Practice

Transformational Leadership

A Model for Advanced Practice Holistic Nurses

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Advanced Practice Holistic Nurse (APHN) leaders could provide a model of leadership to advance value based health care systems in the United States. The American Nurses Association has recognized Holistic Nursing as a specialty because of the emphasis placed on patient-centered care, the development of therapeutic relationships, interconnection, and holism. Transformational leadership is a framework that uses vision, inspiration and intellectual stimulation to motivate people toward needed change. The APHN is well positioned to use transformational leadership methods to lead teams placing the patient at the center of health care decision making and bring the essence of holism to the forefront of health care. Highlighted are methods for positive communication, inspiration, negotiation, and conflict resolution as tools the APHN could use to become a transformational leader. The purpose of this article is to discuss a framework for transformational leadership development and implementation to establish the holistic ideals of APHNs in the health care system.

Keywords: nurses (advanced practice); group/population; health and wellness coaching; common themes; health promotion/disease prevention; common themes

Introduction

Nurses are leading the country toward health and healing by implementing evidence-based knowledge to advance patient empowerment, health promotion, and disease prevention (Cummings & McLennan, 2010). Advanced Practice Holistic Nurses (APHNs) are among those who promote patient empowerment through patient-centered care. The American Nurses Association has recognized Holistic Nursing as a specialty because of the emphasis holistic nurses place on patient-centeredness, self-care, and self-responsibility and on understanding the interconnectedness of all persons and their environments (American Nurses Association, 2008). The one aspect that continues to lag in the establishment of holistic nurses as true and equal partners in health care is leadership, especially among those in advanced practice (Hubbard, 2012). APHNs are prepared to be at the center of leadership in order to change health policy and create new models of patient care because of their whole-person view (Hassmiller & Quinn, 2015). As public and private insurers, including Medicare, move to a more value-based health care model, focusing on pay for value rather than pay for volume, now is the optimum time for APHNs to move forward in leadership to ensure the benefits of holistic care are recognized (Pennic, 2015). The purpose of this article is to discuss a framework for transformational leadership development and implementation to establish the holistic ideals of APHNs in the health care system.

APHNs are critically positioned to lead in creating the changes required to make the U.S. health care system more patient-centered and to provide high-quality, whole-person care (Haseeb et al., 2014). The latest Gallup survey found, for the 14th...
year in a row, that nursing is the most trusted group in health care and the most honest and ethical profession in the United States (Jones, 2015). Building on this trust and honesty, APHNs can lead the health care system to become a more patient-centered and caring environment. Leading can be challenging, and using the framework of transformational leadership as a guide, the APHN could become a leader in the quest to create a health care system that is population focused, puts the patient at the center of decision making, improves health outcomes, and moves the system toward financial sustainability.

**What Is Transformational Leadership?**

Transformational leadership is an approach that requires guiding others through inspiration, strength of vision, and motivating groups of people to work toward common goals (Bass & Riggio, 2008). The concepts of transformational leadership include intellectual stimulation to encourage creativity and explore new ways of action within a team, individual encouragement through fostering supportive relationships, sharing ideas, open lines of communication, and personal encouragement. Transformational nursing leaders use three skills—inspirational influence and motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration—to improve group outcomes and satisfaction among group members (Doody & Doody, 2012; Riggio, 2009). Jacobs et al. (2013) found that groups that experienced transformational leaders had a higher level of well-being even when controlling for factors such as age, job strain, and education. Transformational leaders are people who can use their vision and values to create significant and sustained change in both followers and fellow leaders within the organization with which they are associated (Barbuto, 2005). This leadership style can create a shared vision among different groups and lead changes to make the vision a reality (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2003).

Translational leaders who are using vision and strength to lead should understand that change is a process and not a single event and that managing change will take dedication, intellectual maturity and strength, as well as support and encouragement of all those involved in the change process. Malloch (2014) posits that one of the possible limitations of transformational leadership is that the vision rests with the leader alone. However, in any transformation leadership change process, communication, consensus building, and effective conflict management are essential skills that require intellectual and emotional knowledge.

Change is essentially a three-step process. The first step is to understand the need for change. The transformational leader promotes a vision of change by communicating the benefits of change and listening to and resolving the concerns of those involved. Once consensus about the change has been reached by those involved, the second step in the change process is planning for the transition. Transitions are often unpredictable and disorganized with many different opinions and ideas within a team attempting change. The transformational leader provides a solid support for change as well as a strong personal commitment to resolve the unpredictable and focus the disorganization into meaningful movement forward. The final step in the change process is to solidify the change in whatever form it has evolved into an adaptable and acceptable outcome.

For the change process to be successful, the transformational leader must have the ability to effectively communicate with all team members. To become an effective communicator, the leader must have adequate self-knowledge and sensitivity to others. That can mean working with those in positions of management and authority while promoting and managing change. It requires the leader to understand other team members’ visions and recognize that compromise is essential in order to effect change.

Another important aspect of effective communication is active listening. This technique requires the listener to pay attention to the person speaking and ensure that what he or she has said is fully understood in the proper context. Contributions from all members of the group need to be listened to, acknowledged, and valued. Compromise is usually required, and negation may take many discussions. Positive communication is accomplished when all parties are involved and participate actively in the communication process.

**Transformational Leaders in a Changing Health Care Environment**

Health care organizations are being challenged daily to change, revise, and adapt to new ideas and
strategies to improve health care outcomes and promote cost savings. The role of transformational leaders is to understand and manage complexities in any organization. Once the complexities are understood, the transformational leader develops a concept, convinces other members of the team of the concept's value, finds a viable way forward, and leads and supports the charge for change (Malloch & O’Grady, 2005). The health system in the United States is currently a complex tangle of care that is neither coordinated nor adaptive to the needs of patients (Berry, Rock, Houskamp, Brueggeman, & Tucker, 2013). Because of the inability to adapt to changing conditions, health care has become even more complicated as it struggles to place an increasing focus on patient-centeredness, quality, and cost reduction (Haseeb et al., 2014). To create a health care system that is more open, dynamic, and flexible and that meets the rapidly changing health needs of populations, the Institute of Medicine (2001) supports a team approach to care with the patient at the center.

Transformational leaders are able to form, support, and enhance teamwork among colleagues and other team members. In one study in a community mental health setting that had staff retention problems, a transformational leader was able to instill the concept of teamwork and create a value-based system of rewards that improved retention of employees and reduced emotional exhaustion and burnout (Green, Miller, & Aarons, 2013). These researchers posited that transformational leaders had a buffer effect on providers’ emotional exhaustion. Transformational leadership was the foundation of a Reserve Officer Training Corps study. Findings from this program were that the Reserve Officer Training Corps leaders who attempted to instill pride, build morale, become positive role models, and build confidence in their group using positive reinforcement for work, open communication, and sharing of ideas on how to accomplish necessary tasks had higher rates of retention and better outcomes from their trainees than those who did not use these concepts (Bass, 1990).

The focus of Healthy People 2020 is to generate positive health outcomes that will guide clinical practice in the future (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016b). Providers who focus on population-based patient-centered care include consideration of cultural and ethnic concerns as well as environmental issues that may affect disease and health habits (Bachelder, Pepe, & Salazar, 2012). The Institute of Medicine (2001) has defined patient-centered care as care that is respectful and responsive to individual patient preferences, needs, and values and ensures that the patient’s values guide all clinical decisions. The American public is embracing the care provided by advanced practice nurses because it is person-centered and respectful of an individual’s ideas about health and well-being (DiCenso, 2014). Patient-centered health care has a holistic focus and requires the use of an array of disciplines in areas of health, social science, and education. This approach is the best way forward for primary care in the future (Bachrach, Green, & Shostak, 2015). As transformational leaders, APRNs can envision positive steps toward strength of vision and motivation to promote the values of change to a diverse group of clinicians.

The characteristics of an APHN include effective listening, a nonjudgmental attitude toward patient feelings, knowledge of current health practices, and the ability to direct the patient to evidence-based integrative practices that are safe and effective. One of the cornerstones of the APHN is putting patients at the center of their own health care decision making and caring for the whole human being, not just a disease or health issue (Mariano, 2007). The emphasis of the APHN is health promotion, disease prevention, patient self-awareness, self-exploration, self-care, and self-responsibility (RNtoMSN, 2016). APHNs, who already practice patient-centered care, can move forward as leaders in health care policy and advocacy and guide the system toward the changes required to create a health and wellness model rather than the current disease-focused model. In addition to their focus on whole-person health, APHNs are knowledgeable and able to prescribe traditional medicine treatments and therapies as well as having knowledge of many complementary and integrative practices that can improve health and well-being.

Research has demonstrated the benefits of nurse practitioners to increase access to care, provide patient education, and put more emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention (Poghosyan, Lucero, Bauch, & Berkowitz, 2012; Riegel, Sullivan-Marx, Fairman, 2012; Stanik-Hutt et al., 2013). Nurse practitioners have demonstrated the safe and effective delivery of care to patients of many types and in some cases have provided care that is more effective than that provided by their physician counterparts (Mundinger et al., 2000). Nurse practitioners as a group have been found to provide more care coordination, thereby lowering health care costs by
29% and incurring 18% fewer office visits than physicians (Perloff, DesRoches, & Buerhaus, 2016).

Holistic nursing has long used a model of care that is focused on therapeutic relationships as the cornerstone of practice (Allen, 2014). The APHN with his/her holistic practice knowledge and focus on whole-person care could use a transformational leadership style to lead the way toward understanding of person-centered care and the mind–body connection. As experts in coming to know patients, families, communities, and the environment to promote health and well-being, APHNs are natural leaders. Transformational leadership and the support of transformational leaders among APHN professionals could foster change within the health care system to create new solutions and new holistic practice patterns to better meet the health care needs of all patients.

A study of leadership practices among advanced practice nurses concluded that even though there is strong evidence of the value of nurse practitioners in primary care, evidence of leadership is often lost as nurse practitioners are unable to clearly use and articulate leadership skills to promote and highlight their contributions to practice (Lowe, Plummer, O’Brien, & Boyd, 2011). In another study on the value of the clinical nurse specialist in perioperative leadership, Steelman (2009) found that the advanced practice nurse’s education in areas of leadership positively influences the quality of patient care, patient safety, and implementation of new evidence-based procedures. The Doctor of Nursing Practice Essentials (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2006) defines leadership as an essential skill for advanced practice nurses for them to improve health care and become the arbiters of quality and whole-person health. The APHN should have a clear framework from which to lead, and transformational leadership is a style of leadership that is closely aligned with the principals of the discipline of nursing and holism.

Advanced Practice Holistic Nurses and Transformational Leadership

The United States has an aging population that requires an increased emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention as well as caring for those who are have increasing health care needs both physical and emotional. Caring for the aging U.S. population places an increased emphasis on primary care providers to deliver health care guidance in emotional, physical, and social areas. It is estimated that there will be an increase in primary care office visits from 2008 to 2025 from 462 million to 565 million, creating a shortage of at least 10,000 primary health care providers (CDC, 2016a). Primary care medicine will be challenged to provide more in-depth care to patients rather than immediately sending them to a specialist (CDC, 2016b). New regulations from Medicare and other insurers to reduce cost by increasing quality and pay-for-performance standards will put an even greater strain on primary care practices (Peterson et al., 2012). These changes mandate the need for innovative, patient-centered, and creative new solutions to providing primary care. In addition, the use of information technology to improve health outcomes through care coordination efforts, telehealth, and other new dynamic data-driven methods will increase the need for leadership that uses solid communication skills to keep any individual practice moving forward in the face of dynamic changes. To prosper in a time of great change, successful health care practices will need to focus on a holistic view of patient care and populations using a team-oriented approach to providing care.

The APHN is well positioned to use the evidence and traditions of holism to mentor others in order to support and create a better system of health and well-being among all patients. Becoming a transformational leader in an advanced practice setting using a holistic framework is challenging and takes strength, wisdom, and courage. Transformational leaders easily adapt to change and rely on consideration for all members of the team where the values and aspirations of the group are used to create new ideas. This type of leadership uses a blend of personal humility and intense personal will to create positive contributions to the whole and bring about fundamental change in complex systems. Those who lead in this way use listening, coaching, empathy, support, and recognition of contributions in order to create pathways of change that meet the needs of the organization and each of its members. APHN transformational leaders can lead the impetus for and guide change because they are often described as people of action who are change-oriented, who are value-driven, and who can see the “big picture” (Homrig, 2001).

To be an effective transformational leader, the APHN must recognize the hidden influence within
and among the culture in the health care setting. For example, the cultural patterns of attitudes and behaviors between advanced practice nurses and physicians can interrupt the team concept and create disruptions in patient care (Plesk & Greenhalgh, 2001). To be truly patient-centered, the team member with the best ability in the area of patient needs should be the care team leader to provide coordination among team members while respecting the contributions of all and the patient’s values, dignity, and decision making. This type of responsibility may put the APHN in the position of team leader and equal collaborator with the physician, and therefore hierarchical issues disappear.

To avoid conflict related to assessments of treatment options and keep the patient in the center of decision making, the APHN will need all of the attributes of the transformational leader. To move health practices toward team-oriented holistic endeavor that meets the complex needs of the rapidly changing health care system, it is necessary to change the fundamental ideas of team roles, responsibilities, and equality. Once obstructive patterns of teamwork are uncovered, professional artistry and personal mastery will be required to create change. To accomplish this, transformational leaders will need a holistic view of social, cultural, discursive, and material conditions under which health care is delivered.

Listening to and acknowledging team members concerns while advocating for change are aspects of transformational leadership that could propel APHNs to become organizers of improved care in the area of practice change and development. However, effective leadership by advanced practice nurses working in teams with other health care providers requires commitment, passion, and bold vision (Hardy, Jackson, Webster, & Manley, 2013). By having a clear vision and communicating that vision clearly to the member of the health care team and by acting as a role model in the implementation of change, the APHN can become pivotal to any practice.

**Becoming a Transformational Leader in Advanced Practice**

Having the confidence to lead by example and using confidence, vision, and intelligence begin the journey toward transformational leadership. Hardy et al. (2013) found that educating advanced practice nurses in transformational leadership allows him/her to be more effective in complex health care settings. This type of confidence comes to advanced practice nurses after some time in practice settings and could be increased by becoming a Doctor of Nursing Practice, the terminal degree for practice-oriented nurses. Taking that extra step to the highest level of education in a discipline provides confidence and allows advanced practice nurses to speak from a position of authority by virtue of their educational attainment.

Transformational leaders act with integrity and ethical standards in both behavior and words. The APHN who exhibits competency and visions will inspire others to follow even when they are unsure, and a legacy of trust will be built among the team. This trust could motivate the team to want to move toward change. Having individual consideration for team members by acknowledging ideas that are different and incorporating different ideas into any change plan will encourage others to embrace and own the idea of change. The underlying goal of any change should be to use evidence as the foundation for decision making and provide patient-centered care that focuses on positive outcomes. When evidence is used as the basis for change and the ideas of others are considered and supported, change can garner broad support among team members.

Learning to motivate by inspiring is the next step on the journey to transformational leadership for the advanced practice nurse. Motivation is individual and personal, and motivation can occur only when the transformational leader comes to know the other and understand what motivates him or her. Factors such as money, power, prestige, challenge, and praise are all motivators, but knowing which of these is effective for any one person is the key to using motivation as a leadership tool. For example, in a practice setting, the nurse practitioner transformational leader sees the need to make a change in the length of scheduled patient visits. To make a persuasive argument for the initiation of the desired change, the nurse practitioner uses the evidence that patient-centered care with slightly longer visit times can significantly increase patient satisfaction, adherence to the health care plan, and better patient outcomes. The nurse practitioner points out these improved outcomes can increase revenue for the practice and that increased
patient satisfaction can bring in more patients to increase revenue.

The third step in the process is to challenge the intellect of team members. To overcome entrenched habits and even cynicism about change, challenge team members to think in new ways. Shake off old habits by intellectual stimulation; challenge and reward team members for participation in this exercise. Applaud new ideas, new innovations, and thinking in new ways.

The final step in any change process led by a transformational leader is to give each team member individual consideration. Highlight areas in which team members have espoused the visions of change either in the past or present. Create an environment where new ideas and change are the norm, not the exception. Foster empowerment and collaboration among team members. Create an atmosphere of trust where each team member feels capable and powerful. As you acknowledge each member of the team individually and encourage him or her to embrace and participate in the team process, comfort in the change process becomes a group norm rather than a group exception.

Exemplar

An example of transformational leadership used in holistic nursing practice can be found in the attempt of a holistic nurse to create a holistic stress management program for veterans in a posttraumatic stress disorder clinic at a VA hospital. The holistic nurse created a reflective garden walking program for stress met with psychologists, nurses, and psychiatrists and health care leaders at the vet center and shared the program with them. The vet center practitioners in turn shared the care needs of veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder with the holistic nurse. The holistic vision for this program was to provide the veterans time in a peaceful garden setting, a guide book with themes and readings and journaling pages, and three meetings to hear, from any who wanted to share, experiences in the garden with each other. The holistic nurse believed that the garden was the therapist in this situation, and allowing the vets to spend time there and feel close to nature would assist them in their healing. The vet center was somewhat skeptical that this program would benefit their patients. After many meetings where evidence of the use of nature for healing was presented and concerns on the part of all of the interprofessional group were discussed and resolved, in 2004 a group of vets participated in the program accompanied by their psychologist. The program was a great success, and it is now a part of the offerings of the vet center in that garden as well as in three other gardens around the United States.

Conclusion

APHNs could use the framework of transformational leadership to change health care to be a more person-centered system based on holistic ideals, health promotion, and disease prevention. As many organizations in health care begin to focus on value-based health care focused on quality rather than quantity, APHN leaders could use vision and inspiration to create policy change nationally, locally, and within practice settings. The transformational leadership style allows each member of the health care team, including the patient, to freely express ideas and provide answers to problems and propose changes to improve patient care outcomes. Part of the leadership model for APHNs includes the use of positive communication and conflict resolution skills. This type of leadership comes from the professional inspiration of the leader rather than from a management position within an organization. It is time for APHNs to step out in leadership to bring their knowledge, values, and passion to whole-person patient care and improving patient outcomes. Using transformational leadership skills, APHNs can move the health care system and health care debate forward and encourage others to embrace change in a complex and multilayered system of care.

References


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