

# Challenges to Effective Nursing Leadership: a Systematic Review

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## Research Article

**Keywords:** Nursing Leadership, challenges, outcomes, systematic review, Nurses, health

**Posted Date:** November 1st, 2021

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-948602/v1>

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# Abstract

**Background:** Nurses have been at the center of major improvements in the health. However these feet could not have been achieved without effective leadership. Leadership is required on every sector such education, military and health. Effective leadership tends to blend the thoughts reflection and images as well as influencing followership to achieve a desired goal. Nursing leadership has however been confronted with major challenges despite the major achievements by the health workforce. Hence this review was to describe the findings of a systematic review of studies that examine the challenges of nursing leadership and to make recommendations for further study.

**Methods:** The search strategy of this systematic review included six (6) electronic databases. Published studies that focused on the challenges of nursing leadership were included. Data extractions and analysis were completed on all included studies by the researcher.

**Results:** About 29,851 articles and abstracts were screen resulting in 8 included studies. Using content analysis the challenges faced by the nursing leaders as identified in the studies were group into six (6),namely workload, Human resource recruitment and staffing, budget, Change management and team diversity, Unclear job description and patient safety and expectations. The analysis shows that the main challenge facing nursing leaders were workload, Human resource recruitment and staffing as indicated by six(6) studies with the patient safety and expectation being the least as cited by two(6) studies.

**Conclusion:** This review concludes that nursing leadership should be looked at critically at all levels of health while giving enough support to the nurse leaders in the discharge of their duties.

## 1.0 Background

Globally, the health and wellbeing of every individual is paramount to the success of every nation, hence the existence of a health industry that seeks to achieve the third goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) thus Establish Good Health and Well-Being (1). The health industry has witnessed several challenges over the years with an estimated increase in chronic and communicable diseases in the coming years (2). Despite these catastrophic situations, the health workforce, especially nurses has been very committed and up to the task. These successes can be attributed to effective leadership. The role of effective leadership in health has been highlighted by some researchers(3–8).

Leadership is required in every sector, such as health, education, and the military (3). According to Curtis et al. (2011), "Leadership involves a blend of thoughts, reflections, and images, as well as having power, influence followership, amongst others. Weilrich and Koontz (2005) also view leadership as the course of influencing others so as they can cheerfully and unreservedly work towards achieving organizational goals. According to Firth-Cozens and Mowbray (2001), leadership is required at any level in an organization and mostly involves management duties. Cummings et al. (2008), view leadership "as a process which entails influence and occurs within a group setting or context, and involves achieving goals that reflect a common vision".

Leadership and management sound similar but differs (10). Curtis et al. (2011) citing (11) listed the following as the differences between leaders and managers;

- *"Managers administer, leaders innovate"*
- *Managers maintain, leaders develop*
- *Managers control, leaders inspire*
- *Managers have a short-term view, leaders have a long-term view*
- *Managers ask how and when leaders ask what and why*
- *Managers initiate, leaders originate*
- *Managers accept the status quo, leaders challenge it".*

Leadership is exhibited using different approaches and styles. Spector (2006) identified some approaches to leadership namely; the trait approach, the behaviour approach, the contingency approach, and the leader-member exchange approach. The trait approach deals with personal characters (such as communication style) which enhance effective leadership. The behavioural approach emphasizes the leader and their behaviours. The contingency approach indicates that leadership should be viewed from how a leader interacts, behaves in a situation. Also, the leader-member exchange deals with how leaders and their followers interact. On the other hand, Wong and Cummings (2007) termed these approaches as leadership styles and described them as a "structure" needed for the nursing leaders.

The common leadership styles are authoritarian, democratic, laissez-faire, and participative leadership with transformational leadership being the latest leadership style (14).

An authoritarian leader is described as being preventive, commanding, and directive; and whose decision is final. He or she does not take into consideration the view of his/her followers. A democratic leader focuses more on his followers while deploying the teamwork approach in making decisions, with regards to laissez-faire leaders, they have no skills regarding leadership and are unable to lead their followers to achieve the desired goal. Also, a participative leader tends to blend the characteristics of both an authoritative and a democratic leader in leading his or her followers. Transformational leaders are leaders who can affect the most appropriate change needed in their place of work as well as among their followers (14).

The nursing profession has been faced with major challenges hence the need for effective nursing leadership (2, 15) as leaders play an important role in the realization of the vision and mission of the organization (16). Holm and Severinsson (2014) recommend the transformational style of leadership for all nursing leaders. Effective nursing leaders see to it that there are adequate staff and resources which would help attain optimal patient outcomes (18) they also provide direction for dealing with sophisticated issues affecting nursing and create structures, implement strategies to produce desirable results (3).

Curtis et al. (2011) stress that leadership and nursing leadership are not the same due to their highlights on nurses taking up responsibilities to get the works done in their environment. Nursing leaders are

expected to have “*administrative competence, adequate education, business skills, clinical expertise and an understanding of leadership principles*”. Furthermore, nurse leaders must actively participate in the stewardship and transformation of health delivery, its resources’ and policy to meet the desired goals of the general public (6).

According to Aboshaiqah, Hamdan-mansour, Sherrod, and Alkhaibary (2014) “*leadership involves supporting persons to produce extraordinary performance in the face of challenges, changes, maintenance of constant performance and benefits*”, hence the need to invest in nursing leadership (7) mainly in these five key areas;

- “*managing self*
- *managing the team*
- *patient-centered care*
- *networking*
- *becoming more politically aware*”(20).

Due to these, most countries have begun to focus on nursing leadership as well as the international council of nurses and her allies (21).

The Global Nursing Leadership Institute was started after an intense consultation to be a yearly leadership programme after its maiden programme in 2009 (21).

In the United Kingdom, effective nurse leaders are needed to fully implement and achieve the National Health Service Plan (7). Also in Canada, several policies and current writings have equally stressed the need to have nurse leaders in healthcare settings to see to the effective outcome of health delivery (13). Again in 2011, health players in South Africa held a summit on how to “Reconstruct and vitalize the nursing profession”, out of the six core areas addressed at the summit, two of these areas were tailored towards having effective nursing leadership and outcomes(22).

Nursing is well structured to lead many changes and predict future trends (23), and despite the numerous efforts and resources spent annually towards the development of effective nurse leaders (3) and its corresponding effect on the outcome, perusing nursing as a career does not develop the leadership capacities of newly enrolled nurses (24). Also in Africa, despite the introduction of nursing leadership at the various levels of health delivery, there is little investment and studies done on leadership (25), also leadership comes with many challenges which tend to affect the outcomes. These challenges are mostly overlooked for the outcomes; hence a better understanding of the challenges of nursing leaders is important to change the narrative in the health environments.

## 2.0 Purpose

The purpose of this review was to describe the findings of a systematic review of studies that examine the challenges to nursing leadership and to make recommendations for further study.

## 2.0 Methods

### 2.1 Literature search strategy and Data sources

The literature search for this review was from **six** (6) electronic databases ERIC, Google Scholar, PubMed, Cochrane, Science direct, and Microsoft Academic. The searches were done using the following keywords, “Nursing Leadership, challenges, outcomes” to locate studies published for 30 years (**1990 to 2020**).

For example Data Search in the **ERIC** Database the first search using the keyword “Nursing Leadership” yield **441** results, the results further reduced **64** when “challenges” was added to the initial keyword.

Data Search in the **PubMed** Database the first search using the keyword “Nursing Leadership” yield **18271** results, the results further reduced **2324** when “challenges” was added to the initial keyword. This was again reduced to **470** when the duration (**1990-2020**) was indicated.

After screening, 8 papers met the inclusion criteria.

### 2.2 Inclusion criteria

Articles used for this review were included if the studies met the following inclusion criteria;

- Is the paper written in English?
- Is the article peer-reviewed?
- Does the study focus on nursing leadership?
- Does the study measure nursing leadership outcomes?
- Does the study focus on the challenges faced by nursing leaders?
- Is the study qualitative or quantitative?

Systematic reviews, editorials, and reports were excluded from the study.

### 2.3 Screening and Data extraction

All articles were carefully screen by the researcher based on the areas identified under the inclusion criteria (Table 1). Data were extracted from the included using the following elements (Table 2): **Authors, journal, year of publication, Country, the objective of the research, study design, sampling method, sample size, and leadership challenges.**

Table 1  
A screening tool for Inclusion/ exclusion

<b>CHALLENGES TO NURSING LEADERSHIP: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW</b>		
<b>Screening Tool for Inclusion/Exclusion</b>		
Study:	First Author:	
Year:	Journal :	
Country:	Date of Screening:	
<b>Instruction for completion :</b>		
1: Tick <b>Yes</b> or <b>No</b> for each criterion 2: Record inclusion decision: The article must satisfy all three criteria 3: Record if additional references are to be retrieved		
<b>Inclusion/ Exclusion Criteria</b>		<b>Yes</b> <b>No</b>
1. Is the study primary?		
2. Does the study focus on Nursing Leadership		<b>Yes</b> <b>No</b>
3. Does the study measure Nursing Leadership Challenges		<b>Yes</b> <b>No</b>
4. Final decision: Include in study Comments		<b>Yes</b> <b>No</b>
<b>Adapted from (13)</b>		

Table 2  
Data Extraction Tool

<b>CHALLENGES TO NURSING LEADERSHIP: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW</b>	
<b>Data Extraction Tool</b>	
<b>Author(s):</b> _____	<b>Year:</b> _____
<b>Journal :</b> _____	
<b>Country:</b> _____	<b>Date of Extraction:</b> _____
<b>Objective:</b>	
<b>Study design:</b>	
<b>Sampling size:</b>	
<b>Sampling technique:</b>	
<b>Data collection tool:</b>	
<b>Leadership Challenges</b>	
1.	_____
2.	_____
3.	_____
4.	_____
5.	_____
<b>Source: Authors' own construct</b>	

Table three below represents the characteristics of the included articles. Two of the papers were from South Africa and the United States of America while the remaining from Ghana, Norway, Iran, and Canada. Aside from the study conducted by Klaes (2018), which deployed an online questionnaire for data collection and a quantitative method of analysis, all remaining seven papers used an interview guide and a qualitative method respectively.

**Table 3**  
**Characteristics of included studies**

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Journal</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Aim</b>
(27)	Nursing Management	Ghana	To explore the experiences and challenges of being a Nurse Managers in Ghana.
(28)	Medical Journal of the Islamic Republic of Iran	Iran	To explore leadership challenges encountered by leaders in Iranian hospitals.
(26)		USA	To identify the challenges of Front Line Nurse Managers and inform the development of appropriate interventions to assist them in their roles
(29)	Curationis	South Africa	To explore and present the challenges encountered by Intensive Care Unit managers in the management of large Intensive Care Units
(14)		South Africa	<p>To explore the challenges encountered by unit managers in their leadership roles.</p> <p>To identify and describe the factors that influence nurse unit manager's leadership role</p> <p>To identify and describe the needs of the unit managers in their leadership role</p>
(30)	Journal of Nursing Management	Canada	To identify the critical role of health care managers in developing a sustainable nurse practitioner role.
(16)	Public Health Nursing	USA	To discuss the challenges and characteristics of effective public health nursing leaders in local health departments and barriers to effective leadership during the hyper turbulent conditions of 2008–2010

**Table 3**  
**Characteristics of included studies- Continuation**

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Journal</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Aim</b>
(31)	BMC Nursing	Norway	To illuminate some of the major challenges facing nurse leaders in charge of nursing homes and to draw attention to their professional concerns about the quality of nursing care with the introduction of the new reform and its implementation under NPM inspired municipal executive leadership.

Table 3  
Characteristics of included studies- Continuation

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Study Design</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Instruments</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
(27)	A qualitative and exploratory approach	12 Hospital Nurse Managers	Interview Guide	Qualitative Analysis
(28)	A qualitative and exploratory approach	27 managers	Interview Guide	Qualitative Analysis
(26)	An exploratory descriptive survey design	46 Nurse Managers	Online Questionnaire	Quantitative Analysis
(29)	A qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive study	5 Managers	Interview Guide	Qualitative Analysis
(14)	Qualitative research	6 unit managers	Interview Guide	Qualitative Analysis
(30)	An interpretive epistemology and qualitative methodology	25 nurse practitioners  7 Nurse managers	Interview Guide	Qualitative Analysis
(16)	Qualitative approach	7 nurse directors	Interview Guide	Qualitative Analysis
(31)	Qualitative and exploratory approach	10 nurse leaders	Interview Guide	Qualitative Analysis
<b>Source:</b> Authors				

Table 4  
Results

Reference	Challenges
(27)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work overload</li><li>• Lack of managerial preparedness</li><li>• Lack of clear job descriptions.</li><li>• Lack of support and motivation.</li><li>• Inadequate nursing staff and material resources.</li></ul>

Reference	Challenges
(28)	<p><b>Work nature</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensitivity, stress, and tension</li> <li>• Customer diversity</li> <li>• Team- oriented</li> </ul> <p><b>Organizational challenges</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complexity</li> <li>• Centralization</li> <li>• Job design</li> <li>• Bureaucracy</li> </ul> <p><b>Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulations and programs</li> <li>• Cultural issues</li> <li>• Social issues</li> <li>• Economic issues</li> </ul> <p><b>Human resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number and distribution of human resources</li> <li>• Staff empowerment and education</li> <li>• Motivational mechanism</li> <li>• Staff diversity</li> </ul> <p><b>Leaders related</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superiors and colleagues</li> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Job stability</li> <li>• Knowledge and skills</li> <li>• Appointment</li> </ul>

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
(26)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing critical thinking skills in staff</li> <li>• Recruiting staff with the right competencies</li> <li>• Increasing patient acuity</li> <li>• Patient safety</li> <li>• Budget</li> <li>• Managing a diverse workforce</li> <li>• Implementing principles of culture change</li> <li>• Patient and family satisfaction</li> <li>• Performance management</li> <li>• Physician/providers</li> </ul>

**Table 4**  
**Results-Continuation**

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
(29)	<p><b>The challenge related to the provision of material resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• non-availability,</li> <li>• insufficient amount</li> <li>• poor quality of equipment</li> </ul> <p><b>The challenge related to human resources provision and staffing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provision of nursing staff</li> </ul> <p><b>The challenge related to stressors in the unit</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the workload in the unit</li> </ul>
(14)	<p><b>Qualification and competence of staff</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of competent staff to nursing patients</li> <li>• Shift leaders not adequately trained</li> <li>• Programme to be in place for newly qualified registered nurses</li> </ul> <p><b>Workload Issues</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The manager needs to take all responsibility and accountability</li> <li>• All supervision done by the Unit Manager(UM), result in burnout</li> <li>• Working long hours and overtime on weekends to cover the shortage of staff</li> </ul> <p><b>New acuity model-nurse patient ratio</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acuity model makes no provision for emergency admissions, change of condition, and post-operative complications</li> <li>• Low morale by staff</li> <li>• Human resources are seen as punitive and not engaging staff</li> </ul> <p><b>Existence of orientation programme for UM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UM not given an orientation to the unit, Given keys and passwords to computer</li> <li>• UM does not know her expectations</li> </ul> <p><b>Conflicts in the unit</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resistance to change</li> </ul>

Reference	Challenges
(30)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clarifying the reallocation of tasks</li><li>• Managing altered working relationships within the team</li><li>• Continuing to manage the team in an evolving situation.</li></ul>

Table 4

## Results-Continuation

Reference	Challenges
(16)	<p><b>Extrinsic challenges</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate leadership support</li> <li>• Inadequate mentorship opportunities</li> <li>• Inadequate resources</li> <li>• PHN scope of practice limitations</li> </ul> <p><b>Intrinsic challenges</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual competency</li> <li>• Inadequate program planning skills</li> <li>• Inadequate negotiation skills</li> <li>• Inadequate political acumen</li> <li>• Inadequate confidence to take risks</li> </ul> <p><b>Leadership dissonance</b></p> <p><b>Leading through ambiguity</b></p>
(31)	<p><b>Concerns about overall service quality</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressure from management</li> <li>• Excessive focus on finances than outcomes</li> </ul> <p><b>Increase in tasks unrelated to nursing leadership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing workload</li> <li>• Inadequate time to follow up on subordinates</li> <li>• Many stakeholders to relate to for nurse leaders.</li> <li>• Constant re-prioritising of leader tasks.</li> </ul> <p><b>Importance of support for the nurse leader</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased need for qualified staff for an increasingly demanding 24-h care service.</li> <li>• Lack of understanding from top leadership.</li> <li>• Limited space for nursing care concerns.</li> <li>• Demand for strict budgetary discipline.</li> </ul>

Source: Authors

Table four above represents the nursing challenges identified by the authors.

The main challenge which was identified by the majority of the included articles was work-related challenges and human resource recruitment and staffing as stated by the authors (27, 28, 29, 14, 6, 31) and (27, 28, 26, 29, 14, 16) respectively. The results further show budget as the next major challenge faced by nurse leaders (28, 26, 29, 31). Challenges with change management, Unclear Job description, Team diversity, and organizational challenges were reported by three papers each thus (26, 14, 6), (27, 28, 6), (28, 14, 6), and (28, 14, 31) respectively. Lack of support, Material challenge, Excessive pressure from superiors as well as Patient Safety, and expectations were the least challenges faced by the nursing leaders as reported by two papers each (27, 28), (27, 29), (16, 31), and (28, 26) respectively.

## 3.0 Discussion

This comprehensive review provides detailed challenges as identified by various authors to effective nursing leadership outcomes.

### 3.1 Workload

Workload, as identified by 6, included papers as the major challenge to nursing leaders. A number of the nurse leaders complained about working as both a leader and nurse who sometimes have to step in to cater for patients due to the lack of staff as well as the need to run a 24-hour service at their respective facilities(Tingvoll et al., 2016). Nursing is a sensitive profession; hence the need for health care managers to consider the workload of their staff especially nursing managers when assigning duties to them as it increases their stress levels and makes them less productive. Furthermore, policymakers should consider stipulating the workload for Nurse Leaders to compel hospital managers to avoid overloading their nurse leaders.

### 3.2 Human resource recruitment and Staffing

Having the right workforce and competence is another challenge faced by nursing leaders according to participant in the study conducted by Adatara et al. (2018) stated that "*Our main problem in this hospital is the shortage of nurses. Nurses do not accept posting to this hospital. We are unable to identify the reason(s) why they do not accept posting to this hospital*". Staffing is vital in the provision of quality health service but the challenge of having less staff as well as getting the needed skills to help in the health delivery should be looked at holistically. As expressed by a participant in Matlakala et al. (2014), "*One of the biggest challenges is to find competent nursing staff or ICU trained or experienced*". The ministries of health through its health training schools should continue to train the required health personnel as well as take up the recruitment to reduce the challenge of staffing in the country's health facilities. Also, the hospital managers should join in the search for competent staff when they notice shortages in their facilities.

## **3.3 Budget**

The unavailability of adequate funds is another constraint to the successful outcome of nursing leading. The majority of nurse leaders don't have a say in the budgetary allocation to their units. Due to this most are compelled to use the limited allocation in carrying out their mandate. Enough finance should be made available and allocated to nurse managers as they are required to sometimes procure materials, pay additional staff as well as meet rising health demands.

## **3.4 Change management and Team diversity**

Health is diverse, its requirement and expectation keep changing daily. For health delivery to be complete and successful, a team of a diverse health professionals is required. Nurse leaders face this challenge trying to manage the increasing changes and the diversity of the team they manage. The ministry of health and its officials should train nurse leaders before the rollout of any major health plan; again the superiors should also support nurse leaders in managing the team of personnel working under them than being only result-oriented which increases the pressure on them hence affecting their outputs.

## **3.5 Unclear Job description**

Job descriptions serve as a binding document in measuring the outputs of Nurse Leaders by facility managers as well as enabling them to keep themselves in check. However, most nurses complain of not having such documents hence making it difficult for them to know what is expected of them. The hospital managers as well as appointing authorities should make it a point to make available clear job descriptions for their nurse leaders. This would also help the nurse leaders to overcome some organizational challenges.

## **3.6 Patient safety and expectations**

Patients are at the center of health care delivery. However, managing patient's expectations and safety is becoming increasingly difficult for nurse leaders. With regards to safety, safety policies should be strictly adhered to in all facilities and all needed items to make the adherence easy and lessen the challenge the nurse leaders go through to ensure these guidelines. On patient expectations, the nurse leaders require additional support from their superiors.

## **4.0 Conclusion**

There is an increasing demand in the healthcare industry especially these days of the coronavirus pandemic. This review reveals that the major challenges that need to be addressed by health authorities are workload on Nurse Leaders, Staffing, and budget. These challenges when addressed would go a long way to help not just in lessening the burden on Nurse Leaders but would help achieve the third goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) thus Establish Good Health and Well-Being.

## **Abbreviations**

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Intensive care unit (ICU)

## Declarations

### Ethics

Not applicable

### Consent for publication

Not applicable

### Availability of data materials

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

### Funding

The review was funded by the authors

### Authors' contributions

CAP suggested the topic, CAP and EKN contributed to the review of the title, CAP, EKN and AIN contributed to the design and the inclusion criteria, EKN, AIN, MBT, TAA, MS, PA participated in the search for literature and the selection of all included articles as well as the data extraction, CAP reviewed all the included article. CAP, EKN, AIN, MBT, TAA, MS and PA participated in the drafting of this manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript

### Acknowledgements

A special gratitude to Stephen T. Odonkor, PhD of the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration for his inputs.

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