

# Leadership succession: a necessary reflection for the future of nursing

*Sucessão de lideranças: uma reflexão necessária para o futuro da enfermagem*

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## ABSTRACT

A theoretical article whose purpose was to present a reflection on planning of leadership succession in nursing, highlighting its conceptual bases and challenges to the creation of new leaderships in academic contexts and healthcare organizations. Two key points were defined for this discussion: “Leadership succession in nursing: the fundamentals, strategies, and evidence of its benefits”; and “The essential elements in planning the creation of new nursing leadership”. The planning of leadership succession in nursing can help both training institutions and health organizations to develop the skills and competencies of nurses so they can take over management positions. This planning must consider the history and perspective of young people and those of people who have more experience so that the care provided achieves greater quality. This study encourages nursing leaders, nurses, professors and undergraduate students to learn succession planning as a strategy to ensure achievements in the profession and help build their future.

**Descriptors:** Nursing Administration Research; Leadership; Education Nursing, Continuing.

## RESUMO

Artigo teórico cujo objetivo foi apresentar uma reflexão sobre planejamento de sucessão de lideranças em enfermagem, destacando bases conceituais e desafios para a formação de novas lideranças no contexto acadêmico e nas instituições de saúde. Para tal, foram organizados dois eixos de discussão “A sucessão de lideranças em enfermagem: fundamentos, estratégias e evidências de seus benefícios” e os “Elementos essenciais no planejamento para formação de novas lideranças em enfermagem”. O planejamento de sucessão de lideranças em enfermagem pode auxiliar instituições formadoras e organizações de saúde no desenvolvimento de competências dos enfermeiros para assumirem cargos de gestão. Para isso, valoriza a história e a perspectiva dos jovens e dos mais experientes em busca de melhor qualidade da assistência prestada. Esse estudo instiga lideranças de enfermagem, enfermeiros, docentes e estudantes de enfermagem a conhecerem o planejamento de sucessão como uma estratégia para garantir conquistas da profissão e construir o seu futuro.

**Descritores:** Pesquisa em Administração de Enfermagem; Liderança; Educação Continuada em Enfermagem.

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**How to cite this article:** Munari DB, Nogueira ALG, Sousa ET, Ribeiro LCM, Sherman R. Leadership succession: a necessary reflection for the future of nursing. Rev. Eletr. Enferm. [Internet]. 2019 [cited on: \_\_\_\_\_]; 21:54787. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5216/ree.v21.54787>.

Received on: 09/04/2018. Accepted on: 09/10/2018. Available on: 12/31/2019.

## INTRODUCTION

Although leadership succession has taken place since the inception of modern nursing, it is currently a contemporary challenge that deserves careful reflection, because of its impact on the process of transitions among nursing generations in Brazil and around the world<sup>(1)</sup>.

Today, the nursing workforce may have up to four generations working together — seniors/traditionalists born between 1925 and 1945 (most of them already retired, but sometimes working at some level within organizations); baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964 (most already entitled to retirement, but working in leadership positions within organizations); Generation X born between 1965 and 1980 (the greatest part of the strategic core of organizations); and Generation Y/Millennials born between 1981 and 2000 (young people newly recruited by organizations<sup>(2)</sup>). Even though the time frame for the transition from one generation to another has not been previously established, it is generally 15 to 20 years<sup>(2)</sup>.

Behavior, ways of relating to work and life in general, ways of coping with changes, learning, communication, and leadership development vary from one generation to another<sup>(3)</sup>. Each is still influenced by historical, political and social movements, and life experiences<sup>(3)</sup>.

The aging of the nursing workforce, with a majority of nurses about to retire<sup>(4)</sup>, associated with the fact that younger nurses generally show little interest in leadership<sup>(3)</sup>, leads to nurse shortages in some countries<sup>(1,5,6)</sup>. This constitutes a crisis in nursing, which makes planning for leadership succession essential to the profession, for both health organizations and nursing schools<sup>(1,3-5,7)</sup>.

The definition of succession planning (SP) adopted in this study is a “deliberate and systematic effort made by an organization to ensure the continuity of the leadership in key positions, to retain and develop the intellectual capital and to foster individual progress for the future”<sup>(8)</sup>. This process requires the implementation of policies and practices that value the application of the core strengths and sets of skills of each generation, resulting in a work environment where everyone feels supported and appreciated<sup>(1-3,9,10)</sup>. Therefore, intergenerational differences may be a major advantage in developing successful actions in the process of leadership succession in nursing<sup>(2)</sup>.

In this study, leadership is understood as a competency that is validated by the interpersonal influence exerted at a certain situation and mediated by the human communication process, which is only concrete once a leader is validated by those he/she leads<sup>(11,12)</sup>. It is a vital element to the success of an organization and so that managers can be agents of changes. The main function of leadership is to facilitate achieving objectives in partnership with their subordinates and to provide opportunities for the personal improvement and growth of all of those involved<sup>(11)</sup>.

Despite the importance of SP in organizations in ensuring quality standards in health care, most do not have leadership development plans for succession<sup>(1,5)</sup>. Many nurses take up leadership positions without proper training<sup>(10,13)</sup>. In academic contexts, actions aimed at the development of new leadership have begun to appear in the literature<sup>(13-16)</sup>.

The first studies of this topic date from the late 1990s, with scientific output increasing since the early 2000s<sup>(17)</sup>. More recent studies have pointed out that systematic leadership succession can ensure the future development of the profession<sup>(1,2,5,7,9,18,19)</sup>.

The relevance of the topic and the urgent need to invest in projects in health organizations and educational institutions for leadership succession in nursing prompted the proposal of this study. The objective was to introduce a reflection on planning leadership succession in nursing, highlighting its conceptual bases and challenges to the creation of new leaders in academic contexts and in healthcare organizations.

This reflection is inspired in the literature that explores the conceptual field of leadership succession in nursing and contributes ideas about fostering the implementation of actions in that area and strengthening continuity of achievement. It is worth noting that most of the studies developed on succession planning are grounded on the transformational leadership perspective. This article is divided into two parts: In the first part, we introduce the fundamentals of the concepts, and strategies of SP, and evidence of its benefits; in the second, we highlight some essential elements in the creation of new nursing leaders.

## LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION IN NURSING: FUNDAMENTALS, STRATEGIES, AND EVIDENCE OF ITS BENEFITS

In the near future, young nurses will have to be prepared to replace nursing leaders who will be exiting the market. These leaders are experienced and have made history in the nursing sciences for decades<sup>(17)</sup>. The replacement of experienced leaders with new ones, of different generations and involved in different contexts, requires planning of strategies and formal leadership development programs in organizations<sup>(1,2,5,18,19)</sup>. This same challenge applies in academic contexts<sup>(14)</sup>, since the training of competent professors to work in education, continued education and research requires commitment and effort from professors and time for assimilation of knowledge and development of expertise in specific fields. It also requires clear guidelines for policies and strategic planning of universities<sup>(14,16)</sup>.

The planning of leadership succession in nursing allows high performers to be prepared for the future on the basis of an integrated and systematic approach that avoids putting untrained and inexperienced nurses in leadership positions with which they are not familiar<sup>(20)</sup>. Therefore, when organizations decide to plan leadership succession in a deliberate and proactive manner, it prepares a set of well-trained nursing leaders to face future challenges<sup>(5)</sup>, ensuring smoother leadership transitions<sup>(10)</sup>.

Based on the SP concept adopted in this article, we understand that this strategy can help organizations meet their constant personnel needs at all levels and for all occupational groups, keeping and retaining their workforce<sup>(8)</sup>.

In this systematic process, leadership needs are mapped out, and assessment and training of individuals who are potentially qualified to hold future leadership positions are planned<sup>(17,20)</sup>. In nursing, succession planning begins with the identification of individuals to be replaced, that is, the assessment of future leadership needs and identification of successors<sup>(5,17)</sup>. After the identification of nurses with leadership skills, the next step is to help them develop their potential and nurture them so they become leaders<sup>(7)</sup>.

A model for succession planning is proposed on the basis of a literature review<sup>(17)</sup> as shown in Figure 1.

This is a dynamic process that includes essential elements that suggest ways for organizations to best plan SP. This includes actions such as strategic planning, allocation of resources, identification of key positions to be replaced, the required skills for each position, the selection of potential leaders, leadership development using different theoretical and technical resources such as mentoring and coaching, and finally, a candidate evaluation program<sup>(17,21)</sup>.

In this process, it is important to understand that leaders are not naturally born, but rather appear and evolve continuously on the basis of a series of experiences and social interactions<sup>(22)</sup>. In SP, individuals who show leadership skills, whether in clinical practice or management, are identified as candidates or emergent nursing leaders<sup>(4)</sup>. The development of new leaders is based on the exploitation of leadership skills and competencies, strengths and learning needs, along with a goal-oriented proposal for action and development of the organizations the leaders are in<sup>(17)</sup>.

Several methods can be used to train emerging leaders, such as simulation<sup>(4)</sup>, career mapping<sup>(1)</sup>, coaching, mentoring<sup>(3,7)</sup>, and formal training courses<sup>(20,23)</sup>. Simulation provides realistic experiences, with the creation of environments that enable teams to put into practice skills recently learned in safe environments, without judgment. This methodology has proven to be effective, not only because it prepares nurses for real-life experiences, but because it is also possible to detect whether a leadership position change is justified. This is an

innovative practice that can be used to develop leadership skills, and can also serve as a selection method for succession and assessment of leadership<sup>(4,14)</sup>.

Career mapping is done by means of a specific tool that helps nurses outline their career paths within organizations, aiming for excellence. One study showed that it “supports career evolution and helps the organization by encouraging a partnership between clinical nurses and nursing leaders”<sup>(1)</sup>. Mentoring and coaching can be characterized as counseling, support and consulting. In these processes, current nursing leaders work as mentors and are key elements for transferring knowledge to their potential successors<sup>(7)</sup>. Mentoring requires a commitment from both parties, the one who guides and the one who learns, since it is based on mutual trust, teaching, counseling, and friendship<sup>(3)</sup>.

In formal residencies, new nurses are prepared for leadership positions. An experiment carried out in Florida showed that new nurses expect their efforts to contribute to improved work environments, unite teams, and implement necessary changes to achieve progress in health care<sup>(22)</sup>. In the United States, residencies and formal leadership development programs use solid theoretical and technical references to prepare new leaders. The results show that these are long-term projects that require monitoring and systematized evaluation<sup>(22)</sup>.

In addition to the identification of potential leaders and their development, SP also requires a formal result assessment program. There are countless monitoring and



Source: Titzer et al.<sup>(17)</sup>

**Figure 1.** Succession planning model.

evaluation strategies for these processes, which are generally in line with the scope of the proposals that include SP. These can be evaluation of customer satisfaction, program evolution, positive organizational results, participants' interviews and feedback<sup>(18,22)</sup>.

Therefore, the implementation of leadership succession plans in nursing has an impact on health institutions, since it improves role transitions, and reduces manager turnover rates and replacement costs<sup>(9,10,18,23)</sup>. There is also evidence of reduced time for replacement and preservation of organizational culture<sup>(10,24)</sup>, ensuring continuity in leadership roles and promoting nurse satisfaction by creating sound work environments and improving patient results<sup>(12)</sup>. Succession planning and leadership qualification are essential for the development of leaders who will effectively respond to new challenges and demands, so these are key strategies for the future of health care<sup>(5,24)</sup>. Finally, we point out a study in the United States that concluded that the "most significant contribution" that leaders can make is to develop their successors<sup>(20)</sup>.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR PLANNING THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW LEADERS IN NURSING

Scientific output regarding leadership succession planning in nursing has been more evident since the 2000s<sup>(17)</sup>. Generally speaking, this output highlights several essential elements for the process of new leadership training in nursing. This study highlights some of these elements.

The first element refers to emerging aspects in the training process, highlighting leadership as a fundamental competency for innovative and sustainable practices in health and nursing<sup>(5,7,10,24)</sup>. These studies make it clear that the adoption of solid theoretical leadership models is necessary in the process of training new leaders. These models are based, mostly, on the theory of transformational leadership, which is defined as the art of instilling in people the will to fight for shared aspirations<sup>(11,18)</sup>.

From this perspective, young leaders are mobilized to develop new competencies in order to be agents of change. The idea is that new leaders work to enhance collective actions with their subordinates, providing opportunities for personal growth and improvement of everyone<sup>(5,18)</sup>. In this view, leaders are proactive individuals, and their work is focused on improvement and innovation of both individuals and teams and organizations as a whole, looking beyond what is expected of them. This style of leadership is also characterized by motivation of people

so they can work with the highest ethical and moral standards<sup>(5,11)</sup>.

Instruments such as the Leadership Practices Inventory of Kouzes and Posner<sup>(11,20,23)</sup> and Nurse Manager Inventory Tool<sup>(20)</sup> are used in improving competence of leaders, and are widely used in leadership development programs<sup>(20)</sup>.

Besides the use of solid theoretical models in training, it is essential that this process be monitored in practice, preferably on the basis of interaction with experienced leaders. This is considered to be one of the most effective ways to prepare new professionals who will hold leadership positions<sup>(24)</sup>. When new leaders take on leadership positions, lack of formal training can result in mistakes and lead to frustration. In addition, collaborative work between experienced leaders and future leaders enables new nurses to take on leadership positions with more confidence and assertiveness<sup>(3,19,24)</sup>. A survey carried out in Florida showed that, although young nurses are afraid of taking on leadership positions, they expected their efforts to contribute to improved work environments and implement changes that are necessary to achieve progress in health care<sup>(22)</sup>.

Another study<sup>(20)</sup> pointed to the importance of finding the right mentors for new leadership training, considering that this process is an essential supplement for enhancing role shaping and sharing and discussing the leadership learning process. Support from mentors, in addition to helping in the actual transition of leadership roles, shows the relevance of understanding leadership as a work in progress, which helps in the resolution of problems in real time and in the development of critical thinking<sup>(20)</sup>.

Programs of leadership development have been assessed in different settings and with different models<sup>(20,23,24)</sup>, showing among other aspects that a systematic program and solid references are as important as the adoption of systematic evaluation and monitoring processes for achieving success in the training of new nursing leaders.

It is also expected from these training processes that leaders will contribute to the development of a sound work environment and, more importantly, be more efficient in their qualified communication ability, among other requirements<sup>(12,22)</sup>. Establishing and maintaining sound work environments is clearly related to leadership and is conceived as a strategy for strengthening nurses' work and, consequently, it produces good patient outcomes and job satisfaction<sup>(12,18)</sup>. Leadership is best developed in sound work environments, with positive references by mentors, and focused on personal relationships. Supporting structures and the acknowledgment of its importance by the organizational context is another facilitator of the learning process<sup>(4,5,8,18)</sup>.

The planning of leadership succession presents a great challenge when it comes to maintaining the intellectual assets developed over several generations of nurses and encouraging young nurses to strengthen nursing work. This process requires deliberate efforts by health and teaching institutions so they can stay informed of the progress achieved.

Some studies have suggested that, in this setting, organizations and nursing leaders must be aware of generational differences, understand the factors related to renewal and retention of nurses in different workplaces, and provide a sound environment so that nurses of all generations can develop and show their abilities<sup>(4,5,18,25)</sup>.

Therefore, the challenge for current nursing leaders and young professionals is to understand the characteristics of different generations, and by means of this knowledge, reduce possible conflicts that may occur. Guidance and support from managers are important for adaptation and retention of new nurses<sup>(25)</sup>.

Those who lead are most suited to provide support to their successors. One study showed that this relationship can be beneficial to both sides: current leaders who are challenged to apply their best practices when they are working with successors, and emerging leaders who build on self-confidence about their leadership potential<sup>(24)</sup>.

Investments in institutional projects for the implementation of leadership succession plans are urgently needed. A study published in 2016<sup>(23)</sup> pointed to another setting that showed, unlike other surveys, that nurses from Generation Y, who are inheriting leadership positions in all health services and teaching institutions, are definitely interested in learning about leadership. What's more, they are confident about their ability to make positive changes in their work environments. They are also willing to be involved in structured leadership training programs and want to be monitored by competent mentors<sup>(23)</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, our purpose was to encourage management researchers to think about the challenges of promoting learning experiences of leadership from the perspectives of great changes in organizations, with the renewal of their nursing leaders.

The current perspective on leadership requires proactivity from managers to improve and search for innovation at work, from both individuals and teams and organizations as a whole. There is a need to look beyond the current setting and reach a future projection that includes planning leadership succession.

Current leaders must make sure that future leaders have the opportunity to develop themselves before they hold such positions. Shared environments, daily exchanges and coexistence are some of the factors that help this exchange, but it is necessary to think systematically about how the knowledge gained by experienced leaders can help future leaders in dealing with current and new crises.

Some strategies were pointed out. However, it is important to highlight that they do not run out, since the challenges that are faced every day can change with reality and the coexistence of different generations, who differ with regard to their interests, ways of life, and how they face work realities. This may be the most challenging task for the training of new leaders both in the academic context and in healthcare institutions. In both scenarios, it is fundamental to unite the strengths of different generations of nurses present in the organizations in order to preserve the conquered spaces, knowledge developed and foster innovation.

Leadership succession planning is a possibility to converge experiences and expectations with a focus on the continuity of work, quality and safety of the care provided by these professionals. However, institutional mobilization and the search for legitimate spaces for the implementation of actions that promote leadership succession is a complex challenge that requires strategic action from formal leaders.

Considering this is an emerging topic, it is fundamental to develop empirical studies on nursing leadership succession, highlighting the challenges of this practice both in healthcare institutions and in the academic context. Distinguishing the specificities of succession planning in several scenarios is an important gap, which may and should inspire further research. It is a long journey, and this learning demands that those involved show resilience and believe in the future of nursing.

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