

Understanding leadership styles and the prevention and management of nursing burnout in the hospital setting

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INTRODUCTION

Emerging in the 1970s, professional burnout has served as a “social problem worthy of attention” (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2008, p. 204). Professional burnout (also called burnout) is a syndrome caused by a variety of workplace stressors. It is characterized by “a decline in physical, emotional, and psychological energy resulting from work-related stress that leads to cynicism toward clients and colleagues and feelings of low self-efficacy” (Mudallal, 2017, p. 2). Nursing burnout is considered a salient issue in the healthcare field today and has only gained more attention since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The three key aspects of burnout are **emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment**. Recently, scholars have begun to look at the impact of leadership styles in reducing burnout rates. Specifically, **transformational leadership** has been regarded as one of the best styles for managing nurses. Transformational leadership serves as a valid potential solution to the nursing burnout crisis; however, most literature uses ambiguous language and fails to articulate concrete methods that leaders can put into practice in order to become transformational leaders.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the importance of leadership in the prevention and management of burnout, this project was designed to pinpoint specific practices nursing leaders employ which can be improved upon. This study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do nurses experience burnout?

RQ2: What role do nursing leadership practices play in preventing and managing burnout?

RQ3a: What communication practices and/or behaviors do nurse leaders engage in?

RQ3b: How do these communication practices and/or behaviors impact nurses?

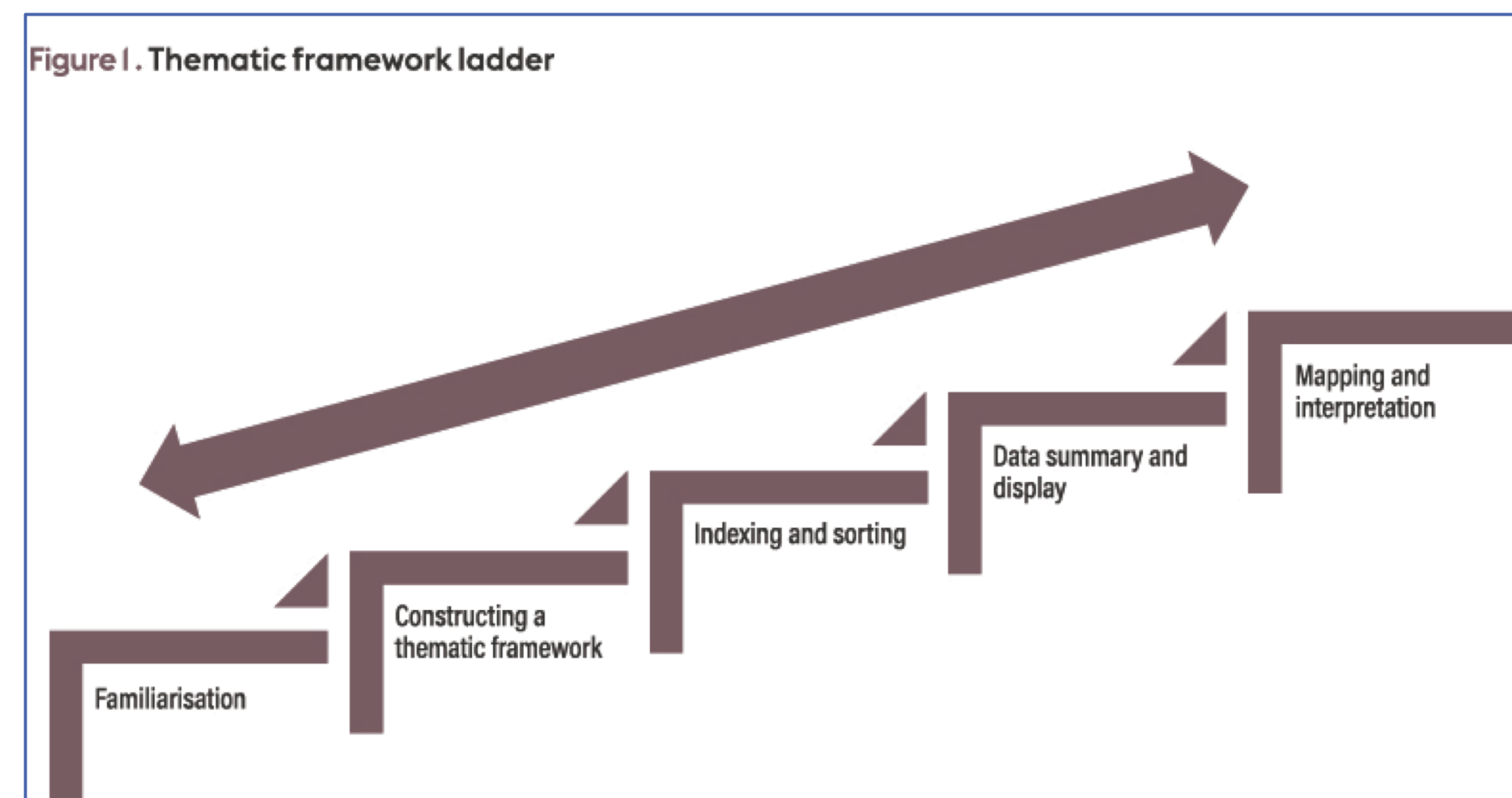
RQ4a: Which type of leadership style is most effective for managing nurses in a hospital setting from the perspective of registered nurses and nurse leaders?

RQ4b: What specific leadership practices effectively reduce or maintain low burnout rates among registered nurses in a hospital setting?

Nursing burnout can be prevented and mitigated by Transformational Leadership practices such as a *shared vision and collaboration*.

METHOD

Qualitative data for this project was collected by conducting focus groups with 6 registered nurses and individual interviews with 2 nurse managers at hospitals across the U.S. Participants were interviewed to better help the researcher understand the lived experiences of nurses in relation to burnout and healthcare leadership. Data was analyzed using a Framework Analysis. Framework analysis is a method of qualitative data analysis that, “involves a systematic process of sifting, charting and sorting material according to key issues and themes” (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, p. 177). Though this method of analysis includes five distinct stages, it also allows for the analyst to determine meaning and make unique connections using his or her own creativity and conceptual skillset.



The five stages of Ritchie & Spencer's Framework Analysis.

RESULTS

Transformational Leadership was the most preferred style of leadership by nurses and nurse leaders alike. Participants described this style as involving teamwork, collaboration, and innovative thinking. It was described as the most balanced style of leadership, as Transformational leaders are neither absent nor micromanagers. One particular unique finding provided a level of detail that is not available in current nursing burnout literature: a few nurse managers explained that when staff nurses wish to meet to discuss an issue, they must bring at least one suggested solution. This prevents excess complaining and invites nurses to become involved in shared decision making. This method ensures that burnout is mitigated for both the nurse and nurse leader.



The four key factors of Transformational Leadership.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded with strategies for nurse leaders. Based on the current study's findings, nurse leaders should strive to be trustworthy, accessible, and understanding. Change must be strategically communicated; leaders should explain benefits of the change and be transparent about what they know and do not know. Further, nurses desire their leaders to make themselves available as a resource to staff nurses. Many nurses expressed a strong desire for their managers to work at least one nightshift per month in order to be better understood and supported; this could be a small but impactful step in becoming a better and more respected leader. Additionally, leaders who step in to help and provide care for patients when needed were found to be greatly desired, admired, and appreciated. When staff nurses approach their managers with an issue, it can be helpful for the leader to request that they also bring an ideal solution and/or steps to accomplish a better outcome. Incorporating these practices will likely result in better nurse and patient outcomes and mitigate burnout for nurses and nurse leaders.

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