

Leadership Development for Frontline Nurse Managers Promotes Innovation and Engagement

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The need for highly engaged frontline nurse managers is becoming more evident to affect staff engagement, patient care, safety outcomes, and advancing nursing practice. At Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, we created an effective framework and process to assess engagement and leadership development data across 7 units. This provided the evidence to design a relevant solution to support our frontline nurse leadership engagement and affect our frontline staff nurses' levels of engagement. To develop the framework and process, the Associate Chief Nursing Officer (ACNO) and the Director of Leadership and Organizational Development partnered to assess the engagement data, and outlined a process that led to the development of the Leadership Engagement Academy (LEA) for frontline nurse managers. Through this framework and process, there were key areas of engagement to have an effect at both the leadership and staff level across 7 units, in alignment with the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) Nursing Excellence standards.



Health care is rapidly changing; and a fully engaged workforce is required to address increasing health care demands. Effective leadership promotes better health care outcomes by fostering employee engagement and encouraging innovation.¹ Here, we present the case for innovative strategies to engage frontline nurse managers to develop new leadership skills. Effective frontline leaders are needed to retain a robust nursing workforce that delivers highly reliable quality health care outcomes.²

BACKGROUND

According to Gallup, only 32% of employees are engaged, and the least engaged frontline employees are nurses.^{3,4} In fact, 7.4% of nurses are completely disengaged.⁴ Nurse engagement is required for patient safety, positive health care outcomes, and to advance nursing practice. Effective leadership promotes nurse engagement and is critical to creating an environment that empowers nurses to share ideas, advance creative solutions, and contribute to positive outcomes.⁵ Although the positive

employee engagement impact of developing leadership skills among senior leaders is well documented in the literature, there is little reference to the role of frontline nurse managers and the impact of their leadership skills for nurse engagement.

Research, which spans 4 decades, 195 countries, and 27 million employees led by managers of 2.5 million teams, provides substantial evidence that managers have the most significant impact on employee engagement.⁴ Managers are the reason given for 50% of employee resignations.⁴ The relationship of employees with their managers is critical for employee engagement and retention. Managers are essential to employee engagement, and manager engagement is linked to employee engagement.⁴

Nurse managers, often referred to as frontline or middle managers, are responsible for engaging employees and developing an environment of support, trust, accountability, creativity, adaptation, and risk-taking that encourages healthcare innovation.⁶⁻⁹ Innovation provides an avenue to quality outcomes. By nurturing a culture of innovation that supports thinking differently and fosters new ideas, nurse leaders promote health care efficiency and cost reduction while increasing nurse engagement.^{7,9} The leadership skills of nurse managers are critical for developing and empowering nurses to think creatively and adopt innovative solutions to improve healthcare outcomes.⁵

Leadership skills that were successful in the past may not be relevant in today's complex and rapidly changing health care environment. Leadership development programs for nurse managers must provide the skills and tools necessary to create a health care environment that supports, empowers, and engages nurses. Innovative strategies are needed to engage nurse managers to develop new leadership skills.

THE GOAL: INNOVATIVE FRONTLINE NURSE MANAGER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

At Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago (Lurie Children's), we established a strategic nursing goal to provide ongoing leadership development and to focus on the areas of greatest opportunity. A focused goal is to develop frontline nurse managers who could navigate continuous change and improve nurse engagement and retention. Our organization-wide employee engagement survey provided a means for a measurable outcome, and engagement survey feedback indicated opportunities to impact nurse-manager relationships and the work environment. Effective ways to achieve the goal include enhancing employee engagement and nurturing a culture of innovation.

Rapid change at Lurie Children's is driving an openness to change during a time of ongoing organizational growth and transition. Despite many changes, including an expansion project that will add 72 inpatient critical care beds and require multiple patient and staff moves to accommodate construction and unit changes, the time is right for piloting a new leadership development approach.

THE ORGANIZATION

Lurie Children's (formerly known as Children's Memorial Hospital), founded over 130 years ago, is a 23-story, 288-bed

medical center that is expanding to 360 beds by fall 2019, and is a state-of-the-art facility in the heart of downtown Chicago. Lurie Children's is the only freestanding, nonprofit, university-affiliated, pediatric acute care hospital in Illinois and the largest pediatric provider in the region, treating over 212,860 children in 2018. Lurie Children's was also the first freestanding children's hospital in the country and the first hospital in Illinois to be designated as a Magnet[®] hospital by the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC). In 2015, Lurie Children's was redesignated as a Magnet facility for the fourth time and driving toward a fifth consecutive designation in 2019. In 2018, Lurie Children's was ranked tenth in the country by *U.S. News & World Report*.

THE FRONTLINE NURSE MANAGER ROLE

Frontline nurse managers at Lurie Children's lead daily shift operations of their assigned unit and oversee anywhere from 25 to 50 direct reports. They serve as resources for staff, bed management, and facilitate patient/family engagement. Frontline nurse managers are also responsible for assessing, maintaining, and leading safety and quality outcomes. Management experience among frontline nurse managers ranges from less than 1 year to more than 20 years.

ENGAGING AND LISTENING

In January of 2016, employee engagement survey results indicated an opportunity for increasing nurse engagement. Through listening sessions with senior leaders, frontline nurse managers voiced a desire for leadership development strategies to better navigate change while engaging nurses. Frontline nurse managers described the challenge of addressing competing demands, projects, and priorities while also engaging direct reports in meaningful and rewarding interactions. Nurses also identified nurse managers' visibility, communication, and recognition as areas of opportunities for management development. Based on feedback from the frontline nurse managers, we heard that the increasing responsibilities of nurse managers and competing priorities limited their focus and time for developing people and creating an environment of engagement. The nurse managers stated that they could not spend the time they wanted with their direct reports and were looking for ways to enhance their leadership to have a greater impact. Based on engagement and feedback received, the ACNO collaborated with the Department of Leadership and Organization Development (LOD) to design practical solutions to meet the needs of our nurse managers with regard to leadership development and engagement.

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

LOD at Lurie Children's is a 2-person team who offers both formal and customized leadership development opportunities through a strong infrastructure of learning experiences that are tailored to multiple learning styles, various styles and levels of leadership, leadership competencies, and specific leadership roles. LOD resources for leaders include coaching, consultation, customized facilitation, and informal and formal

Table 1. Process for Leadership Engagement Academy

1. Review overall employee engagement results
2. Identify the leadership competencies, skills, and concepts framework to influence identified engagement measures
3. Select included units as targeted engagement audience that leadership development will influence
4. Review engagement survey results for targeted key departments / divisions (by manager / leader)
5. Select key questions from engagement survey (lowest scores consistent across all selected targeted divisions that can be influenced through the leadership development content and curriculum)
6. Director of LOD develops learning outcomes and curriculum to affect competency, skills, and abilities related to engagement
7. Launch Leadership Engagement Academy (four 2-hour sessions; reflective and experiential assignments, reflective portfolio presentations to showcase learning)
8. Assessment and evaluation after each session (attendance tracked for all sessions)

learning experiences. A yearly curriculum is designed by LOD to align with the needs and priorities of the organization based on patient/family and employee engagement survey results, organizational strategies, and external industry trends and predictions. Programs to develop leadership competencies and capabilities are provided both in-person and as self-study offerings. Classroom learning experiences range from 45 to 90 minutes to as long as full-day or multiple-day sessions. We have found that a 90-minute session is the amount of time clinical leaders remain immersed in an educational experience without competing distractions or compromising clinical care and management responsibilities.

Today's health care environment requires education beyond licensure to become a skilled leader; although at Lurie Children's, we flip that mental model by creating an "opt-in" leadership development culture—where leaders choose to participate in LOD programming and experiences. Lurie Children's LOD programming is largely experiential and relationship-based, with a focus on self-selection and competency-building. Our formal LOD offerings are for *all* leaders to build a cross-functional community of leaders with organizational-wide competency, rather than explicitly focusing on nursing leadership. To accommodate all shifts and leadership roles (i.e., clinical, nonclinical), LOD offers in-person sessions during all shifts as well as customized leadership development experiences by request.

CUSTOMIZED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

After assessing our organizational goals, specifically employee engagement and our quest to achieve our fifth ANCC Magnet designation (which includes benchmarking nursing excellence engagement survey questions), we identified a need to empower our frontline nurse managers with the knowledge and experience

to engage staff more effectively, develop leadership skills and competency to navigate ongoing change, and promote a culture of innovation. Therefore, the ACNO and the Director of LOD created a customized leadership development program for nurse managers, including content that offered learning experiences to build leadership and staff engagement (*Table 1*). We took a unique approach to build staff engagement by providing focused support to nurse managers through customized content and experiences. We provided customized opportunities for nurse managers to "opt-in" to become more highly engaging leaders, knowing manager engagement is directly linked to employee engagement.³

CREATING THE FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

During each cycle of our hospital-wide employee engagement survey, the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) establishes the goals and chooses areas of focus for nursing excellence and engagement: this year, our CNO chose 3 particular areas of engagement: autonomy, leadership access and responsiveness, and RN-to-RN teamwork and collaboration. Once we solidified our goals, the ACNO and Director of LOD were able to identify key leadership competencies that could influence the goals and themes, and developed the leadership development plan based on the information gathered. After we drafted our preliminary framework to influence the selected themes, we selected vital inpatient departments or patient care units (PCUs) as part of this initial pilot of a customized leadership development program and reviewed all of the engagement data across the included PCUs. During this process, we noted the lowest scoring questions for each department, and categorized alignment with the CNO and organizational engagement goal. Through analysis of the survey questions, we identified sections of the

Figure 1. Leadership Engagement Academy Certificate of Completion



Box 1. Six Key Questions to Influence Leadership Development

I am involved in decisions that affect my work.

When appropriate, I can act on my own without asking for approval.

The person I report to encourages teamwork.

The person I report to supports free exchanges of opinions and ideas.

The person I report to is responsive when I raise an issue.

survey representing magnet, engagement, and manager impact. After reviewing the cross-departmental engagement data, 6 key questions (Box 1) percolated, all of which could be influenced through leadership development, leadership competency, and behavior building. In addition, each of the key questions can be aligned to the ANCC Nursing Excellence questions, organization and engagement goals, and can be influenced by leadership development or staff engagement levels.

Once we validated the 6 key questions that would drive the curriculum with the CNO, we wanted to ensure that our leaders felt the most empowered to engage their frontline staff.

Therefore, we identified that the most appropriate solution for leadership development would be a series of four 2-hour in-person learning sessions, including a showcase during the last session, where each participant would create a visual portfolio of their learning and application of the content. After completion of the learning sessions, participants receive a certificate of completion (Figure 1) and nursing contact hours after completing an evaluation.

The Director of LOD developed learning outcomes, experiences, and a curriculum to affect the competency, as well as skills and abilities related to increasing engagement at the leadership level (Table 2). These tactics, we hypothesize, will increase engagement with their frontline staff. Thus, the Leadership Engagement Academy (LEA) for frontline nurse managers was created to achieve the outcomes as previously mentioned.

FEEDBACK COLLECTION AND MEASUREMENT

To understand the impact of both the leadership and staff engagement levels, it was essential to have a rigorous data collection and analysis plan. First, we identified 6 key employee engagement questions that leadership development education can influence (Box 1). We then plan to measure nurse engagement scores by comparing an aggregate of the overall engagement scores from 2017 to 2018 and identify changes in the 6 key questions used as the foundation for the curriculum. Evaluating and gathering feedback from the leadership development sessions include the following:

Table 2. Leadership Engagement Academy Curriculum Concepts

Session	Concept
<i>Session 1: The highly engaging leader: personal leadership</i>	<p>Connect leadership characteristics to employee engagement</p> <p>Identify key concepts related to autonomy, delegation, empowerment and decision-making</p> <p>Apply concepts to departmental action plans to optimize results</p>
<i>Session 2: team dynamics & creating high impact teams</i>	<p>Connect leadership characteristics to creating high impact teams</p> <p>Identify key concepts related to team dynamics and types of teams</p> <p>Apply team concepts to action items that will affect engagement</p>
<i>Session 3: leadership access and responsiveness—facilitating team idea generation and team decision making</i>	<p>Define decision-making in teams</p> <p>Identify individual biases and how they affect decision-making</p> <p>Discuss techniques to effectively facilitate idea generation and group decision-making</p> <p>Apply concepts to departmental action plans to optimize results</p>
<i>Session 4: learning showcase: reflection and application of concepts to engagement action plans</i>	<p>Showcase learnings of the Leadership Engagement Academy through a presentation and discussion</p> <p>Listen to the reflection and growth to learn from others/peers</p> <p>Identify key action items (post-program) to become an even more effective highly engaging leader</p>

- Post-session, includes both a perceptive competency increase in the key areas identified and a reflective assessment to determine the application of key learnings applied
- Formative assessments throughout the LEA sessions to ensure concepts are being grasped at the foundational levels and allows the Director of LOD to tailor the learning to meet the needs of the participants in the moment
- Summative assessment, at the end of the course to determine competency development
- Formal data collection from validated tools to test our variables: engagement survey results that will take place 2 months after the finale of the program
- Qualitative assessments—testimonials, and in-the-moment feedback for application of concepts to drive results in engagement
- Portfolio-based evidence from the participants to showcase application of concepts
- The ability to apply the concepts to their current engagement action plans

The majority of the data collection and assessments will focus on measuring the knowledge transfer and application

of the content in alignment with the 6 key questions identified during the discovery process. Additionally, our assessments focus on the development of skills in alignment with our internal leadership competency model. Through this data collection, measurement, and assessment plan, we intend to generate information that can provide evidence of learning at multiple levels, so that this process and programming is replicable for other departments with the intention of developing the frontline leader level to influence staff engagement levels. **NL**

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