



The Nurse Manager as Linchpin

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By definition, linchpins are people who are indispensable in their work and essential building blocks of their organizations.¹ They have the potential to make a big difference in the success of any organizational effort. Without the linchpin, things can quickly fall apart. All the current evidence points to the reality that frontline nurse managers are vital to organizational success in achieving healthy work environments, retaining staff, and improving patient outcomes. What they do at the frontline of care to drive practice and environment changes matters far more than what happens in the C-suite.

The evidence to support this viewpoint is in the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses 2018 healthy work environment research on leader impact, which was published in the April edition of *Nurse Leader*.² It is also evident in a white paper published by Press Ganey on nurse manager impact. Press Ganey research data demonstrate statistically significant relationships between the rating of the nurse manager and 8 work environment factors across all but 1 type of unit—rehabilitation.³ In the February 2019 issue of the *Journal of Nursing Administration*, researchers Tyndall, Scott, Jones, and Cook⁴ found that nurse manager support was critical to new graduate retention when Versant data were examined.

In the recently published book, *It's the Manager*, the Gallup organization published their findings about the future workplace and the key role of the frontline manager.⁵ It is great managers who maximize the potential of every team member and drive organizational performance. A key finding is that 70% of the variance seen in employee engagement is directly linked to the manager. Only about 30% of the managers they studied are truly great managers who understand that the contemporary workforce doesn't want traditional bosses, they want to be coached and developed. Millennials and Generation Z seek supportive leaders, and when they don't get that support—they leave. We see evidence of this in nursing today with RN turnover increasing nationwide to 17.2%. The replacement costs of a nurse have risen to well over \$50,000, costing the average hospital up to 7 million dollars each year.⁶ There is fierce competition for talented, experienced nurses. From their work, the leaders at Gallup recommend that if organizations could prioritize only 1 leadership action to improve performance, it should be to equip their managers to be coaches.

Sadly, we are not paying enough attention in nursing to our linchpin nurse managers who are crucial to staff retention, satisfaction, and ultimately, excellent patient outcomes. In today's complex health care environment, many nurse managers have relatively little experience, huge spans of control, and virtually no development. At the June 2019 Gallup Summit, senior consultants from Gallup expressed concern about what they are seeing when they consult with health care organizations and talk with nurse managers. As currently designed, they assess that health care frontline leadership roles are often not doable and cannot provide the level of support that the contemporary workforce demands.

These findings are not a recipe for leadership success. Nurse manager turnover has not been widely studied but appears to be on the increase.⁷ It is not uncommon for some units to have up to 3 different managers in a 5-year timeframe. I hear from so many new managers that they have been handed the keys to an office and were told to call for help if they need it. There is no assignment of a mentor, no leadership onboarding, and no ongoing leadership development. As an outcome, these young nurses struggle with the challenges in transitioning from being a staff nurse to a leader. They also make leadership mistakes that can be costly to their organizations. One new manager recently told me that “she did not know what she did not know until she started making some serious mistakes.”

The nurse manager role is clearly too critical not to focus on their development and support. Yet, in nursing today, we are more intentional with the onboarding of new graduates than we are with the managers expected to support them. We can no longer deny the evidence. If our leadership practice is evidence-based, we have a responsibility to recognize the linchpin role that nurse managers play in the delivery of care and provide them with the development and support that they need.

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