Accelerating 21st Century Care Leadership Practices to Champion Strategic Leadership Excellence

Key Messages

1) To accelerate 21st century care leadership practices, leaders must rethink and reframe how they engage with staff and prioritize the emotional well-being of the health-care workforce to support the transformation of the Canadian health system.
2) Effective leadership matters in health system performance and essential for achieving quality, person-centred care. Relational leaders can shape the culture and values of a health system, build trust, and motivate employees to work towards common goals.
3) Cultivate leadership practices through personal as well as systemic learning. Leaders can learn from their peers and networks to collaboratively address workplace issues.
4) To disrupt entrenched structures, effective leadership is needed to achieve DEI goals. Incremental change, led by individuals, is key to more meaningful systemic change.

Background

Health leadership[1] is viewed as paramount to productivity, capacity, and meeting new or emerging challenges.[2] Healthcare leaders must be equipped with the appropriate set of competencies and education to meet the challenges of a dynamic, rapid changing, and sometimes chaotic health care environment of the 21st century.[3-5] The context of healthcare leadership is specific to an individual's practice and setting. Therefore, adopting a set of leadership standards to guide development and accountability is essential.[6]

An earlier scoping review suggested that effective leaders can have a strong impact on healthcare outcomes and the quality of care provided by healthcare organizations.[7] Since then, research has identified important health-care outcomes and return-on-investment indicators linked to leadership quality, leadership development, and transformative leadership.[8-10] The purpose of this evidence brief is to build on this earlier scoping review and summarize current literature to accelerate health leadership practices especially on performance and transformation.

Accelerating 21st Century Care Leadership Practices

Looking forward, leaders are uniquely positioned to address urgent needs and inequalities in health systems and to cocreate with their organizations a future that best serves stakeholders and communities.[11] Current and future leaders must recognize a heightened *caring ethos*; realize the relationship between personal responsibility and accountability for achieving integrated care; take a systems view to redesign and change; and resist the urge to "snap back" to the pre-pandemic state.[12]

To endure past the COVID-19 crisis, outcomes of using transformational leadership[13] when leading the health workforce take time to develop however may be vital to employee retention and satisfaction.[14-16] Organizational support[17] is associated with improved job satisfaction and increased confidence in leadership ability. Effective communication within different levels of an organization is associated with decreased work stress and burnout of frontline leaders.[18]

The emotional well-being of the health-care workforce is critical to support the transformation of the Canadian health system, and the pandemic has provided an opportunity to rethink and reframe how leaders engage with staff. Across professions, there is a need to destigmatize mental health issues and encourage greater awareness and support from leaders, supervisors, and colleagues.[19] A relational approach to improve teamwork and decrease emotional strain with others needs to take precedence in the workplace.[20,21] Recovering from compassion fatigue by dedicating time and energy to build personal resilience is crucial for leaders as well as that of others.[22] Compelling new research suggest "recovery" or off-work experiences have a direct impact on self-perceptions as a leader and leadership effectiveness.[23] Thus, psychologically supportive workplaces that build resilience and support health-care workers more fully in their lives is essential.[24]

Effective Leadership Matters in Health System Performance

Effective leadership is critical to the performance of a health system and essential for achieving quality, person-centred care.[25,26] Effective leaders can shape the culture and values of a health system, build trust, and motivate employees to work towards common goals.[26] Utilizing distributed leadership[27] and drawing on transformational as well as other leadership principles when leading organizational change is considered an effective way to foster team performance in complex situations.[28-30]

Investing in allied health leadership development can build leadership confidence and leader effectiveness, resulting in enhanced workplace engagement and positive leadership outcomes for allied health leaders, their teams, and their patients.[31-33] Health leaders themselves need to be seen as part of the health workforce and in any strategy going forward.

Cultivating Leadership Practices

Substantive personal as well as systemic learning is needed to achieve the greatest impact to address transformation challenges.[26,33] Building internal strength to lead with confidence, purpose, and conviction is essential for healthcare leaders.[34] Evidence-based and evaluation findings demonstrate that leadership development interventions can positively influence outcomes at the individual level and can help to facilitate organizational impact and benefit to patients outcomes, including quality improvement in a healthcare setting.[35-37] Leaders must build strong, personal, and professional networks. Recognizing that "change starts with me" enables individuals to learn how to facilitate change and collaboratively solve workplace problems through peer consulting.[38] Formal and informal networks can enable leaders to discern factors that can be used to achieve results and vision.

The landscape of leadership development includes e-Learning and other virtual delivery approaches.[38-40] Healthcare organizations can use e-Learning approaches in leadership development program delivery and are able to identify and evaluate the various impacts on the organization and on leadership development itself.[39] By enabling accessible, easily updated, scalable and engaging training, eLearning has the potential to transform health leadership and management education.[40]

Leadership development must be integrated longitudinally throughout a health professional's career. Cultivating leadership during undergraduate education and early career development are critical stages for individuals to recognize and understand their wider responsibility to themselves, others, their communities, and the wider system.[41,42] Placing value on the experience of leadership by reflexivity and

pragmatic, experiential approaches to learning can align educational contexts of learning and focus on effective leadership learning for professions.[43-44] In addition, political skill acquisition is important for leaders' ability to navigate the diverse and competing interests that complicate healthcare change, which may begin to be developed in the early career stage through an integrative learning approach.[45]

Effective Leadership is Needed to Achieve DEI Goals

Strategies to address concerns related to the lack of diversity, including gender in senior leadership positions continue to be explored.[2] To disrupt entrenched structures, key practices could include integrating diverse perspectives, within and across organizations, leveling hierarchies through bringing together a variety of perspectives in the decision-making process, and engaging people more broadly in the co-creation of strategies.[22] Leaders can promote diversity within their spheres of influence. Incremental change, led by individuals, is key to more meaningful systemic change.[46]

Women represent over half of senior health and social care, but the pipeline from middle management suggests that there continues to be pressures that disproportionately push women out of the hierarchy.[47] Although opportunities such as fellowships can accelerate career progression the effect is significantly stronger for men, suggesting that there is some risk that fellowships may be widening the leadership gender gap.[48]

A promising practice to achieve DEI in health leadership requires dedicated resources to address equity within departments, divisions, and organizations. Providing education, planning, and services that will achieve equity has been identified as one strategy for addressing DEI issues.[49] Given the importance of interprofessional work in health care, replicating real-world contexts through interprofessional education is another option. [46,50] This specifically can help to understand the diversity of thought inherent in differing professions amongst health teams, resulting in enhancement of DEI skills for health professionals.[51] There is no single solution—multiple initiatives and accountability for proposed solutions to advance DEI in the health workforce are required at all levels of health organizations and must encompass all stages of career progression.[46,52]

Indigenous health providers deliver strong leadership to influence outcomes for Indigenous Peoples.[53,54] Indigenous Peoples require acknowledgment of Indigenous nationhood and reconciliation as a foundation for addressing health inequity. Health systems will not change unless inequity is exposed and there is political will and action to change it. Building Indigenous leadership is essential, as non-Indigenous health professionals cannot lead and support the development of Indigenous strategies (although can be invited as an ally[55] to assist this work) in academic institutions, clinical or policy settings.[53] Developing meaningful partnerships are key when working with Indigenous Peoples, communities, and organizations. There is significant diversity in Indigenous communities, and establishing key elements (i.e., cultural safety, humility, self-determination, and equitable resourcing) for a successful partnership is an effective way to begin developing relationships.[54]

Conclusions and Recommendations

Current and future leaders can accelerate people-centred change to address urgent needs and inequalities in health systems. Effective leaders need to employ 21st century care leadership practices. Investments in leadership development have demonstrated positive returns by improving individual and

team performance in complex situations. Investing in the development of all members of the care team throughout the career trajectory are opportunities to explore.

Effective leadership in a health care organization correlates with improved job satisfaction, retention, and quality of care. Those in supervisory positions are encouraged to reflect upon their leadership style because it has the potential to improve workforce mental health and health worker retention.

Leadership practices that leaders should embrace include adopting a relational approach to improve teamwork and decrease emotional strain; promoting greater interprofessional collaboration; cultivating leadership development in education and practice; and disrupting entrenched structures by including diverse perspectives in decision making.

CHLNet, *September 2023*

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ENDNOTES
1. Health leadership, as descried by G. Dickson and B. Tholl (2020), is the efforts made by individuals or a collection of individuals to work together to shape and influence improved workforce conditions and ultimately, patient/family/community care.
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