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Nurse educators' perceptions on fostering effective teamwork and creating a person-centred workplace culture in a public nursing education institution in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Background: Fostering a person-centred workplace culture in organisations is one of the most challenging tasks for both employers and employees. Person-centred workplace cultures and effective teamwork have been linked to achieving optimal organisational outcomes.

Aim: We report nurse educators' perceptions of the elements required for effective teamwork to create a person-centred workplace culture in a public nursing education institution in South Africa.

Methods: A consensus meeting with 32 participants, purposively selected from a population of nurse educators and nursing managers. Data were collected during the consensus meeting, which was facilitated by two external nursing education experts. Data were analysed thematically.

Results: Three themes emerged during the consensus meeting in relation to effective teamwork. The first theme was positive work relations, with categories of: knowing self and others, respecting self and others and trusting self and others. The second theme that emerged was effective communication with categories of: sharing information, cultural sensitivity and diversity. The third theme was group cohesion with categories of: active participation, adherence to work plan, collective vision of goals and collective decision making.

Conclusion: Positive work relations open the door towards effective teamwork. Effective communication ensures the smooth dissemination of information and feedback to facilitate effective teamwork and fostering a person-centred workplace culture.

Keyword: Effective teamwork, Workplace culture, Person-centeredness, Transformation.

1. Introduction

The South African government has to manage a quadruple burden of disease with a shortage of nursing staff. South Africa has experienced difficulties in training enough nurses due to inadequate financial, material, infrastructure and human resources (Mkhize, 2009; NDoH, 2013). In 2011, the South African Health System held a Nurses' Summit to discuss the reform of Public Nursing Education Institutions (PNEIs) to enhance the output of competent nurse professionals (National Department of Health (NDoH), 2013). In South Africa, the output of nursing professionals does not match the demand for health services in the South African community. To increase the output of professional nurses at PNEIs, the NDoH (2013) increased student nurse intakes. With the number of nurse educators staying the same, the increased student intake resulted in a ratio of one lecturer to 300 students (NDoH, 2013), creating an unmanageable workload for nurse educators. The situation was further exacerbated by reforming PNEIs to higher education institutions, which took place in November 2019. The first author, a nurse educator at a PNEI, observed that the high workload and on-going changes in PNEIs affected workplace culture, reducing nurse educators' job satisfaction resulting in high staff turnover and marked attrition. The uncondusive workplace culture negatively affected organisational outcomes (NDoH, 2013) and an intervention was needed to retain nurse educators.

In other countries such as Norway, Canada, the United States, Australia and Denmark, person centred workplace culture forms the basis of health care system reforms, guiding the delivery of person-centred health care (McCance and McCormack, 2016). The World Health Organisation (WHO) (WHO, 2015) supports effective teamwork to create a person-centred workplace culture and retain human resources (McCormack, Borg, Cardiff, Dewing, Jacobs, Jones, Karlsson, McCance, Mekki, Porock, van Lieshout and Wilson, 2015; Hanaysha, 2016; Thomson, Outram, Gilligan and Levett-Jones, 2015; Nadal, Mañas, Bernadó and Mora, 2015; Logan and Malone, 2017). Given the experiences of the first author, we decided to explore nurse educators' perceptions of successful teamwork at a PNEI, as a way of creating a person-centred workplace to achieve optimum nurse educator and organisational outcomes.

2. Methods

2.1 *Study Design*

We employed a qualitative, consensus design, guided by a critical realism approach (Clark, 2008). The transformative paradigm believes that rich knowledge is optimised when researchers interact with those being researched and the findings are the creation of an interactive process (Polit and Beck, 2017).

In this paper, we report on the findings generated during a collaborative consensus meeting, where participants explored their perceptions of successful teamwork to transform the workplace culture towards person-centredness. The consensus meeting took place at the PNEI in 2019.

2.2 Participants

This study was conducted at one of six PNEIs in the Gauteng province of South Africa. All PNEIs share the same context and are managed by the Department of Health. In South Africa, all PNEIs are controlled by the South African Nursing Council and governance is provided by the Nursing Act (Act No. 33 of 2005) and Council for Higher Education. The PNEI has 92 academic staff consisting of 82 nurse educators and 10 nursing managers.

We purposively sampled nurse educators and nursing managers to participate in the study. Participants were recruited from a population of 92 nurse educators employed at the PNEI. We presented the study information during academic meetings, and invited potential participants to attend the consensus meeting. We included all nurse educators who had signed a consent form and had worked at the PNEI for more than six months. In total, 32 participants attended the consensus meeting.

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected during a consensus meeting held in February 2019. We conducted the consensus meeting at a convenient time in a lecture room with a projector and whiteboard to display key findings during the discussion. Two consensus meetings were held and each lasted six hours. The researcher did not participate in data collection to avoid any possible power struggles between nurse educators and nursing managers. The meeting was digitally recorded. Two external nursing education experts, who were experienced in consensus research, facilitated the meeting. The facilitators posed questions on workplace culture beliefs and values to initiate the meeting. The participants were divided into smaller groups of five to six participants and were asked to answer the following question: *How can teamwork be employed to transform the workplace culture towards person-centeredness?* Each group generated answers, which were summarised as themes and recorded on whiteboard pages.

2.4 Data analysis

The group, facilitated by the nursing education experts, analysed the data using the thematic data analysis method proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Each group ranked the themes in order of importance and indicated their ranking on the whiteboard. Based on the rankings, the whole group reached agreement on the main themes pertaining to aspects of effective teamwork needed to create a person-centred workplace culture. We assigned categories to each theme. Categories represented the actions required to achieve each theme. We gave participants a hard copy of the final results, and participants provided feedback to refine and interpret the final themes and categories as recommended by du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, and Bezuidenhout (2015).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Participants demographics.

The participants included 30 female and two male nurse educators, which was expected as nursing is a female dominated profession. The mean age of participants was 48.5 years, ranging from 30 to 64 years.

3.2 Themes and categories

Three main themes emerged in relation to nurse educators perceptions of effective teamwork needed to transform the workplace culture to person-centredness. The three themes, and their associated categories were as follows: Positive work relations: *knowing self and others, respecting self and others, and trusting self and others*. Effective communication: *sharing information, cultural sensitivity and diversity*; Group cohesion: *adherence to work plans, collective vision of goals, and clear roles and responsibilities*.

3.2.1 Positive work relations

Participants believed that positive work relations were important in building effective teams. Participants indicated problems in working relations such as bullying that cause difficulties for nurse educators to work effectively in teams:

"I think the main problem is to find yourself working in a team of people who have a bullying behaviour, you can't be effective" [Participants No. 3, 7, 9, 18]

Participants indicated that positive work relations build effective teams and strengthen team efforts for maximum productivity. They highlighted the type of behaviour desired for positive work relations, for example, a positive attitude.

"I feel very good when our relationship is healthy in our work teams... we are able to assist each other with tasks...you don't struggle alone" [Participants No. 22, 9, 2, 8, 32]

3.2.1.1 Knowing self and others

From nurse educators' perspectives, being able to know and understand yourself in the team is the basis for knowing other person's needs. Transformation requires working relationships where nurse educators care for each other psychologically and emotionally. Caring attitudes ensure that teams are effective in every task.

"I think the truth that will help all of us to win as a team is the need to know yourself well in order to understand others in the team...people need to change". [Participants No. 14, 21, 27, 29, 11]

Participants felt that knowing yourself allows you to know your strengths and your weaknesses. Team members need to balance each other's strengths and weaknesses for the team to succeed.

“My belief is that we should help others develop to improve their weak points so that they can perform task better next time” [Participants No. 28, 1, 5, 20, 10]

3.2.1.2 Respecting self and others

Nurse educators emphasised that respecting yourself and others reflects a responsible attitude. Responsibility towards yourself and others helps the team to accomplish their tasks effectively and successfully. Lack of respect influences the effectiveness of the team.

“I value to be treated with respect especially in our work teams... I can't be productive when I'm disrespected”. [Participants No. 20, 1, 13, 15, 10]

3.2.1.3 Trusting self and others

Nurse educators recognised the importance of trust in themselves and among team members. Nurse educators reported that they are assigned tasks to perform during teaching but are not trusted to complete the task, while others lacked trust in themselves or in other team members. Mistrust divides team members and affects team spirit, motivation and causes negative feelings while compromising team efforts.

“You can't trust other team members with certain task...they always bring disappointments” [Participants No. 29, 9, 21, 3, 11, 7]

3.2.2 Effective Communication

Nurse educators voiced concerns about communication problems such as language barriers as nurse educators are from different cultural groups. Nurse educators needed transformation to establish effective communication to facilitate teamwork for everyone to flourish.

“I think we are challenged with communication in our work groups, we need effective communication.... and I mean not just communication.... to lessen frustrations in our daily tasks.” [Participants No. 32, 11, 20, 9, 10, 1]

Nurse educators valued and acknowledged the importance of continuous feedback to establish effective communication and teamwork and they felt that continuous feedback was lacking in their teams. A need was identified to facilitate effective feedback.

“I do not like to receive late feedback because it affects my performance in the team and I look like someone who is not vigilant to the work group” [Participants No. 28, 13, 20, 8, 30]

3.2.2.1 Sharing information

Most nurse educators preferred a direct dialogue when sharing information so that misinterpretations and misconceptions could be clarified immediately. Participants felt that other modes of communication such as emails, policies, circulars, minutes and procedures were not always properly communicated and did not help teams to perform tasks on time.

"I think having information is acknowledged but sharing it is powerful and all team members can benefit...I mean some people hardly share information". [Participants No. 11, 9, 23, 26, 18]

"I don't understand why most policies, circulars and minutes come out as referral when one has got a problem, before that, they are hidden in someone's file or email somewhere. [Participants No. 29, 1, 32, 17, 14, 2]

3.2.2.2 Cultural sensitivity and diversity

Nurse educators voiced mixed views and feelings of concern and disagreement when they discussed cultural sensitivity and diversity. Some participants thought that one cannot be sensitive to another person's culture when such sensitivity is not mutual. Cultural diversity should be respected for everyone to flourish.

"Tolerance of each other's culture and respect for diversity in our teams are more essential for a healthy dialogue" [Participants No. 12, 25, 1, 14, 9]

"When dealing with culturally sensitive issues...my experience has always been that...as a person you have no choice, but to be as careful and patient as far as possible...cultural issues turn-out to great conflicts" [Participants No. 1, 5, 11, 32, 20]

3.2.3 Group cohesion

Participants mentioned that group cohesion was lacking in their PNEI, and that it was difficult to facilitate effective teamwork. Nurse educators viewed group cohesion as being "glued" together when performing tasks in work teams.

"Sometimes we don't work together in our teams and compromised teamwork". [Participants No. 30, 14, 21, 3, 10]

"My experience is that some group members do not want to work with other members, they pick and choose who they want to work with...then you find that the weak group members work together while the strong group members work together...that destroys team performance..." [Participants No. 10, 22, 1, 7, 16, 9]

3.2.3.1 Adherence to work plans

From the nurse educators' perspective, all team members need to have will power to adhere to work plans. Nurse educators expressed that some team members did not adhere to the work plan, creating challenges in the workplace.

"I don't understand reasons of non-compliance from our team members, because most work policies are in place...I mean policies with lack of compliance is nothing...failure is obvious in poor adherence to work plans...I mean it's less stressful to comply than not to comply with work plans..." [Participants No. 4, 11, 15, 8, 29, 32]

3.2.3.2 *Collective vision of goals*

Nurse educators expressed that a collective vision of goals was needed. All members need to share similar interests towards building successful teams to achieve optimal workplace goals. Without collective goals, team members cannot execute an organisational vision.

“I think effective teamwork is dependent on a shared vision, shared goals and shared spirit, but I don’t see it being practical here....”[Participants No. 4, 16, 29, 32, 13]

3.2.3.3 *Clear roles and responsibilities*

Nurse educators reported problems with executing their roles and responsibilities. Poorly defined roles leads to conflict in the team.

“Some roles and responsibilities are not clear in our teams, they overlap with other roles and cause confusion and conflict...” [Participants No. 31, 13, 26, 14, 16]

“ I believe that effective teamwork is reaping the fruits of having clearly articulated work roles and responsibilities... you become your own role model and it gives you a sense of so much satisfaction..”[Participants No. 25, 11, 21, 3, 7, 2]

4. DISCUSSION

A workplace culture that is person-centredness will lead to collaboration, inclusion and participation between team members (McCormack, Manley & Titchen, 2014). According to Parrett, Fahy, Hutchinson, Lohmann, Hastie, Chaseling, and O’Brien (2016) effective teamwork consists of skills and learned behaviours that allow individuals to work towards team goals whilst upholding their own integrity.

Salman and Hassan (2016) argued that effective teamwork improves organisational motivation through performance of employees. The authors pointed out that effective teamwork is a central feature of any organisation and considered as a critical factor to create and sustain organisational improvements.

4.1 Positive work relations

Nurse educators felt that positive relations are complementary to effective teamwork to achieve organisational goals. According to An and Kang (2016), positive relations are important baseline organisational variables that need to be obtained to facilitate effective teamwork in nursing workplace cultures. Effective teamwork is supported by core values of participation, connectedness, humaneness, mutual trust, empathy and respect. Positive work relations create comfort, community spirit, intimacy and mutual respect (An & Kang, 2016). Without a positive attitude, nurses may become dissatisfied and find themselves working in a workplace dominated by increased interpersonal conflict, authority abuse, discrimination, social isolation, communication errors and political attitudes that compromise teamwork and outcomes (Pilch and Turska, 2015).

4.1.1 Knowing self and others

Nurse educators felt that knowing yourself and others entails being able to take control of yourself and others in a team. With this knowledge, team members can cooperate with others in groups to facilitate effective teamwork. In this study, some nurse educators had challenges with knowing themselves and found it difficult to know and relate well with others. As part of a team, nurse educators mentioned that not acknowledging the strengths but rather concentrating on weaknesses of other team members contributed to unhealthy work relations. Knowing yourself leads to attaining organisational outcomes based on self-observation, self-goal setting, focus on new ideas, competence development, cooperation, coordination and positive inner dialogue (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2015). Farmer, Van Dyne and Kamdar (2015) explained that if members do not know and lead themselves positively it could lead to ineffective teamwork with poor performance and unhealthy work relations.

4.1.2 Respecting self and others

Nurse educators believed that effective teamwork depended on respect for both self and others. According to Carmeli, Dutton and Hardin (2015) respect for self and others relates to behaviours that express respect between team members. Facilitating respect for self and others through effective teamwork requires understanding and appreciating others, listening to and attending to other members' needs, and responsible communication that demonstrates caring (Carmeli et al. 2015). Mathieu, Hollenbeck, van Knippenberg and Ilgen (2017) suggest that individuals need to work together to achieve shared goals, and the efficiency of the team depends on individuals' attitudes and behaviours. For nurse educators, respectful interactions in teams could prevent negative situations.

4.1.3 Trusting self and others

Nurse educators believed that effective teamwork required a certain level of trust in self and others. Participants indicated that some team members did not trust the standard of their own performance, dragging more efficient team members down to their level, creating poor work relations. According to Zak (2017) effective teamwork depends on a workplace culture of trust. Zak (2017) also suggests that employees in a high-trust teams are more productive, more energetic at work, collaborate more with teammates, suffer less chronic stress and are more joyful with high performance. These workers stay longer with their organisations compared to employees with a low trust for both self and others. Stander, De Beer, and Stander (2015) recommend that organisations should encourage managers to embrace a more authentic leadership style that will lead to higher levels of optimism, trust and effective teamwork to assist employees to manage demanding working environments.

4.2. Effective communication

Nurse educators in this study highlighted that effective communication is the cornerstone of effective teamwork. According to participants, poor communication leads to a lack of transparency, fragmentation of information, information overload, and poor listening.

Anderson (2017) identified that teamwork is more likely if nurses demonstrate effective communication, such as listening to understand and with intent, repeating and validating the information received and seeking understanding. Anderson (2017) also highlighted that ineffective communication leads to team failure, human errors and negative outcomes. In nursing education institutions, inter-professional educational workshops are needed to improve communication skills to improve the workplace culture and foster effective teamwork (Orr, 2017).

4.2.1 Sharing information

One of the aspects of effective communication is the adequate, timeous sharing of information. Nurse educators in our study complained that some educators were reluctant to share important information, filing information away or sharing information in silos. Sharing information, timeously, facilitates effective teamwork by reducing mistakes, increasing effectiveness, improving integration and competencies (Lee, Shiu Chen, 2016; Nadal, Mañas, Bernadó and Mora, 2015).

4.2.2 Cultural sensitivity and diversity

Nurse educators stated that effective teamwork relied on cultural sensitivity and appreciation for diversity. Despite efforts to improve cultural sensitivity, nurse educators still embraced and prioritised their own culture, compromising effective teamwork (this study). Tompos and Ablonczy-Mihályka, (2018) highlighted that teams made up of different cultural backgrounds contribute new ideas, new knowledge and new approaches to solve team tasks while cultural diversity brings innovation to improve teamwork. Fostering cultural sensitivity and diversity at the workplace has many benefits, including fewer conflicts and disputes, more amicable workplace relations and stronger workplace core values and beliefs (Ferreira and Groenewalt, 2016). Our findings suggest that nurse educators first need to participate in intercultural training programmes to improve workplace culture (Tompos and Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2018) before teambuilding activities can start.

4.3 Group cohesion

Nurse educators mentioned a need for better group cohesion between team members. Poor group cohesion was evidenced in conflicts, poor relations, judgemental attitudes and lack of trust. Chen, Ünal, Leung and Xin (2016) found that group cohesion is important for social integration and emotional attachment among team members, while reducing conflict, inviting group harmony and enhancing positive emotional experiences of group members. According to Xie, Hensley, Law and Sun (2019) group cohesion facilitates self-regulated and collaborative learning strategies amongst peers.

4.3.1 Adherence to work plan

Nurse educators struggled to adhere to work plans due to high workload and increasing student numbers. The overwhelming workload also resulted in ineffective implementation of

individual work plans and poor adherence to time lines, leading to disrupted work relations. Proper planning is required for employees to adhere to work plans (Ferreira and Groenewalt, 2016). Foster (2020) suggests that adherence to plans can be improved by monitoring adherence patterns, providing social support, developing action plans to address specific adherence barriers, providing support and regular re-assessment of action plans to attract adherence behaviours. For effective teamwork, all team members need to adhere to work plans and comply with time lines to reduce stress and tension in the team (Ferreira and Groenewalt, 2016).

4.3.2 Collective vision of goals

Nurse educators felt that teamwork was compromised by a lack of congruence between team goals and workplace goals. Collective goals and visions need to align with organisational outcomes so that managers and supervisors are able to manage subordinates. Everyone should plan around the organisational outcomes and there should be no surprises (Vanderstukken, Schreurs, Germeys, Vaden Broeck, Proost, 2018). Organisations may try to encourage compliance to organisational goals by using transformational leadership to help teams develop autonomy and realise the significance of a specific task while providing continuous feedback to enhance motivation towards effective teamwork (Barrick, Thurgood, Smith and Courtright, 2015).

4.3.3 Clear roles and responsibilities

Nurse educators maintained that team members should have clear roles and responsibilities in relation to allocation of tasks. Nurse educators have a clear job description, but when tasks are allocated in teams some roles and responsibilities may overlap and cause confusion. According to Nkoma (2018), employees prefer having clear roles and responsibilities so that they know what activities they should do. Hanaysha (2016) recommends that roles and responsibilities should be delegated together with empowerment for the given task to reap the advantages of increased responsibility, high employee morale, a favourable workplace culture and effective teamwork.

5. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In this study important aspect regarding teamwork were identified and addressed to foster a person centred workplace culture in a specific PNEI. Our findings are limited to one specific PNEI and only academic staff were included as participants

6. CONCLUSION

In this article, we reported on the perspectives of nurse educators on the elements that are needed for effective teamwork in a PNEI, ultimately creating a person-centred workplace culture. For effective teamwork, nurse educators need to acquire self-awareness and mindfulness. They also emphasised the importance of respect and trust to achieve a person-centred workplace culture. Participants viewed effective communication that entails sharing of information, feedback and cultural sensitivity as vital to teamwork. They valued group

cohesion that could be achieved through active participation, adherence to work plans, collective vision of goals and decision making, and clear roles and responsibilities. Using action and implementation research, the findings may be implemented and tested in similar institutions.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Pretoria Research Ethics Committee (Ethic Reference No: 760/2018).

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicting interests

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