The Role of Transformational Leadership in Successful Change Management

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The healthcare system is constantly evolving due to the various external and internal pressures that are placed upon it, such as budgetary restrictions, the nursing shortage, and technological advancements (Velmurugan, 2017). In order to respond to these changes, appropriate change management strategies must be implemented by healthcare institutions. Unfortunately, many change initiatives fail due to the attitudes of team members and poor change implementation processes (Ahmad & Zhichao, 2018). It is known that staff engagement is one of the many keys to success, and that changes should be planned and implemented from a bottom-up rather than top-down approach (Hanan & Cronin, n.d.). Transformational leadership, with its focus on collaboration, inspiration of team members, transparency, and being genuine, is an ideal approach when creating successful, sustainable change within healthcare.

Change Management Within the Healthcare Setting

As stated by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, change is the only thing in life that is constant (as cited in Geyer & Altman, 2016, p. 34). In other words, if there is one thing we can count on, it is that change will happen whether we like it or not. There are many changes which the healthcare system currently faces. This includes change for economic or political reasons, such as the need to deliver quality patient care despite rising consumer expectations, increasingly constrained resources, increasing acuity, and decreasing length of stay (Velmurugan, 2017). There are also social and demographic changes at play, such as the shrinking nursing pool, the aging population, increasing cultural diversity, and a higher risk of litigation when errors in care occur (Velmurugan, 2017). To add to the problem, failed change initiatives can cause individuals to become increasingly insecure, anxious, resistant, and ultimately unlikely to cooperate with future change processes (Delmatoff & Lazarus, 2014). The question, therefore, is

how to create lasting, successful change when approximately 70% of change efforts fail (Geyer & Altman, 2016). This represents a huge challenge for the healthcare system, and change management is therefore a critical skill for any nurse manager or leader.

An Introduction to Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders bring people together, not despite diversity but because of it in order to create change (Greene-Ryan, Laphan-Morad, Cristofalo, Smith, & Conners, 2016). Transformational leadership is linked to increased staff retention and improved patient outcomes (Duran, 2018), and allows positive, sustainable change to be implemented. Four key aspects of transformational leadership have been identified and will be described in further detail: Being inspirational, collaborative, transparent, and genuine.

Being Inspirational

To inspire is to instigate a belief and motivation within a team to take action based on a common goal or plan. Being an inspirational leader requires the creation of a positive vision and embracing individuals who are willing to transform that vision with you (Greene-Ryan et al., 2018). It involves a bottom-up rather than top-down approach, in which all members of the team are empowered as active participants (MacMillan, 2016).

Being Collaborative

Collaboration involves identifying and engaging stakeholders as critical team members. It includes surrounding yourself with a diverse group of people; especially those with different views than yourself, as that will be a critical fountain of new and unique ideas (Torres, 2013). Collaboration also requires you to empower your team members, building a culture of trust and enhancing engagement within the team (Greene-Ryan et al., 2016).

Being Transparent

Transparency requires being open and honest about any underlying motivations, processes, or restrictions in place which may affect the shared vision. It also includes open communication in which all parties are involved and can have a say, rather than 'closed-door' conversations. One way to increase transparency in leadership is to host leadership rounds – which allows patients, healthcare providers, and other hospital employees to discuss opportunities and ideas with the relevant leaders, as well as identify natural leaders amongst the group (Greene-Ryan et al., 2016).

Being Genuine

The success of a transformational leader relies on the trust that others have in them. In order to establish this trust, one must remain genuine and heart-felt in all their interactions. This includes being willing to 'go the extra mile', to say 'thank you' with authenticity, and to regularly self-reflect on both failures and wins (Duran, 2018).

The Roadmap to Successful Change Management

Successful change management requires the ability to anticipate barriers to change and create solutions (Geyer & Altman, 2016). In fact, the change process has been likened to building a house: successful change is only truly established if it originates from a solid foundation (Geyer & Altman, 2016). This begins with appropriate timing. Many change initiatives fail because there are too many changes occurring at once (Velmurugan, 2017). Furthermore, leadership often underestimates the influential role of team members' attitudes in determining change outcomes (Ahmad & Zhichao, 2018). Leaders must first ask themselves if the team is mentally and emotionally ready for a change at this time. Have there been too many

new hires recently? Has there been a lot of staff turnover? Are staff only just getting used to the last change that was implemented? These are all questions which first determine if change is even appropriate at this point in time and should always be the first step in the change planning process.

Once it is decided that it is an appropriate time to implement change, leaders must then consider the stakeholders in the change, which on a hospital unit could be the nursing staff, other paramedical practitioners, the physicians, the patients, or even housekeeping. Change initiatives can fail because leadership underestimates the importance of stakeholders' attitudes in determining change outcomes (Ahmad & Zhichao, 2018). The key to success therefore is to engage people who will be affected by the change early on in the planning and decision-making process, rather than involving them only at implementation (Hanan & Cronin, n.d.). This allows them to have a say in how the change will be implemented, as well as improves their understanding of why the change is needed, and why a specific strategy was chosen (Hanan & Cronin, n.d.). It is said that those who actively participate in the change process feel accountable for the outcome (Velmurugan, 2017). When stakeholders are engaged early on as discussed, they are more likely to view the change as being done 'with me' rather than 'to me' and are therefore less likely to resist (Hanan & Cronin, n.d.). Overall, empowering members of the team to be active participants is the only way transformative change can be achieved (MacMillan, 2016).

Once stakeholders have been engaged, one must recognize the importance of communication and unit culture in change implementation. Multiple clear, concise, and compelling communication strategies are needed to talk about the change – more than just an e-mail or two (Hanan & Cronin, n.d.) (Velmurugan, 2017). Through this, leaders need to build a

safe environment in which team members feel they can freely express their feelings and have their fears acknowledged (Velmurugan, 2017). People need practical tools for training in order to promote engagement, including actual in-person or classroom courses rather than purely online or e-mail-based training (Hanan & Cronin, n.d.). A good strategy for leaders is to develop an 'elevator speech' – a consistent, brief message about the project which can be conveyed to people of interest in a short period of time and therefore increase engagement (Hanan & Cronin, n.d.). Overall, the ability to communicate the change plan in a way that people can easily understand allows the implementation process to be successful.

Transformational Leadership Put into Action

A transformational leader is ideal in change management processes because they know how to engage team members and work from a bottom-up approach. Transformational leadership dictates that the ideas of the group lead the path forward, and as stated above, if the people who are affected by the change are guiding the change, they are more likely to implement it as an engaged team member rather than seeing it as another barrier in their day-to-day work.

Let's take an example on a hospital unit. A 25-bed medical unit has noticed a high rate of disease transmission in the hospital, and more nosocomial infections as compared to other, similar medical units in the area. Therefore, the manager has implemented a new patient hygiene schedule, in which all patients are showered at least weekly, with full linen changes occurring at least weekly, on Wednesdays, or more frequently when soiled. This change places a heavy load on the unlicensed assistive personnel (UAPs) in the facility, as they are the ones expected to do the showering. Wednesdays become a dreaded day on the unit, and sick calls spike for this day of the week. Staff nurses complain that they are being forced to change linens every Wednesday despite common sense, such as if they know that they changed their patient's sheets the day

before. Staff become resentful of the change, and the manager learns that uptake of the new

process is low. The relationship between staff and leadership is weakened, creating an 'us versus

them' mentality.

Now, let's imagine how this example could have played out if the nurse manager acted in

a more *transformative* way. First, the nurse manager notices that their unit has higher rates of

hospital-acquired infections than equivalent units both within the hospital and in other

neighbouring hospitals. The nurse manager, being immersed in the unit's current culture,

considers whether implementation of a change in working procedure is likely to be well received

at this time. The manager then calls a meeting, open to all hospital staff who work on the unit, to

brainstorm why they think this infection transmission is most likely occurring. From this, it is

determined that improvement could be made in more frequent patient bathing and linen changes.

Staff discuss possible strategies which could work to improve this. They decide to add to the

patient care plan the last date of full shower or bath, and determine it is each nurse's

responsibility, along with the UAP, to ensure their patients are fully showered or bathed if it has

been one week, or sooner as necessary.   They suggest that while a patient is showered, their

linens should be changed, thus accomplishing two tasks at once and ensuring both are done at

least weekly. The nurses and UAPs, having worked together to develop this plan, are more

likely to work as a team to ensure the appropriate patients are showered or bathed each day and

linens are changed. Now that the plan is in place, the nurse manager sends out appropriate

written communication, such as through email, as well as putting up a visual reminder on the

unit's communication board. Educational sessions are held throughout the week verbally

describing the change, including discussions with staff on what does or does not work about the

plan, and what improvements could be made. Over the course of the following months, hospital-

acquired infections are noted to decrease by 10%, a change which remains steady over time. Recognizing this success, the nurse manager again meets with staff to condone their hard work and show them the difference that this change is making in their patients' wellbeing and in reducing length of stay. The nurse manager shows the unit staff charts which outline the money that has been saved thanks to this reduction and provides examples of how this money could potentially be used to improve patient outcomes and better staff working conditions. Staff also maintain the new hygiene plan as they now believe in the inherent benefits of the increased showering and linen changes, rather than just performing the tasks out of obligation or because of fear of retribution if they do not (Ahmad & Zhichao, 2018). Because of this, the change proves to be sustainable over time. Furthermore, through this initiative the staff feel invested in the process and outcome of the change and are more likely to have a positive attitude toward change in the future. Staff members also develop their own transformational leadership skills and are more likely to become transformational leaders themselves.

Conclusion

Transformational leadership requires an immersed leader who is inspirational, collaborative, transparent, and genuine. These leaders can positively affect the change management process which occurs at such high frequencies within healthcare. By working from a bottom-up approach, transformational leaders help the team create, sustain, and inspire changes, as well as work to instill these same leadership skills in the future leaders of the team. The future of healthcare requires constant reform to keep up with technological, cultural, and political demands, and transformational leadership can significantly improve the success of such change.

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