that they have.^{6(p210),11} Your more experienced staff have a breadth of knowledge and have some amazing insights brought to them by their years in the profession and in life.^{6(p210)} It is best you put hierarchy to

the side, be open-minded, and learn from those nurses that are older and more experienced than you.

At one time in my department, we found that "standard" postoperative wound care was being missed. Newer nurses were sometimes missing an aspect of postoperative wound care if there were no physician orders written, but seasoned nurses knew to follow-up with the physicians and obtain orders as needed. One of the nurses on my team had been in the department for over 25 years; she was the wound care expert with a solid perspective on how things should be done. I explored her thoughts on this gap in care that we had found in the department and then I asked for her assistance to create a tool for a standard approach to postoperative wound care. The goal was all nurses in the department could use this tool as reference, such that, even if orders were missed, the nurses would be able to discuss with the physicians and obtain the orders as needed. I made sure to recognize this nurse for her contribution and input. This nurse ended up becoming one of the skin champions in the department, and with that, became a formal resource for all staff in the department. I believe that respect and openness to learn from your more experienced staff brings out a humanness and vulnerability in you that helps build trust with staff.

4. GET TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND YOUR STAFF

It cannot be overemphasized; every nurse manager needs to know and understand their staff.^{6(pp157-161),11} Have one-to-one meetings with all your staff especially in the beginning and ask the same questions¹¹: What are their expectations and concerns? What are their professional development goals? If they were you, what would they prioritize? And what is their preferred method of communication and recognition? From those interactions with your staff, you learn what your priorities for the department should be, and at the same time, you learn your staff's strengths and motivations.⁶ You can then tap into those strengths and motivations for better patient outcomes, teamwork, and collaboration in your unit. Round on your staff daily or at minimum weekly, even if it is just for a few minutes. Use rounding as an opportunity to learn something personal about each your staff, for example, hobbies, children, pets, and so on.^{6(p157),11} These details, although small, make for good conversation once in a while, so it is not business talk all the time. Also, understand generational characteristics that will serve as a guide on how to lead and even communicate with your staff.¹¹ Although this seems like a lot of work, it demonstrates you pay attention to detail and care about your staff.^{6(pp157-158)} There is evidence to show that staff who have regular meetings with their managers are engaged and in turn can drive productivity up in the department.¹²

5. BE CONSISTENT, FIRM, AND FAIR

Being firm is probably the hardest skill to learn. We generally want to be liked, but in order to keep a high standard of performance and uphold standards of practice, you have to be firm and consistent. Ensure you set expectations early and clearly.^{6(p208)} Take the opportunity to coach your staff and follow performance management processes as needed. You will be tested on your fairness, therefore, treat all staff equally.^{9(p28)} You may feel inclined to want to favor some of your staff, especially those who were your buddies at the bedside. One of the nurses in my department came and asked me to leave work early voluntarily (flex) as the patient census was low. I was surprised she came to ask me as our process had always been the charge nurse flexes staff after reviewing the flex rotation list. I asked this nurse why she did not go to the charge nurse? She responded, “I just want to go home; I know you can make this happen.” I sent this nurse to the charge nurse to review flex rotation list, and if the charge nurse determined she was the one to flex, then she could. Had I flexed this nurse, this could have quickly spiraled out of control, bending the rules for 1 staff would mean bending them for the rest. It is, therefore, better to consistently do the right thing, the right way for everyone, every time.

6. BE SUPPORTIVE AND LEND A HAND TO YOUR STAFF

Your staff want to know you will support them when they need you. There may be an ethical dilemma with a patient or a difficult physician; they need to know you will support them and speak up for them as needed. On one occasion, a physician was yelling at a nurse at our nurse’s station. In that moment, I called out the inappropriateness of this physician’s behavior and asked them to stop yelling at this nurse. I asked what the issue was and could it be addressed without yelling. I also took this physician to the side and reiterated that as issues arise, it is best they are resolved collaboratively and respectfully, without yelling. That nurse later on thanked me for being supportive.

Also, lend a hand to your staff when you can. It could be as simple as emptying out a urinal or addressing a beeping IV pump while you are in a patient’s room. It goes a long way with your staff, and this will show you are not that far detached from them. There, however, needs to be boundaries surrounding helping staff.¹³ It is easy to want to spend time doing clinical work; it is your area of expertise and within your comfort level. It is important to remember that you have several administrative duties, therefore, you should effectively spend your time on duties specific to your role.¹³

7. BE REFLECTIVE

Reflective journaling has been found to be a crucial skill to learn for gaining insight on your experiences in leadership and helps build resiliency.^{7,14} The Center of

Creative leadership provides 3 components that each leader should address when journaling: identify event; what your reaction was; and the lesson.¹⁴ A few months into becoming a nurse manager, I had to terminate a poorly performing nurse. This nurse was already on progressive discipline and had been given multiple opportunities to improve. An incident occurred, and after thorough investigation with the assistance of my human resources partner and my director, we determined to it was best to terminate this nurse. I was distraught; I felt I was taking the means to a living for this nurse and this thought kept playing over in my head. I then reflected on this incident: event—terminating a poorly performing nurse; reaction—sad, distraught, and ruminating on the situation; and lesson—although terminating a staff member was tough, there was no need to be sad or to ruminate. This nurse was given ample time to improve her performance, and it was her responsibility to make the necessary changes to improve. Her performance was detrimental to patient care and a liability to the organization. The decision to terminate her was the right thing for the patients and for the organization. The above is just 1 example of my reflections, I have written several on my journey. I have found so much power in going back to read what I wrote and seeing how much I have grown, both in thought process and approach in leadership.

CONCLUSION

Four years later, I have successfully transitioned from staff nurse to nurse manager, and I do not regret making the role transition. I have found that success as a nurse manager is not measured by receiving an award or someone telling you “great job.” Rather, success is having optimal patient outcomes, satisfied patients, and an engaged and empowered staff that consult you as needed and keep you informed.¹⁵ Other successes are seeing a new hire develop into an excellent nurse, having an active unit-based council, or your staff nurse receiving a Daisy award. Most importantly, success as a nurse manager is never losing sight of how you wanted to be treated and lead by your nurse manager when you were at the bedside. We millennial nurses are a glimmer of hope for the dwindling nursing workforce. The previously mentioned strategies can be an empowerment tool and help pave the road to success for those millennial nurses currently in or striving to get into nurse manager roles.

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1541-4612/2019/ \$ See front matter
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2018.09.005>