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The Role of Nursing Empowerment: An Integrative Literature Review

Disclosure Statement — The following disclosure applies to the NCBON continuing nursing education article entitled "The Role of Nursing Empowerment: An Integrative Literature Review." Participants must read the CE article, online reference documents (if applicable), and the Reflective Questions in order to earn CE contact hours. Verification of participation will be noted by online registration. Neither the authors nor members of the planning committee have any conflicts of interest related to the content of this activity.

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The Role of Empowerment in Nursing Practice

Introduction

As the largest healthcare profession, nurses are essential to healthcare delivery. Effective healthcare delivery is reliant on nurses, which highlights the need to focus on strategies to enhance and retain the nursing workforce. Nurse empowerment has been found to improve unit effectiveness, nursing-sensitive outcomes, patient safety, patient satisfaction, and care efficiency (Bogue & Joseph, 2019), which leads to improved nursing care quality and organizational outcomes (Yesilbas & Kantek, 2021). An empowered work environment enables employees to face work-related challenges (Al-Hammouri et al., 2021). Structural empowerment consists of social structures in the workplace that provide employees with access to information, support, desired resources, and opportunities to learn and develop, which allows employees to achieve organizational goals (Kanter, 1993). Psychological empowerment is defined as a set of psychological states necessary for individuals to feel a sense of control over their work (Spreitzer, 1995). Psychological empowerment involves four cognitions, namely, meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). The use of evidence-based approaches to promote empowered work environments can assist nurse leaders to better meet the needs of nurses, patients, and healthcare organizations. This article will explore the need for empowerment in the workplace and the impact empowerment has on nurses, patients, and organizational outcomes.

Background

Nurses, through their unique relationships with patients, are positioned to significantly influence healthcare in the United States. Nurses are instrumental in organizational change and positive patient outcomes yet, for this to be possible, nurses need practice environments that are safe, empowering, and satisfying (Kroning et al., 2019). Empowerment in the workplace is an essential element of sustainable and high-functioning organizations (Abel & Hand, 2018). However, due to work environments and the stressful nature of the nursing profession, turnover rates and intention to leave among nurses remain high (Engström et al., 2022). Nursing is a high-stress profession with numerous job stressors. Job stressors include exposure to traumatic situations, violence, coworker conflict or bullying, high workloads, lack of sufficient staff or resources, and ineffective leadership, all of which can lead to decreased job satisfaction, increased turnover, and burnout (Heron & Bruk-Lee, 2020). Nurse leaders must examine the impact job stressors place on nurses to create a workplace that motivates and enables nurses to develop their full potential. Nurse empowerment leads to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover, which can improve nurse retention (Fragkos et al., 2020). With the current changes in the nursing workforce, now more than ever, it is critical for nurse leaders to understand the importance of empowerment and how empowerment can positively impact nurses, patients, and healthcare organizations.

Nurse Turnover and Retention

The turnover of nurses has widespread impacts and is a major concern for the healthcare industry. In the last five years, the average hospital turned over 95.7% of the RN workforce (NSI Nursing Solutions, 2022). Nursing turnover is costly, compromises care delivery, and negatively impacts both nursing and patient outcomes (Bae, 2022). Costs related to the orientation and training of new nurses along with overtime expenses associated with

vacant positions comprise the largest proportion of expenditures related to nursing turnover (Bae, 2022). Nurse turnover creates poor work conditions that can be detrimental to patient care and safety, and create unnecessary healthcare expenditures (Bae, 2022). A healthy work environment is important for nurses' well-being, successful nurse recruitment, and retention, and the quality and safety of patient care (Wei et al., 2018). Healthy work environments that promote empowerment are positively correlated with employee engagement, organizational commitment, and decreased turnover (Wei et al., 2018). Research has also shown that psychological empowerment correlates to reduced stress and lower turnover intention among nurses (Heron & Bruk-Lee, 2020). Due to the negative impacts of nurse turnover, nurse leaders must implement strategies to reduce nurse turnover and increase nurse retention.

Job Satisfaction

Another important nurse outcome critical for organizational success is nurse job satisfaction. Nurse job satisfaction significantly impacts patients, the organization, and nurses' quality of life and well-being (Barmanpek et al., 2022). Job satisfaction refers to an individual's psychological and physiological satisfaction with the work itself and the environment in which the work is conducted (Alan et al., 2022). Negative or unhealthy work environments create increased job stress and poor nurse well-being, which can lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased turnover (Barmanpek et al., 2022). When nurses have low job satisfaction, patient care and safety are negatively impacted (Alan et al., 2022). Organizations and leaders need to focus on efforts to improve job satisfaction to retain the nursing workforce and maintain quality patient care.

Burnout

Due to the demands of today's healthcare environment, nurses may experience burnout. Nurse burnout is a widespread phenomenon characterized by a decline in nurses' capacity, which manifests as emotional stress, depersonalization, and unhappiness, that results in decreased workplace productivity (Grande et al., 2022). Nurses cannot appropriately care for patients if they do not prioritize their physical and mental well-being. Nurse burnout leads to compromised decision-making, reaction time, and critical thinking (Wei et al., 2020). Long work hours, excessive workloads, staffing issues, and complex patient assignments can lead to burnout and fatigue (Teall & Melnyk, 2021). Nurse burnout is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and suicide (Teall & Melnyk, 2021). The increased prevalence of nurse burnout has been recognized as a hazard to quality patient care and safety (Wei et al., 2020). Approaches to address nurse burnout and create work environments that support the nursing workforce are needed in today's healthcare landscape.

Nurse Empowerment Influences

Leadership style, leadership behaviors, work environments, and job performance impact the level of nurse empowerment within an organization. Each of these factors are closely related and influences one another. Leadership styles and behaviors influence the

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work environment within the organization which can positively or negatively impact job performance. Effective nursing leadership allows for a work environment where nurses use their power and influence to enhance patient care and achieve organizational goals (Amor et al., 2020). All of these factors play an active role in fostering a culture of empowerment.

Leadership Styles

The role of leadership styles on nurse empowerment has been thoroughly discussed in the literature. Leadership style influences the work environment and the way employees perceive their work (Amor et al., 2020). Leadership style can influence both structural and psychological empowerment among nurses. While there are a variety of leadership styles used in healthcare settings, transformational, authentic, and relational leadership styles are positively correlated to nurse empowerment (Cummings et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2018; Shapira-Lishchinsky & Benoliel, 2019), while laissez-faire leadership is associated with a decrease in empowerment among nurses (Khan et al., 2018). Transformational leadership is associated with increased nurse satisfaction, retention, and organizational commitment (Khan et al., 2018). Authentic leadership is associated with an increased perception of influence or power among nurses which can lead to an increased sense of purpose and personal connection to their work (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Benoliel, 2019). Nurses who have a sense of power and purpose in their work are more likely to positively impact the organization and perform above and beyond their formal role (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Benoliel, 2019). Relational leadership is positively associated with productivity and effectiveness, teamwork and collaboration, employee retention, job satisfaction, employee health, and the working environment (Cummings et al., 2018).

Transformational, authentic, and relational leadership styles positively impact nurses' perceptions of their work environment which can significantly influence nurse empowerment.

Leadership Behaviors

Much like leadership styles, leadership behaviors are commonly seen in the literature related to empowerment. Leaders who invest in nurses through professional development and leadership opportunities, allow for shared decision-making, promote collaboration, acknowledge nurses' contributions, provide appropriate feedback and mentorship, and have open communication are viewed as more empowering leaders (Connally et al., 2018; Cziraki et al., 2020; Gholami et al., 2019). Leadership behaviors that promote nurse empowerment have been found to improve organizational commitment and trust among nurses (Gholami et al., 2019) as well as decrease the prevalence of supervisor incivility and nurses' intention to leave both the organization and the profession (Yurumezoglu & Kocaman, 2019). Additionally, leadership behaviors that enhance the meaningfulness of work, foster high performance, facilitate goal achievement, and enhance autonomy have been found to improve self-efficacy (Cziraki et al., 2020). Self-efficacy leads to higher levels of motivation and empowerment, which is associated with improved nursing and patient outcomes (Cziraki et al., 2020). Structural and psychological empowerment are directly impacted by leadership behaviors.

In today's healthcare environment, nurses at all levels of the organization must be leaders in some capacity. Structural and psychological empowerment can strengthen nurses' leadership behaviors (Abel & Hand, 2018). Leadership behaviors of both formal and informal leaders impact the culture of

empowerment within a unit, department, or organization. Poor structural and psychological empowerment can lead to work environments where nurses lack the ability to serve as a leader. Therefore, organizations and nurse leaders must identify optimal leadership behaviors that promote positive work environments and strengthen empowerment structures.

Work Environment

Work environments can either positively or negatively impact nurse empowerment. Work environments where nurses are empowered are associated with positive patient and nurse outcomes (Lundin et al., 2021). Despite efforts to improve nurse work environments over the last decade, recent research indicates the health of nurse work environments has dramatically decreased since 2018 (Ulrich et al., 2022). Although numerous factors impact nurse work environments, structural empowerment is consistently positively correlated to healthy work environments (Balay-odao et al., 2022; Choi & Kim, 2019; Cziraki et al., 2020; Eyuboglu et al., 2019; Ta'an et al., 2020; Teixeira et al., 2021). Work environments are strengthened through professional governance models (Choi & Kim, 2019) and interprofessional collaboration (Cziraki et al., 2020). Additionally, nurses who perceive their work environments as empowering report higher problem-solving abilities (Eyublu et al., 2019). Work environments with lower patient ratios allowed nurses the time and opportunity to be involved in organizational activities, which led to improved empowerment (Ta'an et al., 2020). Healthy work environments and empowerment go hand-in-hand. Strategies to improve work environments will promote empowerment and enhance the nursing workforce.

Work environments are comprised of interrelated multidimensional concepts. Characteristics and demographics of the nursing workforce contribute to the work environment and impact work engagement. Millennial nurses prefer a structured work environment where they have access to opportunities for career advancement, work flexibility, acknowledgment of work performance, and work/life balance (Balay-odao et al., 2022). Nurses with more nursing experience and longevity in their positions report higher levels of structural and psychological empowerment, which can be attributed to more established social and internal networks as well as increased confidence and meaning in their role (Teixeria et al., 2021). With the current multi-generational nursing workforce, healthcare organizations, and leaders must vary leadership approaches to improve nursing work environments, as each generational group brings differences in attitudes, beliefs, work habits, and expectations.

Job Performance

Job performance is a complex phenomenon that requires leaders to examine multiple variables that improve job performance. Job performance is defined as the result of an organizational activity or task over time (Al-Hammouri et al., 2021). While numerous factors contribute to job performance, a positive correlation exists between empowerment and job performance (Al-Hammouri et al., 2021; Ta'an et al., 2020; Tan & Conde, 2021). Job performance improves when nurses are structurally and psychologically empowered (Al-Hammouri et

al., 2021; Heron & Bruk-Lee, 2018). Components of structural empowerment, which include access to information, support, resources, and opportunities, all contribute to job performance. As the components of structural empowerment improve, so does overall job performance (Al-Hammouri et al., 2021; Ta'an et al., 2020). Nursing workforce demographics can also impact empowerment and job performance. Job performance and structural empowerment improve as nurses age and gain more experience within a position or organization (Tan & Conde, 2021). To maximize job performance, healthcare organizations should promote work environments where nurses are empowered.

Implications

Leadership style, leadership behavior, work environment, and job performance are consistently observed in the empowerment literature. Workplace empowerment is an important contributor to organizational effectiveness and success (Balay-odao et al., 2022; Cziraki et al., 2020; Gholami et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2018; Shapira-Lishchinsky & Benoliel, 2019; Teixeira et al., 2021; Yurumezoglu & Kocaman, 2019). Transformational, authentic, and relational leadership styles increased nurses' perceptions of structural (Cummings et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2018) and psychological (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Benoliel, 2019) empowerment. Leadership behaviors such as effective communication, collaboration, shared decision-making, recognition, support, trust,

"Leadership behaviors such as effective communication, collaboration, shared decision-making, recognition, support, trust, and visibility were associated with increased levels of nurse empowerment."

and visibility were associated with increased levels of nurse empowerment (Connolly et al., 2018; Cziraki et al., 2020; Gholami et al., 2019; Yurumezoglu & Kocaman, 2019). Work environments that foster autonomy, shared decision-making, nurse leader support, and control or influence over patient care and the work environment had higher levels of structural empowerment (Balay-odao et al., 2022; Choi & Kim, 2019; Cziraki et al., 2020; Eyuboglu et al., 2019; Teixeira et al., 2021). The concept of opportunity related to structural empowerment was most frequently experienced by nurses (Balay-odao et al., 2022; Choi & Kim, 2019), while formal power was experienced the least (Balay-odao et al., 2022; Gholami et al., 2019; Ta'an et al., 2020). Concepts of psychological empowerment such as meaning, competence, and impact had the most positive influence on work environments (Cziraki et al., 2020; Shapira-Lishchinsky & Benoliel, 2019; Teixeira et al., 2021). Job performance improves as nurses' empowerment increases (Al-Hammouri et al., 2021; Ta'an et al., 2020; Tan & Conde, 2021). Among studies that analyzed participant demographics, several identified that as nurses age, gain more experience, and have longevity in a position or department, their perception of empowerment increases (Cziraki et al., 2020; Eyuboglu et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2018; Tan & Conde, 2021; Teixeira et al., 2021). These findings support the need for organizational leaders to focus efforts on ways to improve empowerment among the nursing workforce to improve performance and retention.

Efforts to improve nurse empowerment require a great deal of support from organizational leaders. Strategies to improve nurse empowerment are multifaceted and should focus on both structural and psychological concepts. Education, competency development, and

coaching/mentoring for nurse leaders on leadership styles and behaviors are beneficial to create positive work environments (Cziraki et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2018; Shapira-Lishchinsky & Benoliel, 2019; Ta'an et al., 2020). Organizations should implement structures, policies, and procedures to create work environments where nurses have access to resources, information, opportunities, and support (Al- Hammouri et al., 2021; Balay-odao et al., 2022; Choi & Kim, 2019; Connolly et al.,2018; Eyuboglu et al., 2019; Gholami et al., 2019; Tan & Conde, 2021; Teixeira et al., 2021; Yurumezoglu & Kocaman, 2019). Shared decision-making is essential to nurse empowerment (Balay-odao et al., 2022; Choi & Kim, 2019; Connolly et al., 2018; Cziraki et al., 2020; Yurumezoglu & Kocaman, 2019). Nurses can benefit from professional development and education related to structural empowerment (Tan & Conde, 2019). Professional development should also focus on ways to improve concepts of psychological empowerment as psychological empowerment is influenced by the organizational environment (Gholami et al., 2019; Shapira-Lishchinsky & Benoliel, 2019). Nurse leaders improve psychological empowerment when they foster a sense of purpose and meaning among nurses in the organization (Gholami et al., 2019). Recognition, rewards, and incentives for contributions and performance can also improve empowerment (Balay-odao et al., 2022; Choi & Kim, 2019). While empowerment is vital to organizational performance, strategies to improve empowerment in the literature are global and lack specificity.

Despite the volume of literature on nurse empowerment, additional research is needed post-pandemic to determine how the current workforce is impacted by structural and psychological empowerment. In the past two years, approximately 100,000 registered nurses left the workforce due to stress, burnout, and retirement (National Council of State Boards of Nursing [NCSBN], 2023), which created vacancies in every level of nursing including leadership positions. Due to the vast changes in the post-pandemic workforce, strategies to improve nurse empowerment pre-pandemic might not be effective with the current workforce.

Conclusion

Nurses are instrumental in overall organizational performance and healthcare delivery. Therefore, organizational leaders must implement strategies to enhance and retain the nursing workforce to be successful. Workplace empowerment has significant impacts on patients, nurses, and healthcare organizations. Healthcare organizations that empower the workforce will have increased nurse satisfaction, lower nurse burnout, and improved nurse retention. Initiatives to improve empowerment among the nursing workforce should focus on leaders' styles and behaviors, work environments, and job performance. An increase in role stress, burnout, and retirement among nurses in recent years has created vast changes to the nursing workforce that highlight the importance of empowerment of a post-pandemic workforce.

Case Scenario

A medical-surgical floor at a local hospital was known to be a "difficult unit" with low morale, poor patient satisfaction scores, and a lack of teamwork. The nurse manager, Susan, had an authoritative leadership style in which staff feedback was not valued and staff members were not involved in decision-making or practice changes. The staff feared Susan because she would often place blame when mistakes occurred and did not treat staff equally. As a result, staff members did not have a trusting relationship with Susan and did not feel comfortable bringing concerns and ideas

to her attention, which negatively impacted the staff and patients. Staff members did not feel motivated or inspired to go above and beyond what was asked of them and were not invested in the overall success of the unit. The unit had a high turnover rate and often a heavy workload due to staff turnover.

Kendra was hired to replace Susan when she retired. Kendra was aware of the challenges the unit faced and was committed to turning the unit around. Kendra knew that for change to occur she needed to establish a trusting relationship with the staff and show them she was committed to the unit's success. Kendra took time to meet with each staff member to learn more about them and make a meaningful connection. Kendra asked for staff feedback on how to improve the unit, allowed them an opportunity to feel heard, and actively listened to their concerns and ideas. Kendra rounded on the unit several times a day during those first few months to observe the flow of the unit and better understand the challenges that needed to be addressed. Kendra also provided feedback and encouraged the staff to think outside the box on how to address these challenges. Kendra frequently communicated with staff members through daily huddles, emails, and monthly staff meetings to address any concerns and communicate any issues that might affect the unit before changes were made. Kendra requested feedback from staff members and allowed them to be active participants in unit and organizational changes.

Over the next several months, Kendra developed a strong relationship with the staff, and they began to trust and respect Kendra as a leader. Shared decision making allowed staff to feel they had a voice in the unit, which created a sense of meaning and

purpose among staff. Staff members had a vested interest in the success of the unit as a whole, which allowed Kendra to motivate and encourage staff to work towards unit and organizational goals. Kendra continued to be available to the staff when they came to her with questions or concerns; however, she did not tell them what to do. Kendra empowered them to use their knowledge and abilities to address the issue and mentored them through that process when needed. Kendra challenged the staff to question current processes that were in place and gave them the time and resources to improve or change those processes.

As the staff developed a trusting relationship with Kendra, they felt more secure in their work environment and developed stronger relationships with their coworkers, which increased teamwork, boosted unit morale, and gave them a sense of informal power. Turnover on the unit decreased due to improved staff satisfaction and teamwork, which resulted in more manageable workloads. The staff had more time to spend with patients making connections and addressing needs, which resulted in improved patient and nursing outcomes.

Kendra consistently relayed to the staff that they were the reason for the unit's success and did not take credit for their contributions. Kendra recognized and celebrated each staff member's contributions, which made them feel valued. Kendra took time to mentor and coach staff members as they assumed committee and leadership roles both on the unit and at the organizational level. Kendra created a supportive work environment for the staff, which encouraged them to reach their full potential and strengthened their commitment to the organization.

Reflective Questions

1. List examples of structural and psychological empowerment from the case scenario.
2. Compare Susan's leadership style to Kendra's leadership style.
3. What characteristics of Kendra's leadership style were most impactful?
4. If you were Kendra, how would you have addressed the culture and unit work environment?
5. How did Kendra foster a culture of empowerment among her staff?

Now think about the culture within your organization:

1. What factors in your organization promote and/or hinder empowerment?
2. How are nurses' competencies developed to enable them to thrive?
3. What opportunities does your organization offer for nurses to be involved in policy development or organizational change?
4. How are nurses' contributions and commitment recognized by leadership? Do you feel this is sufficient?
5. What aspect of empowerment do you think is most impactful? Why?
6. What factors influence your empowerment? How would you rate your level of empowerment within your organization?

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