The hidden treasure in nursing leadership: informal leaders

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Informal leaders

In today’s complex, dynamic healthcare management environment, it is imperative that nurse managers take a more focused look at nursing leadership within the arena of direct patient care in their organizations. The current and evolving nursing shortage, as well as the uncertainty of the healthcare climate, is creating significant challenges to contemporary nurse management and leadership. The goal of the present article was to generate awareness of characteristics of informal

leaders in health care with the emphasis on nurses in acute care settings. To discuss this phenomenon, informal interviews took place with nurse managers in two large urban medical centres in the United States mountain west.

Now, more than ever, nursing needs energetic, committed and dedicated leaders to meet the challenges of the healthcare climate and the nursing shortage. This article presents a very important, timely and alternative perspective to assist nurse managers dealing with current challenges.

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Aim The goal of the present article was to generate awareness of characteristics of informal leaders in healthcare with the emphasis on nurses in acute care settings. There is limited research or literature regarding informal leaders in nursing and how they positively impact nursing management, the organization and, ultimately, patient care. Identification of nurses with leadership characteristics is important so that leadership development and mentoring can occur within the nursing profession. Background More than ever, nursing needs energetic, committed and dedicated leaders to meet the challenges of the healthcare climate and the nursing shortage. This requires nurse leaders to consider all avenues to ensure the ongoing profitability and viability of their healthcare facility. Key issues This paper discusses clinical nurses as informal leaders; characteristics of the informal nurse leader, the role they play, how they impact their unit and how they shape the organization. Implication for nursing management Informal nurse leaders are an underutilized asset in health care. If identified early, these nurses can be developed and empowered to impact unit performance, efficiency and environmental culture in a positive manner.

Keywords: informal leaders, informal nurse leaders, informal leadership, leadership in healthcare, nursing management, nursing leadership

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Shortell and Kaluzny (2000) describe Leadership as a process through which an individual attempts to intentionally influence others to accomplish a goal. A great deal has been written about nursing leadership, ranging from its impact on the nursing shortage, job satisfaction, retention and turnover to patient safety and outcomes. Others have focused on nursing leadership competencies and behaviours as well as pathways to leadership positions and education requirements. The literature and research generally focuses on formal leadership (Cummings et al. 2008). However, there is very little, if any, literature or research regarding informal leaders in nursing and how they might positively impact nursing management, the organization and ultimately, patient care. It is vital to the future of the nursing profession that those with leadership characteristics are identified for development and mentoring to occur.

There is no question that positive nursing leadership is a critical component of a successful health care organization. On the other hand, what about the informal leader and their impact on the organization? This question is the focus of the present investigation.

In a landmark study on leadership, Dr Marcia Smart (2005) researched an evolving phenomenon called ‘Informal Leadership’. Outside the boundaries of formal authority is a phenomenon, in which leadership is driven by a network of people who make things happen primarily through subtle power and influence. Approximately 80–90% of a typical health-care organization is non-management, and within this large group are individuals who have the power and influence to impact the level and quality of patient care at the bedside (Lee & Cummings 2008). Anticipating the demands for future nurse leaders, nurse managers should consider identifying these individuals and begin defining the roles they play in leadership. Additionally, nurse leaders and managers should strive to understand how informal nurse leaders gain their power and influence and focus on the ways they can be mentored and supported.

Informal nurse leaders a hidden treasure

Smart (2005) stated that within most organizations there lies a behind-the-scenes ‘shadow’ organization made up of people and informal networks of people. The leadership phenomenon within this network of people and its cohorts is referred to as ‘informal leadership’. At the heart of the informal network is the informal nurse leader (INL).

Officially, every facility and unit has a formal organizational chart that delineates responsibilities and identifies the chain of command. However, the manner in which work is truly accomplished often follows an undocumented and unacknowledged path, guided by these individuals, the informal leaders, who are both heavily relied upon and often taken for granted.

Informal leaders are individuals without formal title or authority who serve as advocates for the business, and heighten the contributions of others as well as their own primarily through influence, relationship-building, knowledge and expertise (Smart 2010).

Informal nurse leaders are ubiquitous, once they are discovered. They represent an overlooked resource that could be developed and supported to great advantage by any manager savvy enough to take the time to understand who they are, the roles they play and how they function. Informal leaders rarely have the kind of explicit qualifications that can be easily documented or communicated, much less evaluated (Katzenbach & Khan 2010). However, nurse managers equipped with this understanding can appropriately identify, support, reward and develop informal leaders.

How to identify informal leaders

Identifying informal leaders may appear to be a simple process. It is often assumed that the person who is out front, speaks up more often or seems to have the most overt relationship with management would be an informal leader. This assumption may not necessarily be the case. In discussions with acute care nurse managers, it was agreed upon that a critical distinction of informal leadership is ‘influence’. Smart (2010) defines influence as the power to affect other people’s thinking and/or actions. Nurse managers can identify the influence of informal leaders in the acute care setting primarily through observation. Having an understanding of the factors that contribute to nursing leadership is fundamental to ensuring a future supply of nurse leaders who can positively influence outcomes for health care providers and patients (Cummings et al. 2008).

Informal leaders generally do not have formal titles as defined by the organization. The following are traits of informal nurse leaders identified by the nurse managers:

- expert nurses who want to share their knowledge;
- nurses whose names are often mentioned to lead teams or volunteer;
- recognized leaders amongst their peers – staff generally migrate towards them;
• nurses who elevate the whole team – ‘Pulls everyone together’; and
• nurses who have credibility and good track records with both peers and management – the high performers.

These factors and attributes align with (Smart 2005) criteria for identifying informal leaders.

How informal leaders stand out amongst their peers

The nurse managers interviewed for the present investigation stated that nurses who are informal leaders have a strong work ethic (Grabowski & Logan 2009). These nurses rarely have attendance problems, are committed to patients, have integrity and always look at the unit as a whole. One nurse leader stated that informal nurse leaders have a sense of the ‘heartbeat of the unit’ and take an interest in making it better. These leaders are strategic thinkers constantly absorbing and analysing information and helping the team make better decisions (Rath & Conchie 2008). With that broad viewpoint, they can easily spot a coworker needing help and are willing to help resolve the situation (Grabowski & Logan 2009).

How informal leaders lead

Informal nurse leaders have varying forms of power. Webster’s Dictionary (2009) defines power as the ability to do, act; strength; having great influence. In physics, power is defined as the potential or capacity for action, a mobilizing force that overcomes resisting forces. In human behaviour, power is the underlying force of all social exchange (Bass 1990). In health care organizations, as in other organizations, power can be seen as the ability to take actions and initiate interactions. It is the capacity to ensure the outcomes one wishes and to prevent those one does not desire.

Nurse managers and leaders might take a moment and consider their own unit or organization. They might think of a nurse who has not been officially vested with formal status, but has attained a position of power and influence, is able to mobilize the people around them to act even though they have not been officially designated as leaders. Seek the nurse who is adept at using his or her influence to establish team norms and values, and coordinate group efforts. A nurse with these qualities is the informal leader. Their power and influence is based on being effective communicators, building and sustaining strong relation-

ships, and always having a good ‘read’ on how the organization works (Smart 2010).

More qualities found in informal nurse leaders

Informal leaders want to be involved in discussions and in shaping the direction of the unit or organization. They are seen as standing up, speaking out, actively listening and creating a safe comfortable environment for others. These nurses are the leaders of the informal and social networks. Informal networks are especially important in knowledge-intensive sectors where people use personal relationships to find information to do their jobs (Cross et al. 2002).

The nurse managers stated that they hold informal leaders in high regard because, when they consult with them or make a request, the nurse manager is confident the INL will follow through with the task at hand. Staff and peers also gravitate towards informal leaders as non-management because they are knowledgeable, exude confidence and are trustworthy (Grabowski & Logan 2009). Informal leaders are always willing to help and are generally friendly and open allowing peers to confide in them. INLs lead through relationship building which is the essential glue that holds a team together (Rath & Conchie 2008). For example, if a staff nurse is new on the patient care unit and has a question, the new nurses tend to feel more comfortable approaching the nurse who is open and willing to share information for the answer (Grabowski & Logan 2009).

How informal leaders view themselves

Informal leaders do not view themselves as special or even as leaders necessarily. They think of themselves as nurses doing their job. They come to work because it is their ‘calling’. They have a sense of ‘ownership of the unit’ and they feel responsible for outcomes of patient care (Grabowski & Logan 2009). Smart (2005) found that a trademark of an informal leader is a sense of humility. They are humble and do not ‘blow their own horn’ – trying to take credit; they simply focus on getting the job done.

Informal leaders may accept acknowledgement or rewards for their accomplishments; however, many oppose any formal title or visible recognition. While they often get recognition for their service that is not the objective of serving. Their giving and service is what they contribute rather than what they are receiving (Sanborn 2006). Informal leaders feel strongly that a
formal title would change the dynamics of how they operate. A title might inhibit their ability to work quietly behind the scenes and could impact their ability to create a trusting environment.

**How to support informal leaders**

Support of INLs begins with understanding how they approach their professional and organizational role. For example, when informal nurse leaders learn about a change in the organization they mobilize resources and can help integrate the change and enlist the support of the staff. Nurse managers can capitalize on this behaviour by remembering that these nurses are in the trenches, they have the pulse of the unit, have a network of resources and are privy to information about which the manager may not know. However, it is important to avoid asking them to betray confidences. One of characteristics of the informal leader is their ability to create a safe environment for others (Smart 2010).

The current economic situation is creating an environment where we manage and live on tight schedules and tighter budgets. Time is the biggest challenge for nurses within the context of delivery of effective patient care. Bedside nursing takes nearly 100% of nurses’ time and energy. One of the top characteristics identified in nurse satisfaction studies is having good nursing leadership (Chambers & Mazzei 2008). Because the informal leader is fully committed to both the patient and the unit they are often asked to work extra. Managers should be mindful not to overuse their informal leaders. To prevent burnout, managers should carefully choose projects for their informal leaders [American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) (2009)].

Nurse managers have the ability to assist informal leaders in creating a positive and motivating environment. This can be done by encouragement and support to create informal task forces to look at problematic issues; give them opportunities to show how they help solve current problems. Engaging nurses with diverse backgrounds creates synergy and a greater commitment to goals (Tornabeni & Miller 2008). Motivate the INLs to get excited about the issues at hand as they are creative thinkers, and also look at creating a more formalized way to tap into their knowledge and willingness to serve.

In instances of complaints regarding staff–patient–relationships, low morale in nursing units or patient-care complaints, nurse managers can leverage the activist which is a vital quality of informal leaders. Remember, informal leaders are typically your advocates and are vested in the success of the unit. Their power and influence is translated into nurse leaders who are cheerleaders, motivators and problem solvers of the unit (Grabowski & Logan 2009).

Informal leaders need to know that their positive attitude and creative contributions are of great value to you and the unit. Let them know that they are a motivating force in the unit and that their efforts are making a difference. Simple day-to-day recognition efforts can be one of the most highly valued forms of rewarding your nurses (Chambers & Mazzei 2008). Retreats or gift cards may be simple means of encouragement.

After discovering the INL, the nurse managers and leaders may find the best means to support the INL is through mentorship. Mentoring the INL begins by understanding the qualities discussed previously. Formal or informal mentorship programmes might be developed to encourage the INL to continue their role.

**Benefits of informal leaders to health care management**

The benefits of informal leaders to formal leaders and organizations are numerous. Giving staff the freedom to innovate and learn from their mistakes is at the heart of good healthcare services (Clark 2008). Informal nurse leaders have an impact on the quality of services as well as the level of patient and staff satisfaction (Domm et al. 2007). They influence the culture through their overall enthusiastic involvement, freely sharing their knowledge and expertise, team orientation and genuine caring approach towards patients, staff.

As one nurse manager stated, managing informal leader nurses is ‘painless’ because they complete whatever is asked of them. Informal leaders are high performers who are experts at doing more with less, effectively using limited resources to their maximum (Smart 2010). Because they always keep the broader picture of the unit in mind, they can usually anticipate the needs of other staff, physicians and patients. Informal leader nurses tend to feel a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for the outcomes of the unit. Most notably, they embrace the profession of nursing (Grabowski & Logan 2009).

**Conclusion**

‘Informal leadership is about heart’

Informal leaders are an essential component to meet the current challenges of today’s health care environment. In discussing nurses as informal leaders we have identified who they are, the roles they play, how they impact the unit and how they shape the organization. Collaboration, trust
and a high level of management support would definitely contribute to nurses' abilities to exercise informal leadership (Resha 2006). Informal nurse leaders are an underutilized asset in healthcare. These nurses can be developed and empowered to impact unit performance, efficiency, and culture in a positive manner. When properly mentored, nurse leaders will find the informal nurse leader is truly a ‘hidden treasure’.

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