

Leadership, span of control, turnover, patient and staff satisfaction

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Objective:

The study: a) examined the effect of the manager's leadership style and span of control on outcomes as measured by staff turnover, patient satisfaction, and nurses' job satisfaction; and b) investigated which particular leadership style contributes to optimum patient, nurse, and unit outcomes under differing spans of control.

Methods:

The study used a conceptual model that linked concepts from three theories: Span of Control theory, Transformational Leadership theory, and Contingency theory. Span of control is defined as the total number of staff reporting directly to the manager. Data were collected using a survey method conducted over a period of six months. Measures used included: Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form 5X (Bass & Avoli, 2000), Patient Judgments of Hospital Quality Questionnaire (Rubin, Ware & Hayes, 1990), and McCloskey-Mueller Satisfaction Scale. The sample consisted of nurses (717), nurse managers (41) and patient care units (51) and seven hospitals. Hierarchical linear modelling and multiple regressions were used to test the study hypotheses.

Results:

Transformational leadership style was found to be the strongest predictor of nurses' job satisfaction. Nurses who rated their manager as having a transformational leadership style had higher job satisfaction. Transactional leadership style was found to increase patient satisfaction. Span of control was the strongest predictor of staff turnover. Units with managers who had a wide span of control had higher levels of staff turnover. As well, span of control decreased the positive effects of transformational and transactional leadership styles on job satisfaction and patient satisfaction, and increased the negative effects of management-by-exception and laissez-faire leadership styles on job satisfaction and patient satisfaction. The major contribution of this study is its findings that no leadership style can overcome a wide span of control.

Conclusions:

The study results supported the importance of the manager's leadership style and span of control in creating a positive work environment. Organizations need to provide mechanisms to help managers become more effective leaders, such as management training and development programs that focus on effective and facilitative leadership styles, particularly, that of transformational style of leadership.

The moderating influence of span of control on the effects of leadership on nurses' job satisfaction demonstrated that no leadership style can overcome a wide span of control. It is not humanly possible to consistently provide positive leadership to a very large number of staff, while at the same time ensuring the effective operation of a large unit on a daily basis. There is a need to develop guidelines regarding the number of staff a nurse manager can effectively supervise and lead.

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