

Chapter 19

Informal Learning Contributes to the Leadership Development of Nurse Managers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aligns with this book's purpose to highlight the incidents of informal learning in a variety of settings. The focus of this chapter is on the experiential and informal learning that emerged from a recent study of the workplace leadership development of nurse managers in the United States. This study used a grounded-theory methodology and was based on 19 semi-structured interviews of current and previous nurse managers in two healthcare organizations. The findings focus on the informal learning of nurse managers and how these findings fit into and contribute to the existing literature in adult education on informal workplace learning. Subsequently, the author describes a proposed theory of the informal/experiential learning aspects that contributed to the nurses' role transitions in this study. This chapter will shed new light on the healthcare context as a place of immense informal learning and the informal learning of nurses.

INTRODUCTION

This book explores and describes the incidents of informal learning in a variety of settings. The focus of this chapter will be on experiential and informal learning in a recent study of nurses' workplace learning and leadership development in two hospitals in the United States. The chapter will focus on naming and theorizing the learning (experiential and informal) of nurses as they assume leadership roles and managerial responsibilities. Additionally, this chapter will add new information to the existing literature on the informal learning of nurses in leadership roles.

According to Tanner and Weinman (2011), nurses are the largest number, and most trusted, of health-care providers, and they are in the forefront of health-care transformation. As such, nurses are in a unique position to lead and influence during these turbulent times (Domrose, 2002; Institute of Medicine [IOM],

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2010; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2012; Tanner & Weinman, 2011). Several researchers have addressed concerns that the supply of qualified nurse leaders is diminishing (Aiken, 2008; Fennimore & Wolf, 2011; Griffith, 2012; IOM, 2010; Manthey, 2008; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2012; Rosseter, 2011; Westphal, 2012). Additionally, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS; 2014) identified registered nurses as the top occupation for job growth through 2020 because of a predicted shortage (Buerhaus, Staiger, & Auerbach, 2009; Rosseter, 2011). There are concerns that without any aggressive intervention, the supply of nurses in America will fall 36% (more than a million nurses) below national projections of need by the year 2020 (Rosseter, 2011).

Westphal (2012) concluded that the nurse-leader pool is also shrinking, and identified a 30% decline in nurse-leader positions in hospitals over a 16-year period of time. In United States hospitals today, the role of nurse manager serves as a link between nurse executives and the staff nurses, thereby facilitating the accomplishment of organizational objectives, as well as the goals of the nursing profession (Anthony et al., 2005; Fennimore & Wolf, 2011; Jones, 2010). Many experts have identified that nurse managers are able to influence the quality and safety agenda in health-care organizations (Griffith; 2012; IOM, 2010; Johansson, Andersson, Gustafsson, & Sandahl, 2010; Mathena, 2002; Paterson, Henderson, & Trivella, 2010; Richardson & Storr, 2010; Sullivan, Bretschneider, & McCausland, 2003; Tanner & Weinman, 2011).

It is imperative for health-care organizations and professional nursing organizations to recognize the role of experiential and informal learning for nurses and to foster this type of learning in order to meet projected workforce demands (Anthony et al., 2005; IOM, 2010; Korda & Eldridge, 2001; Parsons & Stonestreet, 2003; Paterson et al., 2010; Richardson & Storr, 2010; Westphal, 2012). Understanding how informal and experiential learning contributes to nursing leadership development and enhancing opportunities for informal learning to occur is fundamental to ensuring a future supply of well-prepared nurse managers (Anthony et al., 2005; Cummings et al., 2008; IOM, 2010; Jones, 2010; Korda & Eldridge, 2001; Parsons & Stonestreet, 2003; Paterson et al., 2010; Richardson & Storr, 2010).

This chapter offers a perspective on informal learning of hospital-based nurses as they transition to leadership roles. The following objectives will be addressed: First, I will present background from the nursing literature; next, I will discuss the theoretical background and some major themes in informal and experiential learning. The chapter will describe a grounded theory study focusing on experiential and informal learning as it contributed to nurses assuming leadership roles. The findings will focus on the informal learning of nurse managers and how these findings fit into and contribute to the existing literature in adult education on informal workplace learning. Subsequently, I will describe a proposed theory of the informal and experiential learning aspects that contributed to the nurses' role transitions in this study. Last, I will discuss how this grounded theory adds to the literature on informal learning and I will outline recommendations for practice settings.

BACKGROUND

This section will provide background from both nursing and adult learning literature. The nursing literature will focus on nursing leadership as it relates to role requirements and experiential or informal learning. The theoretical background will focus on experience and education (Dewey, 1938), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), informal and incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), and transformative learning (Cranton & King, 2003; Taylor, Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009; Wang & Cranton, 2013).

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