Leadership for frontline veterinary nurses: The practice

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ABSTRACT: There is a movement away from the leadership of an organisation being dominated by those who are in formal positions of authority and an acknowledgement that staff members at all levels of experience and qualification can be leaders within their own area of expertise. This article will outline four key leadership behaviours that frontline veterinary nurses may use to practise and develop leadership skills, potentially benefitting their own professional development, the practice team, the individual and ultimately the veterinary nursing profession.

Keywords: Leadership; One Health; professional development; leadership skills; leadership behaviours; leadership theory

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After graduating with a degree in Pharmacology in 2002, Helen qualified as a Registered Veterinary Nurse in 2005. She began a nine-year stint as a locum nurse working nationally and internationally, developing experience in referral medicine and surgery, charity practice, emergency nursing and exotics. During this time she spent five years on BVNA council in a variety of roles, culminating in her being awarded honorary membership in 2016.

In 2013 she qualified as a human-centred nurse. After two years working on intensive care, she moved to the transplant team supporting patient's pre- and post-transplant. Currently she works at Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge on the Transplant High Dependency Unit.

Helen remains a RVN and has developed a strong interest in the principles of One Health and chairs the Veterinary Nursing Futures One Health Committee. She regularly lectures and writes about concepts and ways of working that may be shared between the professions to support clinical and professional practice. Her first textbook, on Veterinary Nursing Care Plans, was published earlier this year. She is currently working on an MSc in Healthcare Management.
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Introduction

Part one of this article series on leadership in frontline veterinary nursing defined leadership as a process of influencing others to achieve a common goal. Reflecting on this definition, it is clear that leadership behaviours should be represented across all levels of staff, regardless of their level of experience or qualification. Leaders may be recognised or nominated from within their team for specific tasks without holding a formal authority role. The veterinary treatment of animals is always a team effort and collaborative practice is essential. Having individuals who are willing and able to lead processes supports effective team working.

How can nurses demonstrate leadership within their roles?

This article suggests four ways of working, adapted from the NHS Leadership Framework, Table 1 (NHS Leadership Academy, 2011), that veterinary nurses can use to develop and practise leadership skills within their day-to-day role to support their workplace, their own personal development and ultimately, potentially, the development of the veterinary nursing profession. These are simply introductions to some well-recognised leadership behaviours. It is worth remembering that there are many resources available to support further acquirement of knowledge and understanding of leadership within healthcare. In particular, human-centred nursing has a huge range of information freely available online which is relevant and transferable to veterinary nursing.

(1) Working with others: building and maintaining relationships, developing networks

There is a well-established model of "link nurses" within the NHS, where individuals within a nursing team volunteer to take on the responsibility of being a link for a specific subject relevant to their department. Within the clinical environment there may be link nurses for diabetes, wound management and infection control. The link nurse commits to keeping themselves up to date with the latest policies and guidelines of their area of interest. They will offer support and information to their colleagues and build robust professional relationships with the specialist team. These roles support collaborative practice and improve patient access to specialist services throughout the hospital.

It is a model of working that might be easily replicated within veterinary nursing and has the benefit of offering opportunities for staff to develop their leadership skills through information sharing, networking and accepting a level of responsibility for their subject area. The use of link nurses for different areas of the practice is just as applicable;

Table 1. The NHS leadership framework.

Demonstrating personal qualities	Working with others	Managing services	Improving services	Setting direction
Developing self-awareness	Developing networks	Planning	Ensuring patient safety	Identifying contexts for change
Managing yourself	Building and maintaining relationships	Managing resources	Critically evaluating	Applying evidence and knowledge
Continuing personal development	Encouraging contribution	Managing people	Encouraging improvement	Making decisions
Acting with integrity	Working within teams	Managing performance	Encouraging transformation	Evaluating impact

for example, a link nurse for nursing clinics, for the operating theatre or to manage and support the nursing team CPD.

The veterinary team is made up of several different disciplines – cleaners, vets, nurses, nursing assistants, visiting specialists, maintenance staff and managers – and it can be very easy for one group to judge the other without either understanding the true pressures and demands either team is under. Having the professional maturity and leadership skills to give the benefit of the doubt and acknowledge that lack of insight and potentially rectify it is a valuable technique that might prevent breakdowns in communication between staff groups.

Case study: developing relationships between team members

It was noted in a large small-animal hospital that there were often errors in the orders for foods that receptionists were putting into the supplier. To the veterinary nursing team, who mainly controlled the stock and distribution, these errors were basic and irritating. Products that were similar to the intended product but with very different clinical indications were being ordered. The nursing team were concerned that such "silly errors" might end up with an animal receiving a prescription diet that was not intended for them. Despite multiple conversations with the reception team, the errors persisted. One of the nursing team took the initiative to discuss the matter with the clinical director and was granted permission to spend some time with the reception team to try and understand what was happening. The nurse spent an afternoon with the team on the front desk and was able to comprehend that the role of the receptionist was high-pressure, fast-paced and they were ordering products for clients that they had little understanding of. The nurse found the observation and ensuring discussions very useful. Short training sessions were put in place to offer receptionists basic knowledge of the more common products that were being ordered. Information sheets were designed and in consultation with the reception team, placed in useful spots to support the ordering of the correct products. Errors were reduced and the link that had been established between the nursing and reception team went on to benefit both teams in other ways, through greater comprehension and respect for each other's roles and the unique pressures they were under.

(2) Setting direction – identifying contexts for change

The term veterinary team is becoming more and more synonymous with a multi-disciplinary group all working towards the same goal of offering excellent patient-focused care. Taking the time to assess and benchmark the nursing care that is being provided within a professional environment through measurement and audit can contribute towards the clinical governance of a team and is a robust leadership skill. Audits in practice can be benchmarked across a number of broad values, linked to business profitability or patient outcomes. They are a highly valuable tool to seek out opportunities to improve practice and potentially patient outcomes. Nurses can play a key role in managing these audits and crucially implementing any changes in practice that the audit results require.

Case study: the use of a post-operative prescription diet

A busy orthopaedic specialist surgical unit within a referral hospital had recently held a series of cross-team meetings and decided on a standard guideline for post-operative feeding which outlined a specific diet which was to be used while animals were recovering from their surgery. A newly qualified nurse who had been involved in writing the guideline noticed that often nurses were not adhering to it. The variability seemed to be linked to different procedures, different nurse preference and availability of the food.

The nurse spoke to a member of the senior nursing team and organised an audit of the food being fed to animals within the recovery unit. The results indicated that only 5% of the patients were receiving the food that the team had agreed was the most beneficial to support post-operative recovery. The nurse initiated a root-cause analysis, a systematic process of identifying causes of problems. She designed a survey for her colleagues, taking care to ensure that everybody understood that nobody was being blamed, but she wanted to understand why the uptake for the new food was so low. Several reasons were suggested. Many nurses explained that they were busy and the new food was not particularly accessible to the recovery unit, so they simply picked up the other food. Other nurses felt that they hadn't really understood the benefit of the new diet and trusted the food they had previously used and so were reluctant to change. As a result of the survey, the placement of the food was adjusted, and training sessions were held with the nursing team to ensure that they understood the benefits of the new diet to reinforce the practice guidelines to feed the set diet when possible. The nursing team were also reassured that the guideline was not designed to replace their clinical judgement and that all feeding decisions would still be subject to the usual clinical assessment, which would naturally mean that some animals would require a different food.

A repeat audit a month later revealed that 90% of the patients were receiving the diet supported by the guidelines. The nurse who had led the audit and the root-cause analysis had acted to support an organisational policy that was implemented to support both patient outcomes and hospital financial planning. She had experienced the challenge of running an audit and learnt skills around root-cause analysis and the complexity of dealing with a large range of stakeholders often with differing opinions. These are all excellent leadership skills and experiences and have the potential to support her ongoing professional development as well as contributing towards her CPD hours.

(3) Improving services – critically evaluating and encouraging transformation

An individual's ability to work with an open and questioning mind is an asset to both an employee and their employer. This is particularly relevant within the veterinary profession, which is a complex and rapidly changing environment with new evidence, research, technology and products emerging on an almost daily basis. Being able to critically analyse information is essential. An

extension of an open and curious mind is being able to balance existing ways of working with the potential for change. Being open to new ways of working, looking to try and understand the reasoning behind a change in practice demonstrates a mature approach and one that employers and colleagues will appreciate.

Case study: supporting change

When a practice wanted to implement a new computer records system, the managers began by putting a team of interested staff members together to discuss the new systems and explain why it was necessary. The management team had a clear and concise message, with relevant reasons as to why the new system was essential for the ongoing business plan. The team members identified had previously expressed an interest in the project and most had skills in IT from other areas of their life. This team became known as system "super users". They were the first to receive training on the new system and were encouraged to spread their knowledge of the reasons behind the change and the benefits of the change to others throughout the team. Having team members who were willing to communicate this message throughout the team supported the new way of working. The enthusiasm of the super users was infectious and other members of the team became engaged and excited about the benefits of the new computer system. The super users had kept an open mind and supported a change in practice.

They benefited from the extra responsibility given to them, developing communication and mentoring skills. Additionally, one of the nurses involved published the experience of introducing the new system, offering advice to other practices within the group who were going through the same process. The leadership demonstrated by the super users supported their own development and contributed to their CPD hours. Their support for their colleagues minimised disruption to clinical services. Furthermore, publishing their experiences to share their learning among the wider profession provided an important contribution to the veterinary nursing as a whole.

(4) Demonstrating personal qualities – developing self-awareness

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a skill that is associated with effective leadership as well as potentially a more peaceful and pleasant working environment. It can be defined as simply being more aware of the feelings and thoughts that might occur in the workplace, so that those feelings and thoughts may be managed effectively. It is sometimes referred to as an emotional quotient (EQ). Goleman offers a comprehensive definition, "EI incorporates self-awareness and impulse control, persistence and empathy. These are qualities that mark people who excel: whose relationships flourish, who are stars in the workplace" (Goleman, 1996)

EI requires a relatively high level of self-awareness that can be achieved with deliberate and considered reflection on how a situation or person can stimulate certain feelings. It requires thinking about and understanding how we behave, how we respond to others and being sensitive to our own attitudes, feelings, emotions, and general communication style. It is the acknowledgement that it is worth considering our own feelings and the feelings of others while at work as any strong emotions may well interrupt effective working.

Once there is an awareness of the emotions and feelings that are associated with work, then it is much easier to address them as necessary. This can result in a calmer approach to a situation, meaning staff members are able to demonstrate fair and consistent behaviours even in times of crisis, which is a highly beneficial leadership skill.

Case study: emotional intelligence at work

The veterinary team is increasingly becoming multi-cultural and a person's heritage and culture can influence their behaviours at work. Within an equine practice, a breakdown in professional relationship had occurred between a veterinary nurse and a veterinary surgeon, both from outside of the UK. The nurse believed that the vet was rude as she seldom used the word "please" when addressing the nurse, although was polite in other ways. It made the nurse feel angry and frustrated; consequently, every time she worked with this vet she felt agitated and defensive. This led to her feeling anxious about working with the vet as she struggled to concentrate while balancing her high level of emotions. The nurse decided to have a conversation with the vet about her feelings. She discussed it with a senior colleague first who advised her to try and identify her feelings clearly and manage them before speaking to the vet. The nurse did so and was able to speak to the vet about her manner. She laid out the position and explained how the vet consistently upset her. The vet apologised to the nurse and explained that the word "please" wasn't actually part of her native language and therefore she struggled to remember it was an important term in English. The nurse acknowledged that understanding the language reasoning helped her to empathise with her colleague and resolved to manage her agitation, knowing that it was not personal, should her colleague forget the occasional please when addressing her.

Conclusion

There are leadership opportunities everyday within veterinary nursing practice. Taking the opportunity to take on a leadership role, whether it be a formally recognised role or a temporary responsibility for a specific project, can be an effective way of optimising patient outcomes, supporting the practice team and developing individual skills.

Out of the leadership behaviours mentioned in this article, probably one of the most important is to try and always keep an open and curious mind. Employers will be grateful for a member of staff who is willing to listen actively to a new suggestion and embrace the need for change. Patients will benefit from a nurse who is willing to adapt their ideas, be curious, think outside the box and ensure they are able to adapt a care plan to ensure the care is supporting the patients' needs. Colleagues will benefit from somebody who is open to the fact that there might be a reason why one team member is behaving in a particular way, being open to the idea they might need some support and empathy. Nobody is perfect and work will always have times of stress and nursing will also involve emotional stress, but being able to demonstrate some of these leadership behaviours could help when the pressure builds and the team need to pull together to achieve a common goal.

Disclosure statement

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Further reading

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