Opinion and Perspective

Importance of leadership skills for nursing professionals

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Abstract:
Developing leadership skills for nurses is very important for achieving sustainable development goals in health sector. For a better health care, nurses have to lead from the front moving beyond their routine work.

Providing leadership skills to nurses is the need of the hour. However, there is a huge gap in leadership role expected from the nurses and the skills imparted to them in nursing schools and in-service. Various nursing organizations should take a lead to fill the gap. There can be several approaches to impart leadership skills to nurses.

Three-domain model of managing self, leading teams and adapting to changing environment is a useful approach that can be easily applied to build capacity among nurses. Six essential skills have been identified as priority for nursing professionals to become effective leaders, which are listening and communication skills, emotional competencies, time management, conflict resolution, networking, and managing difficult colleagues.

Key words: leadership, nursing, skills, emotional competence, conflict management, time management, networking, negotiation, team work, curriculum

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1. Introduction

Health care is a team work lead by health professional, administrators, clinicians, public health professionals, nurses and health managers. If the team has a good leader, then it will enhance the quality of care. Nursing professionals are involved in complete spectrum of health care starting from health promotion, prevention of diseases and care of the sick. [1] Developing leadership skills for nurses are very important for achieving sustainable development goals in health sector.

Nurses are leaders right from the beginning of their professional life; leading paramedical staff, ward boys, cleaners, patients and their attendants. As a leader they should be able to inspire others in the healthcare team to make patient care and optimum health outcomes the most important concern of everyone in the team. They have to go beyond their routine work, leading from the front for improving health outcomes. They must also be involved in various governing and administrative bodies in hospitals as well as in health programs and departments. In the current scenario, where we are focusing on task sharing and task shifting, good leadership skills in nurses can make an enormous transformation in quality of health care. Thus providing leadership skills to nurses is the need of the hour. However, when we assess the current scenario in health sector, there is a huge gap in leadership role expected from the nurses and the skills imparted to them in nursing schools and in-service.

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The important question is how can nursing professionals be imparted these skills. The current syllabus of BSc Nursing in India includes 'leadership' in the chapter 'nursing services and administration'. It mainly deals with role of nurses in hospital administration, which is different from leadership. It is not providing the students practical tools on how to develop the skills of leadership. Even the MSc Nursing curriculum does not include any training on leadership. International Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR), Delhi offers leadership training for nurses in academics and health programs. There are very few in-service leadership training programs for nurses in India. The Trained Nurses' Association of India (TNAI) established in 1908 and was initially known as Association of Nursing Superintendents. The Government of India has recognized TNAI as a service organization in 1950.[2] The organization doesn't conduct any programs to build leadership skills among Nurses. The newly inaugurated International Training Centre under TNAI gives hope in building leadership skills among nurses.[2]Even the Nursing Council of India hasn't conducted any programs to build leadership skills among nursing students or in-service nurses. In India there is a need to develop and conduct leadership training courses for the nurses on regular basis. Australian College of Nursing conducts nine-month "Emerging Nurse Leader" (ENL) program empowering nurses to develop leadership skills through a mix of formal teaching, self-reflection, mentoring and action based learning. [3] India can learn from this and such successful examples from other countries.

Student Nurses' Association (SNA) is a nation-wide organization of nursing students established in 1929. It facilitates all round development of nursing students and accredits them to join TNAI as qualified nurses. [4] This takes them beyond a clinical perspective and help them develop skills to leverage external environment. This platform can be used in improving leadership skills of nursing students as well as registered nurses in India.

Three domains model for leadership capacity building among nurses

There are various approaches, which can meet the need for developing leadership to the Nurses. One of the approaches is 'three domains' approach, which is a simple and easy to adapt method for any health care professionals. This model can help the nurses to build

a framework for structuring training to develop leadership skills. The first domain of this approach will help the nurses in developing skill to manage self. Second domain is team and organizational skills and the third is the skills to modify or adapt to external environment to improve health outcome. These three domains represent the three domains of leadership and that is illustrated in the figure 1. [5]
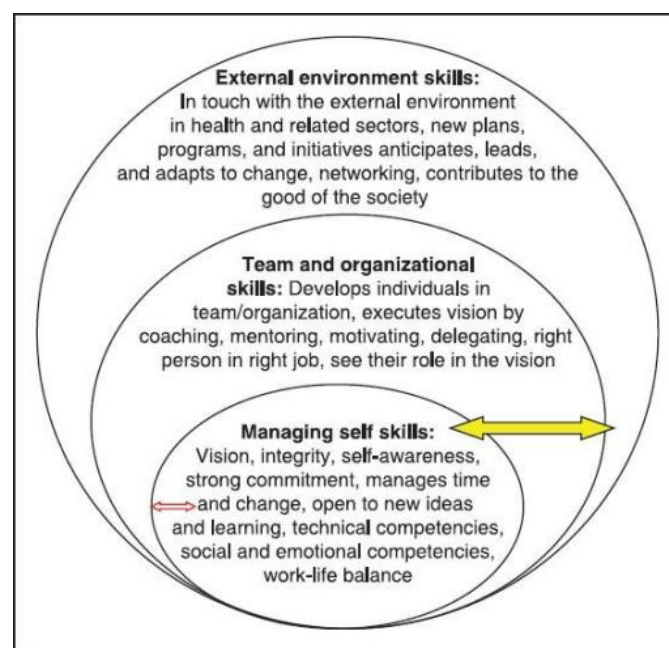

Figure 1: Three domains of leadership capacity development model [5]

Domain 1: Managing self-skills
The skills in this domain include vision, integrity, self-awareness, strong commitment, time and change management, emotional competencies and work life harmony.[5] Developing self-management skills is the first step towards a good leadership.

Domain 2: Managing team and organizational skills
This second domain comprises skills for helping team members develop skills to effectively work together to achieve team and organizational goals. S/he builds, strengthens, and facilitates team spirit and work. Through his/her traits, skills, and attributes, s/he helps his/her team to execute his/her vision. S/he does this by putting the right person in the right job, motivates them and encourages to learn new skills through training, coaching, and mentoring. S/he is strategic in his/her approach and aligns human and other resources to achieve the organizational goals to fulfill the vision. S/he always keeps in touch with his/her employees formally and informally and changes his/her approach to maximize efforts to achieve goals.

S/he transforms the individuals in the organization and motivates them to get the best out of them and channels every one's efforts so that they work in synergy to get the best results.[5]

Domain 3: Managing external environment skills

The work of nurses keeps changing as the environment within health and outside is influencing it constantly. A leader is aware of this and anticipates how his/her work environment is affected by these changes. Awareness of changing disease epidemiology, demography and application of technology in nurses' day to day work is necessary for a leader. The technology is changing how hospitals and health programs are functioning and are managed. Electronic health records are eliminating paper. Real time information on lab reports and patients' condition is available.

A good nurse leader does not just prepare herself/himself but prepares team and organization to adapt to these changes. A good leader develops a strong network outside the organization/team to get a regular feedback on how the team s/he leads is perceived. [5]

Interaction between these three domains

The three domains are helpful in building capacity of nurse leaders to achieve better health outcomes. The double arrow in the model indicates the interrelation among these three domains. This will help a leader in learning new skills in ever changing health care environment. In order to become an effective leader, s/he should update his/her knowledge and skills for identifying the gaps and finding the proper solution for the emerging problems.

Essential leadership skills for nurses

Nurses should have many skills to play an effective role in health sector. Six skills have been identified as priority for nursing professionals to acquire to become effective leaders and are given below:

1) Active Listening as main Communication Skill

A nurse plays many roles while providing nursing care. H/she provides clinical care and is an administrator of the health facility or hospital ward. Good listening skills are at the core of these functions. Good communication between nurses and patients is also essential for the successful outcome of individualized care of patients. The nurses must understand the patients' needs, demonstrate courtesy, kindness and sincerity.[6] It is achieved through

dialogue in an interpersonal environment and with specific skills of verbal communication.[7] To be successful in their work, the nurses must study communication and interpersonal relations during their formal education with special focus on listening skills. Good listening skills will be of immense help in various fields of nursing. [8]

Listening skills are very important for establishing good communication with patients and their family members. Good listening skills have a major impact on nurse's job effectiveness and relationship with others at work.

We listen to obtain information, to understand and to learn. Good listening encourages others to speak. Unfortunately, focus in education is on reading and writing skills and listening skills are often ignored. Active listening can be improved by making the person realize its importance, facilitating the hearing and listening processes. Listening and hearing, are often used interchangeably but have different meaning. Hearing is the physiological process in which sound waves strike the eardrum and cause vibrations that are transmitted to the brain. The brain may or may not pay any heed. Listening goes beyond hearing and occurs when the brain reconstructs the electrochemical impulses into a representation of the sound that gives it meaning. Listening also includes observing body language and other non-verbal clues to understand efficiently what the other person is conveying.

Listening has four components:
1. Attending: Paying attention to a certain stimulus.
2. Understanding: When we make sense of the message we heard.
3. Responding: When we give feedback to the person who sent the message.
4. Remembering: What we remember of the message that we heard.

Listening is affected by impaired hearing, when one is speaking to others and there are distractions in the surroundings. You are not listening if you are mentally elsewhere, side tracked, hijacked by thoughts, formulating a response; prejudiced, physically unwell or emotionally charged. The practices that help to enhance listening include: Face the speaker, maintain eye contact, minimize external distractions, respond appropriately, focus solely on what the speaker is saying, and minimize internal distractions. Keep an open mind, avoid telling the speaker how one handled similar situation. Even if the

person talking is complaining, one should wait until s/he finishes and actively engage oneself in the conversation with the person(s), one is talking to. [9]

2) Emotional Competencies

Emotional competencies seem to be more important for success in professional life than intellectual intelligence. Good news about emotional intelligence is that, unlike intellectual intelligence, these can be learned through practice at any stage in life. Social and emotional abilities were found to be four times more important than Intelligence Quotient in determining professional success and prestige.[10] There is a considerable body of research suggesting that a person's ability to perceive, identify, and manage emotions provides the basis for the kinds of social and emotional competencies important for success in almost any job. Emotional Intelligence was first defined by Salovey and Meyers as "a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to read own and others' emotions and discriminate among emotions and guide one's thinking and actions."[11] The emotional competencies are linked to and based on emotional intelligence. The evidence indicates that high emotional intelligence does have a relationship to strong job performance– in short, emotionally intelligent people make better workers.[12]. Studies have shown that those with highest level of intelligence (IQ),outperform those with average IQ just 20% of the time, whereas people with average IQs and high emotional intelligence outperform those with high IQs 70% of the time.[13] Table 1 shows four components of emotional competencies which contribute to not only improving professional performance but also good social and family relations.

3) First Things First: Managing Time

Time management is a misnomer as no one can manage time but can plan what one can do in the time available. Time management is about setting priorities and doing what is important — first things first. If we set our priorities wisely, we can plan our time to achieve our priority goals in our personal and professional life. We need to use the principle of The 'clock' and the 'compass' which helps us to pay more attention to those activities that take us in the right direction to achieve the desired results. For example, you are going to a city by car. Without compass you may go in the wrong direction, you will never reach the city even if you drive at maximum speed. Another principle we need to know is Pareto Principle or the 80-20 rule which reminds the nurses to focus on the 20 percent activities which produce 80 of percent of the results and identify and focus on these activities.[14]

The four-quadrant matrix of Stephen Covey

Stephen Covey *et al* illustrate the importance of setting our priorities clearly in their four – quadrant matrix shown in the Table 2. This matrix helps us group our activities in four quadrants based on being important/not important and urgent/ not urgent.[15] The nurses should identify all their time consuming activities and put them in different quadrants of this matrix. Urgent and important activities fall in Quadrant I or Priority Quadrant. Activities in Quadrant I and III need to be rationalized. Quadrant IV or waste quadrant may include unproductive meetings, unnecessary or prolonged telephone calls, unnecessary conversation, junk e-mail and computer games. Table no 2 gives some examples of the activities that can be included in the four quadrants. We need to prioritize the activities on which to spend time and minimize time wasters.

Table1: Four components of emotional competencies

Competencies/skills	Self	Others emotions
Awareness	Knowing one's emotions Perceive one's emotions early Identify triggers which generate own emotions	Knowing others' emotions Reading emotions of others in our team, patients and their family members around us
Managing	Self-management of emotions Not behaving under the influence of emotions i.e. not letting emotions hijack one's behaviour	Managing others' emotions Managing emotions of others around us to achieve results

However, remember what is important to one person may not be important to someone else. Culture also plays an important role in one's perception of time, priorities and deadlines. It will help to improve time management by putting one's professional and personal activities on which one spends time in the quadrants and identify areas for improvement.

Table 2: Four Quadrant Matrix of Steven Covey

Importance/ Urgency	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	**Priority Quadrant** Activities that were not planned properly and come up when deadline is close. Deadline-driven reports and activities Crisis management	**Quality Quadrant** Planning and timely implementation of planned activities Relationship and network building Strategy development Self-learning
Not Important	**Deception Quadrant** Interruptions-phone calls, e mails, unplanned visitors Some mails/reports Badly planned meetings Recreation Tea-time/lunch-time	**Waste Quadrant** Junk mails Unproductive meetings Procrastination Net surfing TV Channel surfing

4) Conflict Resolution

It is important skill for nurses. A good leader should encourage team members to bring in different opinions to enrich the work. The divergent views need to be accepted by team members without bringing their ego into play. The role of a leader is to ensure that these differences are dealt with in a healthy manner and do not lead to conflict. Often people are confused between conflict and disagreement. Conflict is a more serious form of disagreement. When two people are having disagreement their relation is intact and in conflict, the relation often turns sour and dialogue ends. [16] Conflicts are disagreements that lead to tension between people. Conflict starts with disagreement and once the conflict escalates the focus shifts from the issues to the person's faults leading to expansion of problem with breakdown of dialogue. The escalation of conflict results in violence, dehumanization process leading to open hostility and polarization where co-existence becomes difficult. A conflict brings down the productivity of the team and vitiates

the work environment preventing members to put in their best. At an organizational level, the process of conflict resolution is an opportunity for growth and improve work environment. Conflict resolution is important for the bottom line on an organizational level as well as for personal achievement in overall success.[17] If conflict is not controlled early, it can have damaging effects in the workplace, stifling the growth of departments and deflating employee morale.[18]

Conflict management is even more important today in view of surge in violence against healthcare providers. The skills of nurses in solving problems of patients and conflict management enhances their effectiveness and improves health outcome. Critical thinking is an essential process for a safe, efficient and skillful nursing intervention. Critical thinking applies to nurses as they have diverse multifaceted knowledge to handle the various situations encountered during their work environment with constant stress of changing conditions and make important decisions.[19]

5) Networking

Networking is a force multiplier to achieve nurses' professional and personal goals. One can do much more through effective, relevant contacts in your network if one cultivate and sustain it. Networking is the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions; specifically, the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business.[20]Ability to network is becoming more and more important. Maintaining good relations fosters trust and fidelity commitment.[21]Today we have two types of networking:

• *Virtual Networking*: Internet has made networking very easy. Various professional and social networking sites such as Linkedin, Facebook, Researchgate, Blogs, Twitter and e mail need to be used effectively to reach out to those in your network easily and fast to communicate and mobilize like-minded persons and groups. These networks help in establishing new contacts (both individuals and groups), keeping in touch with old contacts especially those in distant

places in other cities and other parts of the world with whom you may not be able to maintain face-to face contact and researching potential contacts who may add value.

• *Face to face Networking*: Strong way of making new contacts and effectively maintaining old contacts. One must practice and deliver an effective message in short time say in one minute or a small talk to cash in the opportunity of casual short encounters with influential persons such as a politician or a bureaucrat.

Networking is an arrangement where several individuals or organizations share a common interest. The main activity is information sharing and facilitating lever age of resources. [22]

There are three forms of networking as depicted in Table 3. The first helps manage current internal responsibilities, the second boosts personal development, and the third opens one's eyes to new directions and the stakeholders one would need to enlist.[23]

[24] Difficult colleagues can be dealt by sharpening the following skills:

1. Separate person from problem. One should practice to keep one's focus on the problem and not on the person. If one keeps focus on the person, even non-issues will become issues.
2. Agree with the person what are the issues that need to be addressed and resolved. Focus your conversation on logic and issues.
3. Look for options that will be agreeable to both of you.

Conclusion

Nurses are integral part of a health system and play leadership role at various levels. Adequate attention should be paid to developing leadership skills in nursing curriculum and in-service training. The three-domain model discussed in this paper based on leadership theories gives a good insight into areas, which require attention in acquiring leadership skills. A good nurse with effective leadership skills can be more effective in improving quality of care and better outcome in the organization and contribute to the betterment of the society.

Table 3: Three forms of networking based on what you want to achieve

	Operational	**Personal**	**Strategic**
Purpose	Getting day-today work done	Personal and professional development	Address future priorities and anticipate and prepare for change
Orientation	Mainly internal to the organization one works in	Both internal and external	Mainly external
Context	Prescribed by task at hand	Self-development	Strategic context and environment
Key attributes	Building strong relationship	Contacts and referrals	Linkages within and outside the organization

6) *Managing difficult colleagues*

All of us come across people who are difficult to deal with. As leader you must get work done from everyone in the team by effectively dealing with them. A difficult person can be one who causes others irritation, upset, stress or anxiety. There are three levels of difficult persons; First level - are difficult some of the times and it includes almost everybody; Second level -when a person's behaviour affects more than one person on a regular basis; Third level - includes persons who purposely hurt or harm others through their behaviour. Such persons are rare but really test your skills when you come across them.

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