

Filling the Leadership Gap in Nurses: The Role of Leadership Ladders



While programmes for clinical advancement, such as clinical ladders, are widespread in many health systems, a significant gap exists in the professional development structure for nurturing the next generation of nurse managers. To address this gap, health systems can adopt "leadership ladders." These are similar in spirit to clinical ladders but focus on developing team members for various leadership roles, offering multiple pathways based on individual interests and strengths.

Assessing Current Professional Development programmes

To evaluate the effectiveness of current professional development programmes, health systems should ask two critical questions: Is the organisation consistently filling open leadership roles with internal candidates who have advanced through established development programmes? Is there sufficient transparency and communication within the organisation to allow individuals interested in leadership to clearly understand and navigate the advancement process?

Challenges with Existing Programmes

Several challenges undermine the effectiveness of existing professional development programmes. One major issue is the lack of meaningful variations within these programmes. Current programmes often fail to cater to the diverse aspirations of employees. Some nurses aim to become people leaders, others seek expertise in specific roles, and some wish to train colleagues. Another significant challenge is that many programmes focus heavily on involvement in hospital affairs and advancing degrees or qualifications, neglecting the development of practical leadership skills such as conducting employee and patient rounds or having accountability conversations. This results in new nurse managers feeling unprepared for their roles despite having advanced degrees and certifications.

Complexity and Participation Issues

Additionally, the complexity and demands of existing programmes can overshadow the benefits, discouraging participation. Nurses often struggle to see how these programmes will support their career goals due to a lack of meaningful self-assessment components. Leadership ladders can bridge these gaps by focusing on individual goals and strengths, coupled with defined departmental work standards. These ladders can transform organisational culture, improve staff morale, build local leadership teams, delegate leadership tasks, and foster professional growth. They provide a structured path for increasing the responsibilities that managers can delegate, building mutual trust, and reducing managerial workloads.

Tailoring Leadership Ladders

Leadership ladders can be tailored to various leadership interests, such as management, education, and interdepartmental representation. For instance, a management ladder might involve shadowing assistant managers, taking on staffing responsibilities, and leading daily huddles. An education ladder could include reviewing best practices, tracking quality and safety data, supporting educational initiatives, and developing improvement plans. An interdepartmental representation ladder might involve participating in hospital-wide committees and leading interdisciplinary initiatives.

Building an Effective Leadership Ladder Programme

To create an effective leadership ladder programme, several steps should be followed. First, define programme objectives to align ladder goals with the organization's future needs and each service area or role. Next, focus on developing practical competencies by offering routine feedback and coaching, ensuring that participants gain true competency rather than just higher pay. Structure the programme with clear and simple steps, integrating achievable milestones into routine work and aligning the ladder programme with job descriptions to reduce

administrative burdens. Incorporate self-assessment components to ensure alignment with individual and organisational objectives. Lastly, support and train team members using effective learning methods, such as the "see one, do one, teach one" approach, to support and train team members as they progress.

The Benefits of Leadership Ladders

Implementing leadership ladders can save time and money by developing internal talent, enhancing organisational culture, and improving employee experience. By providing a clear pathway for growth, health systems can better retain and develop their nursing staff, ultimately benefiting the entire organisation. Developing nurses into leaders enables healthcare organisations to leverage their existing pool of team members while enhancing their overall culture, employee experience, and ability to attract talent. The investment an organisation makes in bringing on junior nurses means it's worthwhile to provide them with a pathway to growth that benefits everyone.

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Published on : Thu, 20 Jun 2024