Characteristics of Effective Nurse Management in the Unionized Setting

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Abstract

**Objective:** Identification of characteristics of effective nurse management within unionized settings.

**Background:** Nurse managers impact organizational climates and the experience of staff. Adversarial relations make it difficult for both management and labor unions to work together.

**Methods:** An integrative review of the literature was conducted. Search terms included “management and labor unions”, “nurse managers and labor unions”, “labor relations”, “collective bargaining”, and “organizational culture and unions”. Characteristics of effective nurse management were identified and synthesized into a conceptual framework based on a foundational concept analysis on organizational climate which was utilized to discuss the theoretical link.

**Results:** A connection of collaborative relations between unions and nurse managers has resulting effects on employees, with the end result of improved patient outcomes, improved patient satisfaction, and improved quality.

**Conclusions:** Recommendations for practice include education and development for nurse managers, including strategies for forming collaborative relationships with labor union partners.

Nurse managers have a profound impact on the overall organizational climate and the experience of staff. For nurse managers, working with labor unions can be a difficult endeavor. Unfortunately, this area of nursing management lacks much needed evidence-based practice for nurse managers working within unionized environments. Nurse managers can be instrumental in leading a team of nurses effectively, as well as fostering positive organizational climates. Organizational climate is described in the literature as the perceptions of the outward features of an organization's culture. More specifically, organizational climate can be understood as the employees' perceptions and attitudes toward their organization at a given time (1). Research suggests that the behavior of a manager has an influence on employees and employee perceptions and attitudes that create the overall organizational climate of the workplace (1-10). Relationships between managers and labor unions can turn into "them and us" attitudes between managers and staff. This antagonistic relationship between managers and staff ultimately causes a dynamic of tension in the employment relationship (11). Working within unionized settings presents unique challenges to nurse managers and healthcare administrators. Leaders in these settings must be able to understand how to work with labor unions, and how to move past barriers to effectively lead their teams.
Methods

An integrative review of the literature was conducted, using peer-reviewed, recently published literature (all articles published between the years 2000 to 2010) from the following databases (Nursing, Sociology, Psychology, Business, and Management); CINAHL, PubMed, PsychInfo, SAGE, EBSCO, Wiley InterScience, JSTOR, Wilson, CSA, ProQuest, and Dow Jones. Specific aims included: (a) identify the factors that contribute to effective nurse management in the unionized setting; (b) discuss the challenges of working with labor unions; and (c) understand how nurse managers can create positive organizational climates in unionized environments. The following search terms were used: “management and labor unions”, “nurse managers and labor unions”, “labor relations”, “collective bargaining”, and “organizational culture and unions”. In total, thirty articles were reviewed, of which eight were identified, including a review of articles listed in the authors’ reference lists. Articles included in this review comprised of single descriptive qualitative studies, single correlation studies, systematic reviews, and opinions of expert authorities. From the literature, characteristics of effective nurse management were identified and synthesized into a conceptual framework. My previous work on a concept analysis of organizational climate was utilized to connect the characteristics of effective nurse management within unionized settings, as well as discuss the important theoretical link.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual map (Figure I) developed shows a connection of collaborative relations between unions and nurse managers and the resulting effects on employees, with the end result of improved patient outcomes, improved patient satisfaction, and improved quality. Collaborative relationships between labor unions and nurse managers will not develop unless both parties choose to enter into this relationship. Union leaders as well as healthcare administrators must disown the “them and us” attitudes, which are deep-rooted in the history of unions and organizations (1, 11-16). Working together is a difficult task as unions are in a constant process of conflict and cooperation with management; unions are working with management, yet battling management at the same time (13). The first step for nurse managers is to commit to working collaboratively with labor unions (1, 11-14, 16). Once this commitment is made, nurse managers must also adopt and embrace the following leadership initiatives: accepting their role as leader and taking ownership of their staff despite the union presence; upholding the psychological contract of trust between manager and employee; showing commitment to employees; promoting favorable working conditions; demonstrating a willingness to lead; being confident in decisions; and encouraging dialogue between manager and employees (1, 11-14, 1). If nurse managers choose to adopt the discussed leadership initiatives, the following employee-related factors have been identified within the literature: improved job satisfaction; respect for management; trust in management; improved job performance; teamwork and collaboration; and improved employee behavior (1-16). The result of the efforts of nurse managers, along with the employee-related factors will be the driving force in developing positive
organizational climates. This should be a top priority of nurse managers and healthcare administrators who share the common goals of improving patient outcomes, patient satisfaction and quality of care.

Synthesis of the Literature

The most important finding discussed by researchers is that manager-employee relationships have an unavoidable outcome on the experience of staff and patients, despite the presence of collective representation. Furthermore, researchers across several studies have found that managerial relations with labor unions present an added challenge to the development of positive employee relationships as well as overall organizational climate. Once collaboration has been established, the next step identified through the literature for the nurse manager to take is a commitment to lead. Many important employee-related, patient-related, and organizational outcomes exist in the literature. Lastly, the important link to overall organizational climate of the workplace is discussed in theory through the research findings.

Collaborative Relationships

Collaborative working relationships between nurse managers and labor unions is an essential component to effective nurse management discussed in the literature; without a decision by both management and union representatives to work together, transforming previous adversarial relations will not be possible (1, 11-15, 17-18). Throughout the literature, when collaboration is present, managers and union partners work together to improve quality of care for patients and influence organizational support experienced by staff (1, 11-15, 17-18). Furthermore, both parties must be able to see the benefits of collaboration, as well as separate collaboration from collective bargaining (12-15, 18). Training is a critical factor of the success of collaborative relationships between managers and labor union leaders, as well as instruction on how to incorporate collaboration into daily operations (11, 13-14). Hospital administrators as well as labor union partners must be willing to put forth the personal effort, time and financial resources to attend trainings. D’Art & Turner (2003) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature to describe the relevance of independent representation in the workplace, as well as the relationship to managerial practices. D’Art & Turner found that the consequence of management and labor in a unionized setting is a dysfunctional relationship, leading to disruption in the organization. A limitation of this study is that the authors may hold bias regarding their conclusions, as they make clear their full support of independent representation. These findings are consistent with Hjalager et al. (2009), who conducted a comprehensive survey of union representatives in the Danish healthcare sector. Hjalager et al. found that not only will dysfunction arise when managers and labor union representatives work in conflict, but there is an important link between the nurse manager and the shop steward who holds the unstated role of intermediary between the manager and staff. It was found that the power base, experience and commitment of the shop steward are of importance for the intensity of collaboration with management (15). Eaton et al., (2008) confirm these findings in their analysis of the experience of the Kaiser Permanente Union Coalition and the Labor Management Partnership (LMP) agreement (2008); a
revolutionary approach to partnering with unions to achieve optimal mutual goals. Study results indicate strong support for a participation effect; involvement in the LMP improves member attitudes towards its union and hospital leaders (13). However, it is important to note that the funding for this study was by the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions, thus leading to potential bias in study results. Burke & Greenglass, and Rubin & Richard report in their findings that individual personalities play an important role in working collaboratively with labor unions and organizational reform. This is where training becomes essential, in order to bring the focus back to working in a collaborative relationship (1, 13-15).

**A Commitment to Lead**

Several researchers found that an essential component of effective leadership is a clear demonstration of a willingness to lead, combined with a commitment to the staff on behalf of the manager (1, 11-12, 15, 17). Once the manager has taken ownership of the role as leader, effective leadership can happen. Several characteristics of effective management have been identified in the literature. An effective manager keeps promises to staff, thus building and maintaining trust (1, 11-13, 15, 17). Calo (2006) found through a review of the literature that building trust and respect between manager and employee is best described as the psychological contract; mutuality and trust must be fostered, leading to outcomes that serve the best interest of all stakeholders. Hjalager et al. (2009) further found that once trust has been established, problems in the workplace and dissatisfaction does not necessarily lead to increased distance between manager and staff and any changes are likely to be at the core of relationships with the management.

The effective manager demonstrates confidence in the decision-making process (1, 11-13, 15, 17). The confident manager demonstrates to staff that there is an understanding of the position as leader and the organizational dynamics and processes, which in turn builds credibility of the manager. Researchers have found that the effective nurse manager encourages dialogue with staff, is approachable and maintains an “open door” policy (1, 11-12, 15, 17). Lastly, the most common finding that the researchers discuss across several studies is that the effective nurse manager promotes and supports favorable working conditions for employees (1, 11-15, 17-18). By promoting favorable working conditions for employees, this sends a profound message to staff that the manager not only cares about their well-being, but also demonstrates that employees are valued, not just a commodity or an expense to the organization.

**Employee Outcomes**

When effective leadership is present within an organization, unionized or not, it will be evident in several different employee outcomes, and ultimately patient experience. Researchers found that employees underneath an effective leader tend to be more satisfied with their job, and take pride in performing well (1, 11-15, 17, 18). Interestingly, within study findings respect for management and trust in management
is linked to the presence of an effective leader, as perceived by staff (1, 11-12, 15, 17). This perception drives employee behavior; employees want to maintain a positive working relationship with the manager, as the manager is highly respected (1, 11-15, 17, 18). Finally, several studies demonstrate that employees thriving under an effective leader will work together collaboratively as a team, with the best interests of the clients in mind (1, 11-12, 17).

Organizational Climate
Learning to work collaboratively with unions, adoption of the identified characteristics of effective nurse management, combined with an understanding of organizational climate in the workplace is imperative for both hospital leaders and union leaders. It has been identified in the literature that patients will not receive truly exceptional care, as long as staff do not have positive relations with their direct manager, as well as the existence of negative relations between managers and the union (1-13, 15, 17). Found in my previous concept analysis (19), the overall perception that staff, and the receiving clients have of an organization’s climate is not only related to employee and customer satisfaction, a safe working environment, and financial implications for the organization, but is a direct driver of whether or not the climate is positive or negative. Focusing on moving past adversarial relations between nurse managers and labor unions, and putting in the efforts to transform the culture of the department through adoption of the identified characteristics of effective nurse management will ultimately determine how patients are cared for and how patients perceive their care experience.

Patient Outcomes
Quality of care is undoubtedly a priority for both nurse managers and labor unions. Swan & Harrington (2010) found that unionization influences quality by increasing the monitoring of quality processes (18). In their quantitative analysis of quality measures across all free-standing licensed and certified nursing and skilled-nursing facilities in California across an entire year, Swan & Harrington found overall that there were fewer complaints by patients, as care was more adequate due to the increased monitoring of quality processes in the union setting. This study limits data examination from California nursing facilities only. Nursing facility unionization may be different in California than in other states. A gap exists in the understanding of what the unionized environment looks like in nursing facilities, which may be very different than acute care hospitals. These findings are consistent with D’Art & Turner (2003), who discuss improved quality when there is union presence in an organization. D’Art & Turner point out that organizations are structures of power and control, with subordinates at the base of the enterprise hierarchy; this kind of environment negatively effects quality of patient care, as employees are not able to thrive in this restrictive environment. Unionization can be seen as an attempt to offset the power of the employer, as well as a means to monitor employee well-being, and standards of care for patients (11).
Conclusion

The first step for nurse managers and union leaders is to enter into a collaborative relationship; a letting go of the “they and us” attitudes that have historically been the way nurse managers have dealt with labor unions. By adopting the identified characteristics of effective nurse management, the discussed employee-related, organizational, and patient-related outcomes will follow. The understanding of how to lead effectively in the unionized setting provides essential evidence-based nursing management practices, and will contribute to the advancement of the area of nursing leadership as a specialty of nursing practice. There remains crucial gaps in current research regarding the understanding of what a collaborative relationship looks like, as well as potential barriers to upholding the commitment to work together long-term between nurse managers and labor unions. Further research is needed to understand the nature of collaboration, especially during the ebbs and flows of common issues that arise between management and labor, as well as maintaining positive relations through the collective bargaining process. Ongoing training has been identified in the literature as a necessary component to the collaborative relationship between hospital leaders and labor unions, however more research is needed to understand how these trainings should be developed as well as the content of such trainings. In order to transform patient care on the units, nurse managers must have support from above and have access to educational resources to manage effectively with labor unions. Recommendations for practice include education and development for nurse managers, including strategies for forming collaborative relationships with labor union partners. Further studies are needed in the area of nursing management to research the identified leadership initiatives put to practice within labor union settings and potential outcomes for staff and patients. Lastly, a further understanding through research is needed to identify the differences of labor union dynamics in different hospital settings, as well as skilled nursing facilities in order to help nurse leaders in varying settings apply the evidence learned.
**Figure I: Concept Map of Characteristics of Effective Nurse Management**

- **Labor Unions**
  - Collaborative Relationship - No to "them and us" attitudes
  - Keeping Promises
  - Confident Dialogue with Staff
- **Nurse Managers**
  - Willing to Lead
  - Committed to Staff
  - Improved Employee Behavior
  - Teamwork and Collaboration
  - Improved job Performance
- **Employees**
  - Job Satisfaction
  - Respect for Management
  - Trust in Management
  - Improved Organizational Climate
- **Positive Organizational Climate**
  - Patient Outcomes
  - Patient Satisfaction

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