

The relevance of servant leadership in nursing. Conceptual comparison of servant leadership and nurse leadership models

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Purpose

In ever changing environment of health care there is increased need for developing knowledge about nurse leadership. The aim of this paper is to present a conceptual comparison of servant leadership and two evidence based models of nurse leadership and to answer the question if servant leadership is an important contribution to current knowledge about successful leadership in nursing.

Background

A number of studies show the significance of supportive nurse leadership behavior for better patient and staff outcomes. Further development of these models is important for the benefit of health care outcomes. Servant leadership is an approach to leadership development and was first published by Robert Greenleaf in 1970. This practical philosophy is applied widely in modern organizations and publications are increasing¹. However, nursing research about servant leadership is limited.

Method

Conceptual comparison was used to investigate the relationship between the philosophy of servant leadership and two different, however interrelated nurse leadership models. Key attributes of servant leadership, i.e. traits related to communication, competence and vision, were conceptually compared to the characteristics of the two well-known evidence based nurse leadership models: Magnet hospital and organizational empowerment according to Kanter's theory.

Findings

The concept of servant leadership is conceptually related to the leading concepts of magnet hospitals and organizational empowerment. Servant leadership is a practical philosophy which supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead by encouraging collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and the ethical use of power and empowerment. Servant leaders supervise others by facilitating them to grow as persons and guide them to be leaders themselves¹. These characteristics are closely related to the principles of magnet hospitals and organizational empowerment. In magnet hospital leaders are visible and supportive, nurse autonomy is high, and communication channels are open². Organizational empowerment includes access to information, resources and support, and opportunities to learn and develop³ (table 1).

Table 1: Conceptual comparison of servant leadership and two evidence based nurse leadership models

	Key characteristics		
Leadership model	Communication. Relationships within the organization.	Leader's competence.	Vision and philosophy
Servant leadership ¹ Supervision through serving people. Promotion of a sense of community. Shared power in decision making. Leaderful organizations enable people to meet shared goals.	Intent listening: what is said and unsaid. Recognition of people's unique spirits. Potential for healing oneself and relations with others. Persuasion rather than positional authority in decision making.	Self-awareness and awareness about ethics, power and values. Commitment to the growth of people and to serving them. Seeks ways to build community within the organization.	Emphasis on great dreams and long term goals Balance between conceptual thinking and day to day operational thinking. Foresight into consequences of decisions on the future.
Magnet hospital model ² Structure fosters supportive relations and autonomy enabling nurses to provide safe patient care.	Open communication channels. Knowledgeable resources for staff. Professional development supported. Equality of power and excellent collaboration.	Participative and supportive leadership. Courage to take risks. Visible and able to listen to staff. Strong position and a voice at top level.	Meaningful philosophy of patient care. Concern for patient paramount within the organization. Nurse contribution to care is highly valued.
Organizational empowerment ^{3,4,5} Power derived from structural conditions as an ability to get things done in an organization.	Mutual respect and trust in communication. Access to formal and informal power resources: opportunities and power. Empowered individuals with control.	Empowered leader creates energy and empowers staff. Fairness and respect for others.	Spirit of winning team. Success through joint effort of motivated, empowered and engaged staff.

Discussion

Magnet hospital and Organizational empowerment are well known leadership models in nursing and are widely accepted for their result in nurse job satisfaction and better patient care. Research shows that servant leadership is related to organizational success in terms of better outcomes for staff and clients. Servant leadership is conceptually related to well-established nursing models and therefore highly relevant to further develop current nurse leadership knowledge. Servant leadership could successfully be implemented in health care with the potential to help resolve increasing nurses shortage. Further research in this area is recommended.

References:

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