

Leadership succession in nursing: thinking and acting today to ensure a better tomorrow

Denize Bouttelet Munari¹, Ana Lúcia Queiroz Bezerra², Alyne Leite Nogueira³,
Bárbara Souza Rocha⁴, Elyana Teixeira Sousa⁵, Luana Cássia Miranda Ribeiro⁶

¹ Nurse, Ph.D. in Nursing. Retired Professor, School of Nursing, Federal University of Goiás. Goiânia, Goiás, Brazil. Email: boutteletmunari@gmail.com.

² Nurse, Ph.D. in Nursing. Adjunct professor, School of Nursing, Federal University of Goiás. Goiânia, Goiás, Brazil. Email: aqueiroz.fen@gmail.com.

³ Nurse, Master of Nursing. Doctoral student, Graduate Nursing Program, School of Nursing, Federal University of Goiás. Goiânia, Goiás, Brazil. Email: alynenogueira@hotmail.com.

⁴ Nurse, Ph.D. in Nursing. Adjunct Professor, School of Nursing, Federal University of Goiás. Goiânia, Goiás, Brazil. Email: barbarasrocha@gmail.com.

⁵ Doctoral student, Graduate Nursing Program, School of Nursing, Federal University of Goiás. Goiânia, Goiás, Brazil. Email: elyanasousa@hotmail.com.

⁶ Nurse, Ph.D. in Nursing. Professor, Federal Institute of Goiás. Goiânia, Goiás, Brazil. Email: luaufg@yahoo.com.br.

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The world has been experiencing a crisis in leadership that has evolved with the ageing of a generation that pioneered the innovation and transformation of collective life⁽¹⁾. Changes have been introduced by the younger generations, and with their new habits, values and behaviors, they have begun taking the reigns of the management or are in the front lines of organizations. However, changes do not occur merely through the presence of what is new; previous generations are still essential to any organization⁽²⁾.

Some areas actually require professionals with more agile profiles, but on the other hand, it is important that the knowledge and experience of other professionals be valued. In light of so many changes, the characteristics of older generations also contribute to the development of organizations⁽³⁻⁴⁾. Throughout this process, coexistence is not always harmonious, but are necessary if good leadership practices are to be passed down generations for the common good⁽¹⁾. Ideally, leaders of organizations should employ emotional intelligence and have the ability to manage the coexistence of both generations, as well as address concerns about ethical and professional relationships⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

According to Peter Drucker⁽⁷⁾ “a leader is someone who has the ability to make others follow, and it is mainly this type of ability that describes him the best. An effective leader is not someone who is loved

or admired. The quality of leadership is not measured by popularity, but by the results they are able to produce. Leaders are highly visible. They therefore set examples. Leadership is not rank, privileges, titles, or money. It is responsibility.” Drucker defends that preparation for leadership, the exchange of experiences, and concern with leadership succession and training are essential to any organizations’ success⁽⁷⁾.

In nursing, this change has been taking place quickly and demands that current leadership commit to

the development of the profession, preparing and facilitating exchange of experiences between generations in order to plan and ensure a promising future for the career^(1,8-9).

Factors such as the ageing workforce^(8,10-13), the imminent retirement of a large number of nurses in the coming years^(11-12,14), coupled with the low level of interest demonstrated by younger nurses in leadership positions and lack of investment in professional training and improving leadership performance⁽¹⁵⁾ are a foreshadowing of an unprecedented crisis in nursing worldwide^(13,16).

This crisis tends to make future nursing leaders alienated and ill-prepared for the role, pointing to impacts in services in general, ranging from healthcare institutions to universities and centers for training and research, where professors/researchers are going through the same retirement process⁽¹⁷⁾. One possibility to mitigate the situation is to implement projects to stimulate the sharing of experiences among professionals from different generations, ensuring leadership succession in nursing^(8,17).

Even though this matter is of the utmost relevance, leadership succession planning has not received the attention it warrants. This can be observed in the scarce scientific production on the theme, and low levels of investment in health and educational institutions in preparing future leadership, and, furthermore, the issue is not addressed in ongoing education programs^(9,11,17).

A systematic review of literature on the theme showed that it is an innovative yet incipient theme, even in developed countries. The review produced some theoretical and conceptual articles about leadership succession planning in nursing, however, few studies portrayed experiences with the implementation and monitoring of succession planning (SP), even though there is consensus on the importance of the topic for the future of the profession.

The purpose of SP is to ensure continuity of leadership in institutions through the development and assessment of individuals with the potential to occupy future positions of command^(11,13). This process is complex and includes elements such as strategic planning, resource allocation, identifying key position/competencies to be replaced, selecting potential leaders, leadership development, mentoring/coaching and assessing candidates⁽¹⁸⁻¹⁹⁾.

Studies have shown that SP facilitates leadership transition, decreases stress within teams, improves retention and recruitment of high-potential nurses^(8,14,18), reduces turnover rates of nursing managers^(8,13), reduces replacement costs^(13-14,18,20), maintains levels of productivity⁽¹⁸⁻¹⁹⁾, improves the workplace/environment⁽⁸⁻¹³⁾ and increases client and professional satisfaction⁽⁹⁾.

The development of new leadership competencies creates a culture that fosters career progression, which demonstrates a commitment to the development of the profession⁽¹⁸⁾. Succession planning also ensures quality benchmarks in health care and the preservation of knowledge produced by various generations of nurses.

The implementation of SP helps strengthen management and leadership, giving continuity to the experiences of veteran leaders, who can contribute to the selection, grooming, and retention of new talents. This process also facilitates the process of convincing younger nurses about the importance of becoming

leaders^(13,21).

In light of this reality, in order to build a better future for nursing, we must concern and occupy ourselves with the important task of developing new leadership. Above all, we must enable different generations of nurses to be capable of coexisting in a relationship of respect in the various fields of practice.

To be successful, the laborious task of developing SP requires a mutual and respectful relationship between generations. In such a relationship, veteran nurses should have room to tell their stories and dole out advice and younger nurses should have the opportunity to share their dreams, difficulties and challenges. Both should be able to share their experiences and knowledge, planning a future for our profession that meets various expectations.

The work of a younger leader can be well done and bring good results, however, they must also accept the teachings of more experienced professionals, and strive to pass on to them their more relevant skills. In this context, organizations are responsible for directing their objectives and work of their professionals, in addition to using all the tools and skills that this generation has to offer to develop the best work possible. This may be a path for reaching the training of effective leaders who base their practices on ethical behaviors and innovative decisions.

In this editorial, in addition to presenting ideas, our objective is to present in practical terms the results of different generations coexisting in search of the development and growth of nursing. It was written by professors who are already going through the retirement process and who are concerned with the future of the profession and its young followers who join the experience of their masters with dreams for the future of their careers.

We hope this text may be convincing enough to instigate current leaders, and senior professors and researchers to take on the mission of training new generations, sharing knowledge and experiences, and extending their work into the lives of other nurses, and in so doing, leaving behind a lasting legacy.

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