

Empathy and Qualities such as Mindfulness and Courage Needed for Effective
Nurse Leadership

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In order to provide holistic care to clients and work well alongside members of the health care team, effective nurse leaders are able to demonstrate leadership qualities and understand other's point of view to approach a situation appropriately. As mentioned by Anonson, Walker, Arries, Maposa, Telford, & Berry (2014), effective nurse leadership is an essential factor in ensuring proper functioning of nursing units, such as following guidelines, policies and procedures, providing competent and ethical care to clients to a high standard, retaining nurses, and having effective organization. In order to be taken seriously and respected, a great nurse leader understands who is working with or for them, and is able to effectively interact with the team accordingly to let them know they are important, and their voice will be heard (Sinek, 2014). In this way, empathy, mindfulness and courage are essential qualities to demonstrate when taking on the responsibility of being a nurse leader.

The topic chosen for this paper discusses the necessity of effective nurse leaders displaying empathy and certain qualities that good leaders possess ie mindfulness and courage, in order to effectively lead a team and ensure the vision or goal in mind is translated well and worked towards by all involved. Know an important quality that makes for a good leader is the natural ability to empathize with others and present an 'aura' that lets it be known that the leader cares about their people (Sinek, 2014). As mentioned by Cooper (2016), empathy allows leaders to build rapport with those that are being lead, by understanding the support and direction they need, as well as being able to respond to their needs to help them achieve the goal in mind. Great nurse leaders demonstrate qualities such as being able to understand how clients may be feeling and being able to empathize with them. They are also able to understand that everyone they interact with, including clients, family members and other members of the healthcare team- bring their life experiences to the table, offering different points of views that are considered before

making decisions. Furthermore, great nurse leaders are able to utilize other health team member's strengths while motivating everyone to work towards a common goal. In addition, a good leader makes the people around them feel safe, important and as though they belong and are wanted. He or she also has trust in their followers, with their followers having trust in their leader and respecting the leader's vision (Sinek, 2014).

The topic of empathy was chosen to discuss the need for nurse leaders to display empathy and qualities associated with being a great leader- such as mindfulness and courage- to highlight the effect individuals have on each other via interactions that take place, and how certain attitudes and behaviours come across to those around us. Individuals who are capable of leading a team efficiently and effectively are those that are able to put themselves in other's shoes, and understand other's point of view subjectively; which allows the leaders to better translate their vision in mind and have the team work towards achieving it. Furthermore, empathy and relational engagement are especially important to practice as nurse leaders, in order to build and maintain a positive nurse-client and nurse-health team-member relationship. A crucial part of this is for nurse leaders to give individuals importance by actively listening to what they have to say and understanding what the client needs, in order to competently carry out nursing duties to work towards improving the client's health. In this way, modelling good communication skills as a nurse leader shows staff and clients that their thought and feelings are welcome, with the nurse present to lend an ear and provide the sense that the client can comfortably seek out the nurse for an issue.(Anonson et al., 2014). Moreover, communicating well with others aids the leader in identifying the team's strengths and utilizing each individuals capabilities appropriately to produce efficient work. When instances arise where the leader needs to address poor

performance, their instinct is not to replace the individual, but instead nurture them to grow and build upon their capabilities.

In order to engage in empathy and reap its benefits, nurse leaders must understand what it entails and how it affects people. As summarized by Cooper (2016), empathy is the ability to recognize and understand how another person is feeling given the situation they are in, or being able to see oneself in their situation and understanding how it may affect an individual. The nursing profession greatly relies on nurses interacting with others and showing genuine care for the client, thus empathy plays a crucial role in understanding the client's situation, with "... an empathetic leader [prioritizing] the welfare of the people they lead" (Cooper, 2016). Being able to empathize with others is a natural ability that allows nurse leaders to present themselves in a manner that allows their followers to know their leader cares about them or any concerns they may have (Goffee & Jones, 2001).

Thus, as mentioned by Goffee and Jones (2001), "[r]eal leaders don't need a training program to convince their employees that they care. Real leaders empathize fiercely with the people they lead. They also care intensely about the work their employees do" (p. 6). These kinds of leaders may engage in a certain type of empathy- tough empathy, where nurse leaders motivate and encourage staff or clients by giving them what they need to succeed, not what they want (Goffee & Jones, 2001). Moreover, engaging in tough empathy allows nurse leaders to communicate with their staff, providing them with what they need to prosper- such as individualized attention for clients and going over procedures and policies with staff to keep up to date- versus what they may want instead of need. Nurse leaders are therefore able to have their vision or goals be met by putting in work to direct people with respect and communicate authentically, where the people get the sense that the nurse leader is not just playing a role, but

instead is actively working towards the goal and caring passionately about the people at the same time (Goffee & Jones, 2001). As a nurse taking on a leadership role, tough empathy can be useful when working with clients who need motivation and direction to better themselves, by providing them with useful information and resources instead of what they may want, or not want to do (Goffee & Jones, 2001).

Additionally, there are certain skills an empathetic nurse leader displays, such as good communication skills, lending a hand and building strong relationships with those working alongside them (Cooper, 2016). In order for nurses and nurse leaders to ensure they are providing competent, ethical care to clients and working cohesively with other members of the healthcare team, it is imperative to be an active and engaged listener when conversing with others. As mentioned by Cooper (2016), “an active and engaged listener is looking for the body language and subtext that accompanies all our verbal interactions”. Active listening is an important relational engagement skill for nurse leaders to practice, such as making eye contact, letting the individual speak freely, and relaying back to them what they have said to confirm what they mean (Cooper, 2016). Great nurse leaders also have the sensibility to step in and share in the workload when they see their team members struggling to meet deadlines or handle the client load, sending the message that it is a joint struggle and not just their struggle (Cooper, 2016). These leaders care to build relationships with individuals they work with, as well as clients and their families, which allows them to show empathy to others (Cooper, 2016).

Likewise, it is imperative that nurses be able to work with individuals belonging to different generations, as older nurse’s age out and younger nurses join the workforce. Effective nurse leaders are able to work with nurses belonging to different generations and engage in conflict resolution, understanding there will be a difference in opinions, attitudes and beliefs

regarding client care, along with different perspectives and experiences the nurses bring to the team (Sherman, 2006). By valuing the contribution of all members on the nursing team- without generational stereotyping- nurse leaders can effectively lead and manage their team by appreciating the diversity of the group which "... [adds] richness and strength to the team..." (Sherman, 2006). Nurse leaders play an important role in fostering a work environment that supports generational differences where each employee is held to the same regard as others in terms of expectations at work and following policies and procedures (Sherman, 2006). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, effective communication is very important for nurse leaders to engage in with their team, being aware of different ways to communicate effectively with different generations of nurses, and what works best for them (Cooper, 2016 & Sherman, 2006). This can range from face-to-face or hand written communication to staff meetings, telephone conversations, e-mail or chat rooms (Sherman, 2006).

In addition to empathy and good communication, Pipe, FitzPatrick, Doucette, Cotton & Arnow (2016) discuss the impact mindfulness has on being a good leader- in that it allows the individual to be present in the moment and be aware and accepting of the situation at hand without having preconceived judgements. Pipe et al. (2016), present an interesting thought that mindfulness, presence and compassion are interrelated. This is because individuals who are present in the moment, for example, nurses, are aware and accepting of the situation the client is in, and appropriately able to relay compassion to the individual by empathizing with them and engaging in relational engagement. With the nurse focusing on the present moment and the client's situation and helping the client to do the same- such as giving attention to what the client can currently do to better their situation- is vital for the client's well-being. Furthermore, Pipe et al. (2016), mention the benefits of mindfulness and focusing on the present: better sleep, pain

management and resilience, with reduced depression and anxiety. This would greatly help the client's state of mind, by allowing them to focus on their current situation, instead of clinging to the past as Pipe et al (2016) mention, or worrying about the future. In terms of nursing, practicing mindfulness allows the nurse to immerse herself in her work and focus on caring for clients, but also knows to not bring work home with him or her, and engage in self-care as necessary. Moreover, practicing mindfulness as nurse leaders "... enables self-awareness, reflection and intentional growth of leadership capacities... [with the ability]... to check in with their own humanity to better use their capabilities" (Pipe et al., 2016, 47). It is also essential for a nurse leader to engage in self-compassion and forgiveness- which naturally would extend to the people around them, providing the individuals with an authentic presence from the leader (Pipe et al., 2016).

Moreover, Clancy (2003) makes a great statement in that "one doesn't have to be a leader to have courage, but all that lead must have courage" (p. 128). In regards to nurse leaders, it is important for them to display moral courage and hold on to their beliefs and principles when taking on the responsibility to provide competent and ethical care to clients and ensuring client safety while working alongside competent nursing staff; along with making necessary decisions- considering the pros and cons and how the staff or client would feel (Clancy, 2003). Moreover, Clancy (2003) mentions the importance of nurse leaders reflecting on their core values and morals when challenging situations occur- leading to ethical fitness, which involves leaders "... [questioning] their passion surrounding an issue and whether or not they are truly engaged... [with]... successful leaders either consciously [recognizing] the importance of developing ethical fitness or are naturally disposed to it" (p. 130-131). In addition, courageous nurse leaders are willing to take the stand to engage in conflict resolution by counselling staff on unacceptable or

unsuitable behaviour, bringing attention to a serious matter and not being afraid of conflict that may arise when an individual feels threatened or questioned (Clancy, 2003).

The topic of empathy and other necessary qualities such as good communication, mindfulness and courage are essential to consider as a nurse leader- especially empathy which “... is an important social competence for nurses, especially when nurses are interacting with and taking emotional care of [clients]” (Mortier, Vlerick, & Clays, 2016, p. 358). Additionally, with nurse leaders demonstrating leader’s empathy, which can be considered a resource for work, they are able to effectively understand how the staff or client may be feeling and what actions to take accordingly (Mortier, Vlerick, & Clays, 2016). In other words, Mortier, Vlerick, and Clays, (2016) signify the positive affect of empathy in the work environment, where “... empathy from leaders can strengthen the relationship between leader and subordinates and elicit more positive feelings in the work environment...” (p. 362). This can in turn help to increase morale in the workplace, knowing everyone is aiming to work cohesively together, regardless of their position.

Furthermore, Gunther, Evans, Mefford, and Coe, (2007) emphasize empathy as being a major component of transformational leadership and emotional intelligence, which are both predominant in nursing, with the majority of the nursing administrative literature being grounded in it. Transformational leadership focuses on interpersonal relationships and the focus of workers on the greater good of the organization they are working for; and emotional intelligence is the ability for an individual to reflect on and understand one’s thoughts, feelings and emotions to drive one’s thinking and actions (Gunther, Evans, Mefford, & Coe, 2007). This applies to nursing practice since it is imperative to be able to understand what guides one’s own thoughts and beliefs and being able to distinguish among them to know what to think or how to act given a situation. Also, emotional intelligence allows nurse leaders to control and regulate their

thoughts and actions, working to pull through frustrations to achieve the goal, while empathizing with those surrounding the leader (Stichler, 2006). Moreover, empathy in clinical nursing is applied to various concepts that need more exploration, "... such as patient advocacy, consumerism, holistic care, and increasing awareness of moral and ethical issues..." (Gunther, Evans, Mefford, & Coe, 2007)

In conclusion, engaging in empathy and utilizing the skills that make for an empathetic leader allows the team to benefit from one another and function cohesively. The nurse leader is able to communicate and be aware of the needs of others, letting any issues be solved in a timely and appropriate manner, instead of letting them fester and get out of hand (Anonson et al., 2014). In this way, effective nurse leaders are also able to provide support and guidance to their followers, anticipate their needs, build rapport, trust and empower others, which goes a long way when working towards a common goal (Anonson et al., 2014). A good leader lets their people know that he or she will do for them what they will do for the leader by setting the tone for what needs to be achieved and how each person's strengths will be utilized (Sinek, 2014). It is also important to remember that leadership is a choice, which differs from authority (Sinek, 2014). There are many people who have authority and are followed because of that, but they do not possess the qualities that make them a good leader.

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