Nurse Retention Related to Worker Satisfaction: a Key Challenge for Nurse Leaders.

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Abstract

The nursing profession is currently facing the challenge of improving retention amongst the nursing workforce. This paper identifies retention as a key issue for nurse leaders and examines aggravating factors related to nurse retention. Multiple research studies are reviewed to support the link between job satisfaction and role ambiguity with relation to retention. Additionally, Lewin’s Change theory is analyzed as a potential change strategy for nurse leaders to utilize as they aim to improve work environments. Nurse Leaders must examine issues related to retention and develop strategies for improvement; playing a critical role in ensuring the satisfaction amongst workers through providing ongoing administrative support, clearly defining work roles, ensuring adequate training, and creating healthy work environments.
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The anticipated shortage across all levels of nursing is frequently discussed amongst nursing professionals. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing has clearly voiced their concern over the anticipated nursing shortages, pointing to the compounding issue of aging baby boomers (AACN, 2012). Exacerbating the problem of nursing shortages, Krsek (2011) reported 27.1 percent of nurses voluntarily leave their position after the first year of work, creating an additional issue with retaining the current nursing workforce. In light of concern over anticipated nursing shortages, the issue of nursing retention is heightened. Nurse leaders must examine issues related to retention and develop strategies to improve retention and recruitment for the nursing workforce. One area of significant impact for this issue is increasing worker satisfaction. Marshall (2011) discussed the critical importance of provider’s satisfaction in retaining valuable personnel, adding “retention of nurses and other providers is directly correlated with the general work environment, which is heavily influenced by the characteristics of the leader” (p. 140). This statement points to the critical role that nurse leaders have in ensuring the satisfaction amongst workers. The purpose of this paper is to examine the issue of nurse staff retention related to worker satisfaction as a key challenge for leaders in nursing.

**Literature Support: Improved Work Environment**

With an aging population, an aging nursing workforce, and the ever-increasing complexity of our health care system, nurse leaders are forced to examine retention and recruitment (O’Brien-Pallas, Murphy, Shamian, Li, & Hayes, 2010). Nurse leaders must first recognize the large cost to an organization as a result of nursing turnover. Strachota (as cited in O’Brien-Pallas et al., 2010) reported a cost of 42,000 dollars to replace a medical-surgical nurse, this cost being even higher for specialty areas of nursing. Consistently, researchers continue to
point to the importance of job satisfaction as a key factor in nursing turnover (O’Brien-Pallas et al., 2010). Job satisfaction has been defined as “the affective orientation that an employee has towards his or her work” (Lu, Barribal, Zhang, & While, 2011, p. 1018). Through the identifying of factors that affect one’s job satisfaction, nurse leaders have the potential to help develop management interventions and solutions (Lu et al., 2011).

In order to develop these strategies for improvement, the workplace culture or environment must be fully understood. The culture of a workplace has been specifically linked with the well-being, commitment, and experience of its staff members (Tillott, Walksh, & Moxham, 2013). Tillott et al. (2013) describes the following as key elements of an effective workplace culture: “shared governance, role clarification, transformational leadership, open communication, teamwork, safety, person-centeredness, lifelong learning, and involvement and participation by stakeholders” (p. 28). When these elements are not achieved the resulting negative work environment has significant impact on the nursing workforce, as well as posing a threat to the larger health care system. Literature has shown increased sick leave, poor retention, and high frequency of medication errors amongst nurses reporting poor workplace cultures: thus, having detrimental effect on care provided in these types of organizations (Tillott et al., 2013).

A recent Canadian study sought to examine the relationship between determinants of nursing turnover and their implications for nurse leaders through survey collections of both patients and staff nurses. From the perspective of the health care system, the most frightening result was related to medication errors as the study linked the increased likelihood of at least one medication error occurring on units that reported higher turnover rates and high level of role ambiguity (O’Brien-Pallas et al., 2010). Further, the study indicated a direct link between role ambiguity and high turnover rates: Units that reported increased conflict and ambiguity between
roles also had high turnover rates amongst staff (O’Brien-Pallas et al., 2010). The implications of this study for nurse leaders are clear. Effective leadership must reflect clear feedback of both job performance and expectations as well as provide well-defined role clarity (O’Brien-Pallas et al., 2010).

“Providers need to feel valued, to believe they are making a difference, to believe they have control over the care they provide, and to feel able to provide care in the manner they believe their patients deserve” (Marshall, 2011, p. 140). An additional study further supported results discussed in the Canadian research. Role conflict and ambiguity we found to be significant predictors of burnout in nursing (Dasgupta, 2012). Dasgupta (2012) discussed the negative relationship often seen between burnout and motivation: A nurse who feels overworked or underutilized brings little motivation to his/her work, thus, providing poor patient care that in turn negatively reflects upon an organization. Although removing all stressors seems daunting, nurse leaders should work to reduce these stressors as part of their main objective of management (Dasgupta, 2012).

**Change Strategies**

German social psychologist Kurt Lewin developed, as part of his psychological field theory, the *Theory of Planned Change*, which is the process that a group goes through in “altering an event or events” (Chaney & Hough, 2005). Central to this theory are *forces*, which are all the existing properties of a particular social situation over time. These include specific events, past, present and future; and more abstract, emotional forces such as hope, aspiration, and emotional investment (Chaney & Hough, 2005). These forces can either be *driving* forces, which increase the intensity of a particular change event, or *restraining* forces, which combine to diminish the intensity of the same (Chaney & Hough, 2005).
“Creating health care environments that are conducive to providing and promoting optimal patient and staff outcomes requires a change in the systems and structures that govern the existing culture, with an emphasis on cultural change” (Tillott et al., 2013, p. 28). The research discussed identified issues of role ambiguity and job dissatisfaction as contributing factors to the issue of nurse retention. These are the restraining forces that inhibit the change process, according to Lewin. By clearly identifying the restraining forces, one can then focus on increasing the intensity of corresponding driving forces. According to the research, these driving forces may involve the nurse leader providing ongoing administrative support, clearly defining work roles, adequate training, and a healthy work environment (O’Brien-Pallas, 2010).

Culture change is a daunting task with wide ramifications. Utilizing a framework to develop positive workplace changes can aid the nurse leader in better understanding of the environment’s culture as well as current misconceptions of nursing workforce (Tillott et al., 2013). Tillott et al. (2013) suggest nurse leaders utilize the Scarf framework; status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness when seeking to change workplace culture. The five domains in this framework reflect the level in which a person engages in their environment by either a threat or reward response. These threat and reward responses aid in describing the way a person responds to situations within their environment, helping the leader gain a clearer understanding of workplace issues. Specific to the retention of nurses, this framework allows leaders to engage staff nurses in a process that will promote open communication and ownership in decisions-making processes, key aspects of job satisfaction (Tillott et al., 2013). The responsibility of the nurse leader is to focus on employees strengths, identify weakness’, examine innovative ideas, provide motivation and confidence in staff, and act as a positive role model for their unit (Tillott et al., 2013).
Marshall (2013) proposed that trust is the key challenge for any leader working towards change: The best way to find a sense of power during change is to simply move forward and fully engage yourself in the change process. Nurses need to have clear expectations and find meaning in their work to prevent the deterioration of quality patient care (O’Brien-Pallas et al., 2010). “The current worldwide shortage of nurses highlights the importance of understanding the impact and interrelationships of the identified variables if healthcare organizations are to implement interventions to improve the retention of their nursing workforce” (Lu et al., 2012, p.1033). The established association between role ambiguity and heightened staff turnover rates demand an immediate response from nurse leaders. Nurse leaders have the responsibility to change current work environments in health care through recognizing the scope and types of role stressors that currently exist in the nursing workforce, in addition to facilitating team building across health disciplines as competing expectations often contribute to poor work environments (O’Brien-Pallas et al., 2010).

**Conclusion**

It is anticipated that nursing shortages will likely place stress on our health care system. Therefore, nurse leaders have the immediate responsibility to develop strategies that will improve the retention of the nursing workforce and also progress nurses’ morale and engagement in the workplace (Tillott et al., 2012). The current trend of poor nurse retention not only has large financial consequences for health organizations, but also has wide-scale implications to health care as research has linked this issue with worsening patient outcomes and increased incidents of medication errors. Nurse leaders have a critical role in ensuring the satisfaction amongst workers through providing ongoing administrative support, clearly defining work roles, ensuring adequate training, and creating healthy work environments.
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References


