

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP STYLES IN SHAPING NURSING TEAM PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Leadership in nursing is a critical determinant of team performance, job satisfaction, and patient care quality. As the healthcare landscape grows increasingly complex, effective leadership has become essential to addressing workforce challenges, improving team dynamics, and fostering resilience among nurses. This paper explores the impact of various leadership styles—transformational, transactional, servant, and laissez-faire—on nursing team performance, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and influence on outcomes such as job satisfaction, innovation, and burnout. Transformational and servant leadership emerge as the most effective styles, promoting collaboration, trust, and professional growth, while transactional leadership is suited for task-oriented, high-stakes scenarios. Conversely, laissez-faire leadership often leads to confusion and reduced team cohesion. Mediating factors, including workplace relationships, communication, resilience, and organizational support, play a pivotal role in shaping the success of leadership approaches. However, implementing effective leadership is not without challenges. Workforce shortages, leader burnout, resistance to change, and inadequate organizational resources create barriers that must be addressed to optimize leadership effectiveness. This paper emphasizes the need for leadership development programs, organizational support, and policies that prioritize nursing leaders' well-being and professional growth. By fostering adaptive and supportive leadership, healthcare systems can enhance team performance, reduce turnover, and improve patient outcomes, ensuring sustainable, high-quality care delivery.

Introduction

Leadership is a cornerstone of effective healthcare delivery, particularly in nursing, where the dynamics of teamwork, communication, and patient care intersect. Leadership styles not only influence the performance of nursing teams but also impact job satisfaction, resilience, and the quality of patient care. In an era where healthcare systems are strained by growing patient demands, workforce shortages, and increasingly complex clinical environments, effective leadership has become more critical than ever. Leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, servant, and laissez-faire each produce unique outcomes in nursing teams, shaping how they respond to stress, adapt to change, and achieve organizational goals. This article explores the interplay between leadership styles and nursing team performance, using empirical research and theoretical models to underscore the importance of leadership in fostering high-functioning clinical environments.

The Importance of Leadership in Nursing

Leadership in nursing is both a critical and complex concept that directly impacts the performance of healthcare teams, the quality of care delivered to patients, and the retention of skilled professionals within the workforce. The role of nurse leaders extends beyond managing daily operations to creating environments where nurses feel supported, motivated, and empowered to provide high-quality care. In an increasingly challenging healthcare landscape marked by workforce shortages, rising patient demands, and resource constraints, effective leadership is essential to maintaining the resilience and efficiency of nursing teams.

Leadership as a Catalyst for High-Performing Teams

Nursing is inherently a team-based profession, requiring seamless collaboration, communication, and coordination to ensure optimal patient outcomes. Nurse leaders play a pivotal role in fostering these dynamics within their teams. By setting clear expectations, providing guidance, and facilitating open communication, they ensure that all team members work cohesively toward shared goals. Effective leadership helps mitigate conflicts, improve interpersonal relationships, and boost team morale, all of which contribute to higher levels of performance and productivity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research has consistently shown that nursing teams led by skilled leaders exhibit greater cohesion, lower error rates, and higher levels of patient satisfaction (McCay et al., 2018).

Addressing Workforce Challenges Through Leadership

One of the most pressing issues facing the nursing profession today is the global workforce shortage. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 27 million nurses and midwives make up nearly 50% of the global healthcare workforce. However, there is a projected shortfall of 6 million nurses by 2030—a gap that threatens the sustainability of health systems worldwide (WHO, 2022). This shortage places immense pressure on existing staff, leading to increased workloads, stress, and burnout. Leadership is critical in addressing these challenges by advocating for better staffing levels, ensuring equitable workload distribution, and fostering environments that promote job satisfaction and retention.

Effective leaders also play a key role in combating turnover, which exacerbates workforce shortages. High turnover rates among nurses are often linked to dissatisfaction with leadership, lack of support, and poor work environments. Nurse leaders who adopt transformational or servant leadership styles are better equipped to address these issues by creating positive, supportive environments that enhance nurses' sense of purpose and belonging (Specchia et al., 2021). By prioritizing the well-being of their teams, leaders can reduce turnover rates and ensure that healthcare organizations retain skilled and experienced professionals.

Promoting Job Satisfaction and Resilience

Job satisfaction is a critical determinant of nursing performance, and leadership plays a central role in shaping how nurses perceive their work environment. Transformational and servant leaders, for instance, foster job satisfaction by recognizing and valuing the contributions of their team members, providing opportunities for professional growth, and promoting a culture of trust and respect (Baljoon et al., 2018). These leadership styles also help to mitigate the effects of workplace stress, which is particularly important in high-pressure environments like emergency departments or intensive care units.

Resilience is another critical outcome of effective leadership in nursing. Healthcare settings are often characterized by unpredictability, emotional intensity, and high stakes, all of which can take a toll on nurses' mental and emotional well-being. Leaders who prioritize the psychological safety of their teams and provide resources for coping with stress foster resilience, enabling nurses to navigate challenges without compromising their performance or well-being (Wei et al., 2019). Resilient teams are better equipped to maintain high standards of care even in the face of adversity, such as during public health crises or resource shortages.

Enhancing Patient Care Outcomes

Ultimately, the quality of leadership in nursing has a direct impact on patient care outcomes. Effective leaders ensure that their teams adhere to evidence-based practices, maintain high levels of accountability, and continuously strive for excellence in care delivery. Transformational leaders, in particular, inspire their teams to go above and beyond their basic responsibilities, engaging in proactive problem-solving and innovation that improve patient safety and satisfaction (Salanova et al., 2011).

Nurse leaders also play a crucial role in fostering a culture of patient safety. By emphasizing the importance of adherence to safety protocols, promoting open communication about errors, and encouraging a non-punitive approach to incident reporting, they create environments where patient safety is a shared priority (Vaismoradi et al., 2020). This is particularly important in high-risk settings, where a single error can have devastating consequences.

Bridging the Gap Between Management and Staff

In addition to their responsibilities within nursing teams, nurse leaders serve as a vital link between frontline staff and organizational management. They advocate for the needs and concerns of their teams, ensuring that decision-makers are aware of the challenges faced by nurses and the resources

required to support them. This advocacy role is particularly important in addressing systemic issues such as inadequate staffing, limited access to training, and insufficient investment in nursing infrastructure (Cho & Han, 2018). By bridging the gap between staff and management, nurse leaders help align organizational goals with the needs of their teams, creating a more harmonious and productive work environment.

Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Nursing Team Performance

Leadership styles play a critical role in determining the performance, motivation, and overall satisfaction of nursing teams. The style of leadership adopted by nurse leaders influences team dynamics, decision-making, communication, and the ability to deliver high-quality patient care. In healthcare environments, where collaboration and adaptability are essential, effective leadership is crucial to fostering positive outcomes. Transformational, transactional, servant, and laissez-faire leadership styles each have unique impacts on nursing teams, shaping how they interact with one another, handle stress, and achieve their goals. Understanding these styles and their effects on nursing performance can help organizations create supportive environments that optimize team functionality and enhance patient care.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is widely regarded as one of the most effective approaches in nursing. This style is characterized by a leader's ability to inspire and motivate their team by creating a shared vision, fostering innovation, and prioritizing the professional development of their staff. Transformational leaders focus on building trust and creating a sense of purpose, encouraging nurses to go beyond basic responsibilities and contribute proactively to team goals.

Studies have consistently shown that transformational leadership improves nurse performance by enhancing job satisfaction, engagement, and resilience. A systematic review by Specchia et al. (2021) found that transformational leadership was associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and lower rates of burnout among nurses. This leadership style also fosters psychological safety, allowing nurses to voice their concerns, share ideas, and learn from mistakes without fear of criticism or punishment.

Transformational leaders tend to empower their teams by involving them in decision-making processes, which fosters a sense of ownership and accountability. In the context of nursing, this can lead to improved problem-solving and innovation. For example, nurses working under transformational leaders are more likely to take initiative in identifying areas for improvement, such as implementing new protocols to enhance patient safety. Furthermore, transformational leadership has been linked to better patient outcomes. A study by Salanova et al. (2011) found that nurses under transformational leaders exhibited proactive behaviors and extra-role performance, such as mentoring peers and improving workflows, which contributed to higher levels of patient satisfaction and care quality.

Despite its many advantages, transformational leadership requires significant emotional intelligence, strong communication skills, and the ability to inspire trust. Leaders who lack these

qualities may struggle to effectively implement this leadership style, particularly in high-stress environments where rapid decision-making is required.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is a more task-oriented and hierarchical style, focused on achieving specific goals through a system of rewards and punishments. Leaders using this style emphasize adherence to established protocols and the completion of assigned tasks. In nursing, transactional leadership can be effective in ensuring compliance with regulations, maintaining consistency, and managing crises where clear directives are essential.

While transactional leadership is useful in situations that require strict adherence to procedures—such as infection control or emergency response—its emphasis on rules and structure can sometimes stifle creativity and innovation. Nurses working under transactional leaders may feel less motivated to contribute beyond their assigned duties, as this style does not typically address their emotional or developmental needs (Sharma & Dhar, 2016).

However, transactional leadership can be beneficial for new or less experienced nurses who require clear guidance and structure. For example, in situations where nurses are unfamiliar with specific protocols or are working in high-pressure environments, transactional leaders provide clarity through well-defined expectations and immediate feedback. This can help nurses build confidence and develop their skills.

One of the main criticisms of transactional leadership is that it may lead to disengagement over time. Nurses may feel undervalued if their work is recognized solely through rewards or penalties, without acknowledgment of their intrinsic contributions or personal growth. Over-reliance on this leadership style can also result in high turnover rates, as nurses may seek more supportive and empowering work environments.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a people-centered approach that prioritizes the needs of team members over organizational objectives. Servant leaders focus on building trust, fostering collaboration, and supporting the personal and professional development of their staff. In nursing, servant leadership creates a positive work environment that enhances team performance and promotes job satisfaction.

Research has demonstrated that servant leadership is particularly effective in reducing workplace stress and improving morale. A study by Kül and Sönmez (2021) found that nurses working under servant leaders reported higher levels of satisfaction and were more likely to engage in innovative problem-solving. By actively listening to their teams and addressing their concerns, servant leaders create a culture of mutual respect and support, which translates into better patient care.

Servant leadership also emphasizes mentorship and professional growth. Nurse leaders who adopt this style often provide opportunities for training and development, helping their teams build skills and confidence. This approach not only improves individual performance but also fosters a sense

of loyalty and commitment among staff. Nurses who feel supported and valued are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to remain engaged in their roles.

One limitation of servant leadership is that it can be time-intensive, requiring leaders to invest significant effort in meeting the needs of their teams. In resource-constrained environments, where leaders are often stretched thin, it may be challenging to fully implement this approach. However, the long-term benefits of servant leadership—such as increased retention and improved team morale—make it a worthwhile investment.

Laissez-Faire Leadership

Laissez-faire leadership is characterized by a hands-off approach, where leaders provide minimal guidance or involvement in team activities. While this style may be suitable for highly skilled and autonomous teams, it is generally associated with negative outcomes in nursing. Laissez-faire leadership often leads to confusion, lack of accountability, and reduced cohesion, particularly in high-pressure environments where clear direction is required (Cha & Sung, 2020).

Nurses working under laissez-faire leaders frequently report lower job satisfaction and higher levels of stress. This leadership style can create uncertainty, as team members may feel unsupported or unsure of their responsibilities. In critical care settings, where timely decision-making and effective communication are essential, laissez-faire leadership can have serious consequences for patient safety.

Despite its shortcomings, laissez-faire leadership may have some advantages in specific contexts. For example, experienced nurses who are confident in their abilities may appreciate the autonomy afforded by this approach. However, even in these cases, the absence of active leadership can limit opportunities for mentorship and professional growth.

Comparing Leadership Styles

Each leadership style has unique strengths and limitations, and the effectiveness of a particular style often depends on the context in which it is applied. Transformational and servant leadership are generally associated with the most positive outcomes in nursing, fostering job satisfaction, engagement, and resilience. Transactional leadership, while effective for achieving short-term goals and ensuring compliance, may fail to address the long-term needs of nursing teams. Laissez-faire leadership, on the other hand, is rarely beneficial in healthcare settings, where active involvement and clear communication are crucial.

Nurse leaders must be adaptable, selecting and combining leadership styles based on the needs of their teams and the challenges they face. For example, a transformational leader may adopt transactional strategies during a crisis to ensure adherence to protocols, while returning to a more empowering and collaborative approach once the situation stabilizes. By understanding the strengths and limitations of different leadership styles, nurse leaders can create environments where their teams thrive, ultimately improving patient care and organizational outcomes.

Additional Mediating Factors in Leadership and Performance

Leadership styles alone do not fully determine nursing team performance. A variety of mediating factors influence how leadership affects outcomes such as team cohesion, job satisfaction, and patient care quality. These factors include workplace relationships, communication and decision-making, resilience and burnout, and organizational support. Understanding these mediators can help nurse leaders tailor their approaches to maximize team performance and create sustainable work environments.

Workplace Relationships

The quality of workplace relationships is a critical mediator in the relationship between leadership and nursing team performance. Transformational and servant leaders often foster strong interpersonal connections within their teams by promoting trust, respect, and collaboration. These positive relationships create a sense of belonging and mutual support, which enhances teamwork and reduces conflict. In contrast, leadership styles that fail to prioritize team dynamics, such as transactional or laissez-faire leadership, can lead to fragmented relationships and decreased morale. Strong workplace relationships not only improve the team's ability to work cohesively but also help nurses feel supported and valued, which boosts their overall performance and job satisfaction (Tran et al., 2018).

Communication and Decision-Making

Effective communication is a hallmark of successful leadership and is instrumental in mediating the relationship between leadership style and team performance. Leaders who facilitate open communication create environments where team members feel heard, valued, and empowered to share ideas and concerns. Transformational and servant leaders excel in fostering this kind of dialogue, which improves decision-making and problem-solving within nursing teams. On the other hand, poor communication—often associated with laissez-faire leadership—can lead to misunderstandings, errors, and diminished team cohesion. Clear, consistent communication ensures that nurses understand their roles, responsibilities, and organizational goals, thereby enhancing performance and patient outcomes (Specchia et al., 2021).

Resilience and Burnout

Resilience and burnout are critical factors that mediate the impact of leadership on nursing team performance. Transformational and servant leadership styles are particularly effective at fostering resilience by promoting a sense of psychological safety, work engagement, and access to resources. Resilient nurses are better equipped to handle the emotional and physical challenges of their roles, maintaining high performance even in stressful situations. Conversely, leadership styles that fail to address workplace stress, such as laissez-faire leadership, can exacerbate burnout, leading to decreased productivity, errors, and high turnover rates. Nurses who feel supported by their leadership are less likely to experience burnout, which directly improves patient care and team stability (Wei et al., 2019).

Organizational Support

Organizational factors such as staffing levels, resource availability, and access to professional development opportunities significantly mediate the effectiveness of leadership. For instance, transformational and servant leaders are more successful in environments that provide adequate resources and support, as this allows them to focus on team development rather than crisis management. Conversely, poor organizational support can undermine even the most effective leaders by creating conditions of chronic stress and resource scarcity. Leaders who advocate for better organizational support, such as improved staffing ratios and access to training, can enhance both team performance and job satisfaction (Cho & Han, 2018).

Challenges in Implementing Effective Leadership

The implementation of effective nursing leadership is fraught with several challenges, many of which stem from the unique complexities of the healthcare environment. These challenges include workforce shortages, burnout among leaders, resistance to change, and insufficient organizational support. Addressing these obstacles is critical for fostering leadership that promotes team performance, job satisfaction, and quality patient care.

Workforce Shortages

One of the most significant challenges to effective leadership in nursing is the global workforce shortage. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the world faces an estimated shortfall of 6 million nurses by 2030 (WHO, 2022). This shortage places immense strain on nurse leaders, who are often required to manage understaffed teams while simultaneously addressing the needs of overworked and stressed employees. Workforce shortages not only limit the time that leaders can dedicate to mentorship and professional development but also force them to prioritize operational tasks over long-term strategic goals. As a result, leaders may struggle to implement transformational or servant leadership approaches, which require time and effort to build trust, foster collaboration, and develop team members.

Burnout Among Leaders

Burnout is another critical barrier to effective leadership in nursing. The demanding nature of leadership roles, coupled with the high-pressure environment of healthcare, often leads to physical and emotional exhaustion among nurse leaders. Burned-out leaders may find it difficult to inspire and motivate their teams, resulting in disengagement and reduced performance across the organization. A study by Wei et al. (2019) highlights that burnout among leaders not only affects their own well-being but also creates a ripple effect, negatively impacting team morale and patient care. To combat this challenge, healthcare organizations must prioritize the mental health and well-being of nurse leaders by providing resources, support systems, and opportunities for self-care.

Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is a common challenge in healthcare organizations, particularly when leaders attempt to introduce new policies, practices, or leadership styles. Nurses, like any professionals,

may feel apprehensive about changes that disrupt established routines or require them to adapt to unfamiliar processes. Leaders who adopt transformational or servant leadership styles may face initial pushback as their teams adjust to new expectations, such as increased collaboration or a shift in decision-making dynamics. Overcoming resistance requires strong communication skills, the ability to articulate clear benefits of the change, and a commitment to building trust over time.

Lack of Organizational Support

Insufficient organizational support is another major obstacle to effective leadership. Nurse leaders often operate in environments with limited resources, inadequate staffing, and high patient demands, which can hinder their ability to implement leadership strategies effectively. For instance, a leader may want to prioritize professional development for their team but lack the budget or time to do so. Similarly, leaders may struggle to advocate for their teams if organizational policies or priorities conflict with nursing needs. Research by Cho and Han (2018) emphasizes that strong organizational support, including adequate resources and clear communication channels, is essential for leaders to succeed.

Strategies for Enhancing Nursing Leadership

Leadership Training and Development

Leadership training programs should focus on developing competencies in transformational and servant leadership, such as emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and effective communication. Training should also address the unique challenges of healthcare settings, equipping nurse leaders with the skills needed to navigate high-stress environments and foster resilience among their teams (Specchia et al., 2021).

Mentorship and Role Modeling

Mentorship programs can play a critical role in developing effective nurse leaders. Experienced leaders can provide guidance and support to emerging leaders, helping them navigate the complexities of healthcare leadership. Role modeling is also an effective way to promote positive leadership behaviors and foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement (Baljoon et al., 2018).

Policy and Organizational Support

Healthcare organizations must create policies and structures that support effective leadership. This includes providing adequate staffing, resources, and professional development opportunities for nurse leaders. Additionally, organizations should establish mechanisms for evaluating and rewarding leadership performance, ensuring alignment with organizational goals and values (Cho & Han, 2018).

Conclusion

The role of leadership in shaping nursing team performance cannot be overstated. Transformational and servant leadership styles have been consistently associated with improved job satisfaction, resilience, and patient care outcomes. Conversely, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles, while useful in specific circumstances, often fail to address the holistic needs of nursing teams. By investing in leadership training, mentorship, and organizational support, healthcare systems can empower nurse leaders to inspire and motivate their teams, ultimately enhancing the quality of care delivered to patients. Addressing leadership challenges is not only essential for optimizing nursing performance but also for ensuring the sustainability and resilience of healthcare systems amid ongoing workforce shortages and increasing patient demands.

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