

The Role of Nursing Leadership in Enhancing Patient Safety and Quality of Care

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Abstract:

In the evolving landscape of modern healthcare, the significance of nursing leadership has emerged as a crucial determinant in ensuring both patient safety and the overall quality of care. As patient needs grow more complex, and healthcare systems become increasingly multifaceted, the role of nurse leaders expands beyond administrative oversight to encompass strategic decision-making, ethical leadership, clinical governance, and interprofessional collaboration. This review article explores the comprehensive responsibilities of nursing leaders and their transformative impact on safety outcomes and care delivery standards. Drawing from current literature, case studies, and policy frameworks, it delves into various leadership styles such as transformational, servant, and situational leadership, and examines their distinct contributions to fostering safe clinical environments and achieving excellence in care delivery.

Additionally, the article highlights essential competencies required for effective nursing leadership, including emotional intelligence, advocacy, clinical expertise, and the ability to implement evidence-based practices. It further investigates how nurse leaders cultivate a culture of safety, encourage continuous quality improvement, and drive sustainable organizational change. Through an exploration of real-world challenges—such as workforce shortages, burnout, resistance to change, and resource limitations—the review underscores the resilience and adaptability required of today's nursing leadership. The paper concludes by offering forward-looking insights into how empowering nurse leaders through policy support, education, and cross-disciplinary collaboration can strengthen global healthcare systems and elevate the standards of patient care.

Keywords: Nursing leadership, patient safety, quality of care, clinical governance, transformational leadership, healthcare quality, nursing management, evidence-based practice, healthcare systems, nursing roles.

1. Introduction

Healthcare delivery in the 21st century is undergoing a paradigm shift, driven by innovations in technology, changing population demographics, rising patient expectations, and a global call for safety, quality, and equity in care. Within this rapidly evolving context, nursing professionals stand at the heart of the healthcare system, uniquely positioned to influence every level of patient

interaction—from bedside care to boardroom decisions. Among these professionals, nursing leaders occupy a particularly critical role, not only as administrators and coordinators but as visionaries, change agents, and moral compasses in an increasingly complex and high-stakes environment **(1)**.

The importance of patient safety and high-quality care has never been more pronounced. With growing public scrutiny, regulatory mandates, and performance benchmarks, healthcare institutions must ensure that every patient encounter reflects the highest standards of safety and effectiveness. Nurse leaders are tasked with a dual responsibility: to maintain the operational integrity of clinical services while also fostering an environment where safety protocols are upheld, quality indicators are monitored and improved, and staff members are supported and empowered to deliver their best. Their leadership is instrumental in setting the tone for organizational culture, encouraging transparent communication, reducing medical errors, and ensuring patient-centered practices **(2)**.

Moreover, as interdisciplinary teams become the norm in modern healthcare, nursing leadership plays a key role in promoting collaboration across disciplines, aligning efforts toward shared goals, and bridging gaps between administrative directives and frontline realities. Nurse leaders are also critical advocates for vulnerable populations, working to ensure that care delivery is not only safe and efficient but also equitable and inclusive **(1)**.

This review article aims to comprehensively analyze the strategic and operational role of nursing leadership in enhancing patient safety and quality of care. It will examine leadership theories and styles, the core competencies necessary for effective leadership, and the best practices that nurse leaders use to elevate care standards. It will also address systemic challenges that nurse leaders face and propose solutions that reflect international best practices and policy recommendations. In doing so, the article seeks to reaffirm the indispensable role of nurse leaders in shaping the future of healthcare and building resilient, patient-centered systems.

2. Nursing Leadership: Definitions and Context

The concept of **nursing leadership** is deeply embedded in the history and evolution of the nursing profession. From the early days of Florence Nightingale, often regarded as the pioneer of modern nursing leadership, the role of nurses has progressively expanded from caregiving to proactive decision-making, advocacy, and systemic reform. Nightingale's leadership during the Crimean War not only improved sanitary conditions and reduced mortality but also laid the groundwork for the professionalization and formal recognition of nursing as a discipline with its own body of knowledge, ethics, and leadership philosophy **(3)**.

In its modern interpretation, nursing leadership is understood as the **intentional and strategic use of influence** to guide individuals, teams, and organizations toward the achievement of shared healthcare goals. It transcends routine supervision and operational control to encompass visionary planning, innovation, culture-building, and value-driven action. It includes not only what leaders do, but how they **think, feel, communicate, and inspire** others **(4)**.

Nursing leadership is both an **art and a science**—grounded in evidence-based practice, systems thinking, health informatics, and clinical judgment, yet reliant on interpersonal skills, empathy, and moral courage. Unlike management, which typically focuses on maintaining the status quo through planning, budgeting, and monitoring, **leadership emphasizes change**, growth, and transformation. While nurse managers ensure policies are followed, nurse leaders ask whether those policies are achieving their intended outcomes and what can be done to improve them **(1)**.

- **Philosophical Foundations of Nursing Leadership**

Philosophically, nursing leadership draws on several foundational values: **(5)**.

- **Human dignity:** Respect for the intrinsic worth of all individuals, regardless of background or condition, informs leadership interactions at every level.
- **Justice and equity:** Nurse leaders work to eliminate disparities in care delivery and ensure access to services for marginalized or vulnerable populations.
- **Holism:** Nursing leaders consider the physical, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of health when making decisions.
- **Autonomy and empowerment:** Leaders in nursing advocate not only for patient autonomy but also for the professional autonomy of nurses and other team members.

These values shape how nurse leaders prioritize resources, resolve conflicts, respond to ethical dilemmas, and implement change **(5)**.

- **Leadership Across Healthcare Settings**

Nursing leadership is not confined to hospitals or acute care facilities. In **primary care**, nurse practitioners and clinical nurse leaders guide chronic disease management programs and preventative services. In **public health**, nurse leaders design community outreach campaigns, manage vaccination efforts, and coordinate responses to epidemics. In **long-term care** settings, nurse administrators ensure regulatory compliance, quality of life for residents, and safe staffing levels **(6)**.

In **global health contexts**, nurse leaders play pivotal roles in humanitarian aid, policy advocacy, health diplomacy, and capacity building in underserved regions. For example, in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), nurses constitute the majority of the healthcare workforce, and nurse leaders are often at the forefront of efforts to scale up health services, address maternal-child health issues, and respond to infectious disease outbreaks **(6)**.

- **Nursing Leadership as a Systemic Force**

Nurse leaders serve as a **systemic force for integration**, helping align multiple components of the healthcare system—including finance, human resources, clinical operations, and policy—with the goal of delivering seamless, high-quality care. They act as boundary-spanners between frontline staff and senior administration, bridging the gap between practice realities and organizational strategy **(7)**.

Additionally, nurse leaders are increasingly engaged in **governance and health policy**, contributing to legislation, regulatory reforms, accreditation standards, and the development of national healthcare frameworks. The **Nursing Now campaign**, led by the International Council of Nurses and the World Health Organization, has emphasized the role of nurse leaders in achieving

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to universal health coverage, health equity, and gender equality (7).

- **Academic and Research Leadership in Nursing**

Another important domain is **academic and research leadership**. Nurse educators and researchers shape the future of the profession by developing curricula, mentoring students, conducting clinical research, and contributing to scholarly literature. Their leadership ensures that new generations of nurses are not only clinically competent but also equipped to lead and innovate in diverse and challenging environments (8).

In summary, **nursing leadership is an indispensable driver of excellence, safety, and innovation across all levels of the healthcare system**. It involves much more than occupying a position of authority—it is about purposefully guiding people and processes to improve health outcomes, advocate for vulnerable populations, promote team well-being, and continuously raise the standards of care. As health systems around the world face unprecedented pressures and transitions, the role of nurse leaders will become increasingly vital to creating solutions that are ethical, evidence-based, inclusive, and sustainable.

3. Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Safety and Quality

Leadership in nursing is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. The style of leadership adopted by nurse leaders profoundly influences organizational culture, team dynamics, patient outcomes, and the psychological safety of healthcare providers. Leadership style defines how a leader interacts with their team, motivates behavior, makes decisions, resolves conflicts, and responds to crises. In the context of patient safety and quality care, certain leadership styles have consistently demonstrated stronger associations with positive clinical outcomes, staff engagement, and system resilience (9).

3.1 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is widely regarded as the most effective leadership style in healthcare settings. It is characterized by a leader's ability to **inspire, motivate, and empower** team members to exceed expectations and commit to shared organizational values. Transformational leaders articulate a compelling vision of the future, demonstrate individualized consideration for staff, promote intellectual stimulation, and act as ethical role models (10).

Impact on Safety and Quality: (7).

- Promotes a culture of **psychological safety**, where staff feel encouraged to speak up about errors, near misses, and process inefficiencies without fear of punishment.
- Associated with **lower patient mortality, higher adherence to safety protocols, and improved clinical performance**.
- Enhances **nurse retention, job satisfaction, and collaboration**—all of which are vital in reducing burnout and maintaining consistent, high-quality care.

Transformational leaders often lead quality improvement projects, spearhead patient safety initiatives, and drive the implementation of evidence-based practices, fostering a high-reliability culture (11).

3.2 Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is based on a system of clear structures, rules, and expectations, where leaders use rewards and penalties to influence performance. It is highly task-oriented and often effective in ensuring short-term objectives are met, particularly in procedural or compliance-driven settings (12).

Impact on Safety and Quality: (13).

- Useful for **maintaining routine operations**, enforcing safety checklists, and ensuring **regulatory compliance**.
- May **lack the motivational force** required to inspire innovation, adaptive thinking, or meaningful staff engagement.
- In isolation, this style may inadvertently foster a culture of minimal compliance rather than proactive excellence.

While transactional leadership can be beneficial in high-pressure environments such as emergency departments or operating rooms where protocol adherence is critical, it is most effective when **balanced with transformational behaviors** that address team morale and long-term development (13).

3.3 Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is centered around the philosophy that the primary role of a leader is to **serve their team**—to listen actively, support growth, remove obstacles, and prioritize the needs of others above personal ambition. This humble, empathetic, and human-centered approach is particularly well-aligned with the caring ethos of the nursing profession (14).

Impact on Safety and Quality: (15)

- Promotes **emotional well-being**, **ethical practice**, and **trust** among staff.
- Associated with **higher levels of staff satisfaction**, **reduced turnover**, and **better patient satisfaction scores**.
- Encourages **open communication** and team cohesion, both of which are essential for identifying and mitigating risks before they lead to adverse outcomes.

Servant leaders are particularly effective in managing diverse teams, addressing staff burnout, and building inclusive environments where all voices are valued (15).

3.4 Democratic (Participative) Leadership

Democratic leaders involve their teams in decision-making processes, seek input before acting, and value the collective intelligence of the group. This approach promotes a sense of ownership and accountability among staff (16).

Impact on Safety and Quality: (16).

- Facilitates **shared governance**, which has been shown to improve **nursing-sensitive indicators** like falls, pressure ulcers, and infection rates.

- Improves **engagement, communication, and mutual respect** across professional roles.
- Encourages creative problem-solving and **continuous improvement** through regular feedback loops.

Democratic leadership is especially effective in Magnet hospitals, where nursing excellence, empowerment, and evidence-based innovation are core institutional priorities (16).

3.5 Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leaders make decisions unilaterally, often without team input, and expect strict adherence to instructions. While this approach may be necessary during emergencies or high-risk situations requiring immediate action, its routine use can lead to disempowerment and low morale (17).

Impact on Safety and Quality: (17).

- May **increase efficiency** and clarity in crisis or trauma scenarios.
- Over time, can **erode team cohesion**, suppress critical feedback, and create a culture of fear and compliance rather than learning and improvement.
- Associated with higher **staff turnover, burnout, and communication failures**, which are major contributors to patient harm.

This style should be used sparingly and only in situations where rapid, centralized decision-making is essential to avoid harm (17).

3.6 Laissez-Faire Leadership

This hands-off style is characterized by minimal direction, delegation of decisions to team members, and limited oversight. While it can work in highly autonomous and experienced teams, it is often problematic in dynamic, high-risk clinical environments (18).

Impact on Safety and Quality: (18).

- Associated with **lack of accountability, poor coordination, and communication breakdowns**.
- Can result in **inconsistent practice**, overlooked errors, and decreased patient safety.
- Often correlates with **poor job satisfaction and lower performance ratings** among staff.

Laissez-faire leadership is generally considered inappropriate in settings that require high reliability and clear clinical governance (18).

3.7 Situational Leadership

Situational leadership, developed by Hersey and Blanchard, posits that effective leaders adapt their style according to the **maturity level, competence, and confidence of their team members**, as well as the context in which they operate (19).

Impact on Safety and Quality: (19).

- Highly adaptive and versatile, making it ideal for leading teams in **diverse clinical settings**.
- Encourages both autonomy and guidance depending on team needs, supporting both novice and expert nurses effectively.
- Strengthens team trust and enhances **developmental pathways**, leading to improved skillsets and confidence in safe practice.

In multicultural, multidisciplinary, or resource-variable settings, situational leadership allows nurse leaders to fine-tune their approach to maximize both team performance and patient safety (19).

3.8 Integrating Leadership Styles for Optimal Outcomes

In practice, the most effective nurse leaders are **not confined to a single leadership style**. Instead, they exhibit fluidity—shifting styles based on team dynamics, clinical acuity, organizational culture, and strategic goals. For example, a transformational leader may adopt transactional behaviors to enforce a new safety protocol, or use democratic principles to gather input while maintaining ultimate accountability for final decisions (20).

The **integration of leadership styles** is also essential for leading during crises, such as pandemics or system failures, where leaders must balance decisiveness with compassion, structure with flexibility, and autonomy with support. The **best patient safety outcomes** are consistently observed in environments where nurse leaders demonstrate emotional intelligence, communicate vision clearly, value feedback, and ensure that safety and quality are everyone's responsibility—not just management's. (20).

4. Leadership Competencies Essential for Patient Safety

To effectively promote safety and quality, nursing leaders must possess a diverse range of competencies, including: (9).

- **Clinical Expertise:** Understanding the complexities of patient care enables informed decision-making and proactive problem-solving.
- **Communication Skills:** Clear, open, and honest communication is vital for maintaining transparency and coordinating care across multidisciplinary teams.
- **Critical Thinking and Decision-Making:** Leaders must assess risk, analyze data, and implement solutions rapidly, especially in high-stakes environments.
- **Advocacy:** Effective nurse leaders advocate for patient rights, equitable care, and safe working conditions for healthcare professionals.
- **Emotional Intelligence:** The ability to manage interpersonal relationships with empathy and professionalism enhances team cohesion and resilience.

5. Leadership Practices That Improve Safety and Quality

In high-performing healthcare systems, nursing leadership is increasingly recognized not simply as a hierarchical function but as a vital set of practices that directly shape patient safety and care quality. These leadership practices are rooted in evidence, experience, and a strong ethical commitment to protecting patients and supporting care providers. Rather than waiting for adverse outcomes to trigger reform, effective nurse leaders take a proactive approach—establishing conditions that prevent harm, facilitate learning, and drive systemic improvements before failures can occur (21).

One of the most impactful practices is the cultivation of a strong, transparent culture of safety. This involves creating an environment where all team members feel psychologically secure

enough to report near misses, question unsafe practices, and contribute ideas for improvement without fear of retribution. By promoting open communication and modeling transparency, nurse leaders help shift organizations away from punitive cultures toward learning-focused systems. This cultural transformation is not incidental but deliberate, requiring consistent reinforcement of accountability, non-punitive error reporting, and visible leadership engagement in patient safety events and quality reviews **(22)**.

Equally central to improving safety and quality is the active promotion and integration of evidence-based practice (EBP). Nurse leaders who embrace EBP ensure that clinical decisions are consistently guided by the latest research, validated guidelines, and data-driven insights. They facilitate continuous learning through journal clubs, protocol updates, and staff education, ensuring that bedside care evolves with emerging knowledge. More than simply endorsing EBP, they create systems and expectations that embed it into daily practice, thereby narrowing the gap between theory and execution **(23)**.

Continuous quality improvement (CQI) is another essential leadership practice, demanding that nurse leaders regularly evaluate processes, identify gaps, and drive measurable changes using structured improvement models such as Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles or Lean Six Sigma methodologies. By leading and sustaining CQI initiatives, nurse leaders not only address existing safety risks but also build organizational capacity for innovation and responsiveness. These leaders prioritize monitoring quality metrics—such as infection rates, medication errors, falls, and readmissions—turning clinical data into actionable strategies for performance enhancement **(24)**. Supporting and developing the nursing workforce is an equally vital component of leadership. Leaders who prioritize mentorship, staff development, and well-being foster teams that are confident, competent, and committed to high standards of care. Through individualized coaching, career development support, and advocacy for appropriate staffing and resources, nurse leaders build the resilience and morale of their teams. This, in turn, reduces turnover, increases consistency in patient care, and strengthens the collective ability to deliver safe, compassionate service in demanding environments **(21)**.

Moreover, effective nurse leaders demonstrate a clear understanding of the power of interprofessional collaboration. They do not work in silos but actively facilitate communication, coordination, and mutual respect among diverse healthcare providers. Through inclusive decision-making, shared governance, interdisciplinary rounds, and team-based problem solving, nurse leaders unify multiple stakeholders around a common mission. This collaborative leadership style not only enhances continuity of care and care transitions but also reduces errors stemming from fragmented or unclear communication among disciplines **(21)**.

Leadership in nursing is also exemplified by visible role modeling. The most effective nurse leaders lead by example, consistently demonstrating ethical behavior, professionalism, adherence to clinical standards, and compassionate engagement with both staff and patients. Their behavior sets the tone for unit culture, influences how staff interact with patients, and defines what is acceptable and expected in terms of quality and safety. By embodying the values they wish to see in others, nurse leaders create a ripple effect that elevates the performance of the entire team **(25)**.

In the modern healthcare environment, these leadership practices increasingly rely on data and digital tools. Nurse leaders must be adept at leveraging technology, using electronic health records, clinical decision support systems, and performance dashboards to monitor patient outcomes and guide improvements. They must synthesize complex data into meaningful insights that inform care, support compliance with safety protocols, and drive strategic decisions (26).

Ultimately, these practices are not isolated actions but an interconnected framework of influence and intervention. Effective nurse leaders understand that safety and quality do not improve by chance—they are the result of intentional, persistent, and evidence-informed leadership behaviors. Through cultivating cultures of trust, applying evidence in practice, empowering teams, and aligning interdisciplinary collaboration, nurse leaders serve as the critical engine behind safer systems and higher-quality care (27).

6. Interprofessional Collaboration and Shared Governance

One of the most influential aspects of nursing leadership is the ability to foster collaboration among physicians, pharmacists, allied health professionals, and administrators. Shared governance structures enable nurses to have a voice in policy development and clinical decision-making, reinforcing accountability and mutual respect among teams (28).

By promoting inclusive practices and flattening hierarchies, nurse leaders ensure that patient safety becomes a collective responsibility, not a siloed obligation (28).

7. Challenges Facing Nursing Leadership

Despite their critical role, nurse leaders face several barriers, including: (29).

- **Workforce Shortages:** High turnover rates, staffing shortages, and burnout hinder the ability of leaders to maintain quality care.
- **Resource Constraints:** Limited budgets and equipment deficiencies can compromise safety initiatives and hinder innovation.
- **Organizational Resistance:** In some institutions, hierarchical rigidity and lack of support from executive leadership pose significant obstacles to nursing-led improvements.
- **Ethical Dilemmas:** Balancing administrative demands with patient advocacy can create moral distress for nurse leaders.

Addressing these challenges requires systemic reform, investment in leadership development, and recognition of the value nurse leaders bring to healthcare organizations (29).

8. Future Directions and Global Perspectives

Globally, institutions are increasingly recognizing the strategic importance of nurse leadership. Initiatives such as the WHO's "State of the World's Nursing Report" and the International Council of Nurses' leadership programs aim to empower nurses to take on expanded roles in health governance, policy-making, and quality assurance (30).

Future directions include leveraging digital health tools, incorporating artificial intelligence into clinical oversight, and fostering global networks of nursing leadership to share best practices across borders (30).

9. Conclusion

Nursing leadership is a cornerstone of any healthcare system committed to safety, quality, and patient-centered care. Effective nurse leaders not only manage clinical teams but also inspire change, advocate for excellence, and ensure that care delivery aligns with the highest ethical and professional standards. As healthcare continues to evolve, the sustained investment in and empowerment of nursing leadership will remain essential to building systems that are safe, resilient, and responsive to the needs of all patients.

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