



# What Brandon Can Teach Nurses About Leadership

**M**y Gen-X nurse friend recently sent me a video of her 3-year-old son's first day at pre-school. I was in the midst of a large nurse retention study, but I took a break to watch Brandon make his way into the world of playmates and play dates. As I watched Brandon explore his new social system, I suddenly realized I was watching the answer to the dilemma of retaining young nurses in the hospital setting, increasing their job satisfaction, facilitating their leadership development, and ensuring their career success in the future. Indeed, the lessons taught by Brandon and his peers are simple. If we want to ensure that tomorrow's nursing leaders grow and prosper, if we want to have a caring and competent nurse there to care for the Boomer generation in the future, if we want to ensure that the best and the brightest enter and stay in nursing, here is how to do it.

By Lynn Wieck

### Lesson #1. Share your toys.

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Many Boomer nurses grew up in two-parent, single-income homes with several siblings and modest financial means. Their parents, having lived through the Depression and World War II, were often focused on earning a living, making the world safe, and giving their children more than they had. Developing interpersonal skills and social graces were not always a top priority. Therefore, sharing information and experience may take a backseat to getting the work done and making a difference. Some older nurses are perceived as thinking that new nurses have to earn the right to be a nurse. “I learned the hard way, so can you!” Emerging workforce nurses have their eyes on the outcome. They work to meet objectives and reach goals. They find the idea of hoarding information and failure to share short-cuts and insights to be totally counterproductive to reaching the goal. Young children learn early that if you share your toys, it makes everyone happy and creates a harmonious social environment. Experienced nurses who refuse to share their knowledge, experiences, and insights contribute to driving young nurses out of the hospital environment. And new nurses must step up and admit when they need help. When you share your toys, everyone wins. The joy of giving and the happiness of receiving improve the health care environment for everyone.

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### Lesson #2. wait your turn.

Today, Millennial nurses (those born between 1980-2000) are loyal employees who seek to make a difference in life, but their life lessons have not focused on patience. They have grown up in an instantaneous world where television has 500 channels and instant messaging gives you immediate access. Unlike their Boomer counterparts who remember a world without computers and the internet, young nurses are part of the “plugged-in” world. Tulgan (2004) says that young people today do not intend to stay at their first job for more than a couple of years. Therefore, they cannot afford to be patient about raises, bonuses, promotions – they are not going to be around that long. Boomer nurses think of this as disloyal and are impatient with younger nurses who want to bypass the “system.” They waited their turn and expect the younger nurses to do the same. Patience is a virtue that could benefit both generations.

### Lesson #3. Listen to the teacher.

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The twenty-something generation grew up with “Sesame Street” where even a grouch was treated with dignity and respect. Baby Boomers grew up with



“Father Knows Best” where the world revolved around a male head of household who solved all of the problems and had the last say. And while everyone may want to be the leader, all of the generations could benefit from knowing when to lead and when to follow. Young nurses need to listen to the senior staff when they talk about policies, procedures, protocols, and politics. It is fine to respectfully question the status quo, but the structure of the hospital is there to protect patients and staff as well to prevent chaos. On the other hand, young nurses may be the leaders when it comes to technology. They grew up in a high-tech world and are not hindered by what computers cannot do but are constantly challenged to make them do more. Listening to the teacher involves the conscious act of deciding who the best teacher is in each situation.

#### Lesson #4. Say please and thank you.

# 4

One of the most frequent responses to what nurses of all ages want in their workplace is “recognition from my manager” (Wieck, 2004). The need for recognition and praise is ageless and vital. Young people crave attention and feedback from those they respect and are perfectly happy receiving it in an email. A hallmark of the Boomer generation is that they value respect and feel they have earned it. By showing common courtesy to each other, by saying please when asking for help and thank you when it is given, we set up an environment of respect for all generations where nurses want to stay and excel.

#### Lesson #5. If the other kid falls down, lend a hand.

# 5

While nurses routinely show kindness, compassion, and caring to patients and families, they often fail to show those same attributes to each other. Leah Curtin, a well-known nurse leader, once said, “Nurses are the only group that, when threatened, circle the wagons and shoot each other!” New grads need help and praise and input. If they fall down, they need help to get up. Senior nurses are dealing with the aches and pains of growing older, often working 12-hour shifts which test the strength and endurance of their aging skeletal systems. If they fall down, literally or figuratively, they need help getting up.

So Brandon’s life lessons can go a long way in helping senior nurses serve as worthy role models in developing young nurse leaders. Emerging workforce nurses can find a home in nursing where they can grow and prosper through career fulfillment and balance in the workplace. All we need to do is remember what we learned at preschool: respect your peers and they should respect you in return. ©



## references

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**Lynn Wieck, PhD, RN, FAAN**, is Chief Executive Officer of Houston-based company Management Solutions for Healthcare, and is a nurse consultant for health policy and workforce issues. She is also the Jacqueline M. Braithwaite Professor at the University of Texas at Tyler where she is helping develop a new online PhD program. Her latest book, *Stories for Nurses: Acts of Caring* was released in August, 2002 and has received an American Journal of Nursing Book of the Year award. Dr. Wieck will be the Endnote Speaker at NSNA's 56th Annual Convention at the Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center in Grapevine, TX.

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