

## **The meaning of self-leadership for nursing academics in the context of a leadership programme at a higher education institution in the Western Cape**

Karien Jooste, Hester Julie, Portia B. Bimray, Ilhaam Essa, Ezihe L. Ahanohuo, Sathasivan Arunachallam, Hazel Vuyiswa Rashe and John J. Willemse.

### **Abstract**

A self-leadership development programme was created in 2012 for ten nursing academics with the aim of empowering them to embark upon research projects, write for subject matter publications, and develop as leaders at a school of nursing in the Western Cape. This study aimed at exploring and describing the experiences of nurse leaders with regard to the meaning of self-leadership during a leadership development programme offered by a lead researcher at a school of nursing. A qualitative, exploratory, narrative, and contextual study was conducted with a sample of eight participants who were lecturers in an undergraduate nursing programme. The researcher collected the data by means of individual narratives. An open coding method of data analysis was followed to transpose collected data into meaningful data. The participants were between the ages of 28 and 57 years. Two main themes emerged from the data analysis, namely leadership attributes and responsibilities towards the group. Nursing academics were motivated to use their self-influence to direct themselves to achieve optimum performance in the programme. Broadly speaking, the meaning attached to self-leadership was closely linked to concepts of shared leadership, reflective leadership, and collaborative leadership that were concepts leading to group leadership according to the leadership framework of Jooste (2011). Self-leadership is regarded as an essential component of leadership and an integral aspect of the nursing academic's role.

### **Introduction and background information**

Leadership refers to 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2013). It can also be understood in terms of power, influence, followership, dynamic personality, charisma, goals, autocratic behaviour, innovation, cleverness, warmth and kindness. A common theme that generally runs through definitions is that leadership presupposes guiding the attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and feelings of other people (Curtis, De Vries & Sheerin, 2011), as well as to reveal the strengths and potentials of a person and to enable that person to work towards a greater good and common objective (Blanchard, 2007). On the other hand, self-leadership is widely acknowledged as an important leadership capability. For example,

there is empirical evidence suggesting that self-leadership is positively related to transformational leadership (Andressen, Konradt & Neck, 2012). Van Zyl (2009) defines self-leadership as a set of rational approaches utilised by individuals in discovering, motivating and influencing themselves to attain desired behaviours and to maximise their abilities. It focuses on self-motivation that a person utilises to direct himself or herself to achieve optimum performance. The identified components of self-leadership include self-observation, self-goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment and self-cueing.

Self-leadership should be positioned in context with other forms of leadership. The leadership conceptual framework of Jooste (2011) outlines the different levels of leadership moving from individualistic inaugurated leadership, social responsive leadership, assemblage leadership and system leadership (Figure 1). Self-leadership is part of individualistic inaugurated leadership within this framework where 'individualistic' refers to being unusual but professionally accepted, unique, distinctive and single, while 'inaugurated' refers to the concepts of established, created, set, and brought into being. Individualistically inaugurated leadership, therefore, refers to a unique leader who respects the norms of the establishment (Jooste, 2011) and includes servant leadership, hostmanship, reflective leadership and self-leadership (Jooste, 2011).



**Figure 1:** Levels of leadership (Jooste, 2011)

As much as self-leadership focuses on directing the self to achieve personal goals, Neck and Houghton (2006) assert that persons engaging in self-leadership frequently cultivate a sense of ownership in terms of their tasks and work processes. As a result, self-leading individuals may demonstrate higher levels of commitment to their tasks, goals, teams, or organisations than individuals who are not engaging in self-leadership. Hence 'guiding others [sic] to obtain their goals' and 'giving them support' is a natural outflow of

self-leadership that is geared towards developing the effectiveness of self-managing teams (Neck & Houghton, 2006).

Research concerning organisational behaviour of employees demonstrates that self-leadership is connected with higher levels of self-efficacy, proficiency, increased resilience, adaptability and productivity (Carmeli, Meitar & Weisberg, 2006). Self-leadership advances that the performance of an individual in the long run is controlled by inner forces even though external forces, such as organisational structures or policies, leaders and actions, can also influence performance (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Boss and Sims (2008) argue that efficient teams and organisations that require employees who are willing to lead themselves are significantly related to greater perceptions of work satisfaction, enhanced communication, quality management and effective work relationships. In addition, self-leadership assists individuals in teams to deal with the challenges that inadvertently accompany change by ensuring that they develop optimistic perceptions of their capability and work situation (Hauschildt & Konradt, 2012). Those who possess good self-leadership qualities know how to achieve high levels of self-direction and self-motivation (Neck & Houghton, 2006).

### **Statement of research problem**

A self-leadership development programme was created in 2012 for ten nursing academics with the aim of empowering them to embark upon research projects, write for subject matter publications, and develop as leaders at a school of nursing in the Western Cape. While the focus was on research, it was important to understand what the meaning of self-leadership was for them in the context of a higher education institution in South Africa.

### **Purpose of the study and the research question**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe nurse academics' understanding of the meaning of self-leadership, as well as their underlying individual motivational processes in the context of an educational setting.

### **Research methodology**

#### **Study design**

A qualitative exploratory, contextual, narrative research study was conducted to understand the experiences of persons (nurse academics) concerning a specific phenomenon (self-leadership). The narrative method is a form of qualitative research in which data is collected using the stories of the participants as told by the participants themselves or by other people on their behalf (Munhall, 2012). Participants wrote their narratives over a period of 3 months, after attending a team leadership workshop. Ethical clearance (registration no. 12/9/26) of the project was obtained from the Higher Degrees Committee of the faculty at a university in the Western Cape.

#### **Study participants**

The participants comprised eight nurse academics in a leadership programme working at a nursing school at a higher education institution in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. The participants were seven female and one male nurse educators between the

ages of 28 to 57 years appointed as lecturers of an undergraduate programme in the nursing science department.

**Data collection**

Data was gathered during November 2013 by means of narratives that were coordinated by the lead researcher of the leadership group. Members were requested to provide informed written consent and the central open-ended question to them was: “What is the meaning of self-leadership during the programme for you?”

**Data analysis**

The collected data was analysed by an independent qualitative researcher who used open coding during the process. The steps involved categorising, ordering, manipulating and summarising the data until prevailing themes and categories were identified. The analysis aimed at identifying boundaries of the narratives, as well as exploring the content and context of the stories (Grbich, 2013). The researcher maintained trustworthiness using Guba’s criteria model (1985). Credibility was ensured by the authority of the main researcher who had 15 years’ experience in the field of nursing research. The researcher ensured transferability by providing a complete dense and description of the method of writing narratives. Confirmability was warranted by the use of an independent coder who was an expert in the field of qualitative research. An audit trail was developed with the purpose of meeting the criteria of dependability.

**Discussion of research results**

The two overarching themes with categories were identified from the data: (i) Leadership attributes and (ii) Responsibilities towards the group (Table 1). Those themes confirmed the underlying dynamic of personal and professional growth. While interpreting the meanings that participants attached to the phenomenon of self-leadership, there was an underlying dynamic of personal and professional growth, moving to the next level of leadership, namely group leadership. The two themes are presented comprehensively in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Themes and categories of the meaning of self-leadership]

Leadership attributes	Taking responsibility Innovative thinking Willingness to lead (learn) Motivation Self-reflection for development
Responsibilities towards the group	Support Taking the lead Situation analysis Dedication to team success Ensuring goal attainment Valuing team members' contribution Collaboration

## **Theme 1: Leadership attributes**

Five categories emerged from Theme 1 (personal attributes)

*Taking responsibility:* Taking responsibility for oneself is described as an individual who becomes accountable for themselves and takes personal responsibility for his or her needs and development goals, self-motivation, renewing thinking patterns and directing his or her efforts towards success (Rothstein & Burke, 2010). It was clear from the narratives that the nurse academics viewed self-leadership in terms of taking responsibility individually and within a team. They viewed it as efficiently carrying out their assigned roles and responsibilities. One participant wrote: 'Self-leadership for me means taking responsibility for the tasks that I do get allocated'. Another nurse academic stated: 'You have to be responsible for your part of the project ...'

Leadership of the self includes the responsibility of being self-aware and proactive in developing personal strengths (Van Zyl, 2013), even when being part of a project. The findings also indicated the ability of academics to carry out a self-appraisal of their personal capabilities.

The findings of this study lent support to the role of self-leadership skills in fostering innovative behaviour at work and was illustrated in the words of one participant who wrote: 'To use my initiative and clinical enquiry skills to think about the task, to improve and create innovations.' Academics demonstrated innovative behaviour at the workplace. Rumsey (2013) argues that self-leaders may be more likely to engage in innovative behaviour at the workplace and self-leadership represents a self-influencing process that involves self-direction and self-motivation (Dubrin, 2013).

*Willingness to lead (learn):* In an ever changing work environment, an individual leader must be willing to lead by having self-awareness and adaptability to learn new skills or competencies (Gallagher & Costal, 2012). The findings indicated that the willingness to lead was understood to be an aspect of self-leadership, as a nurse academic stated: 'You must also be willing to find out, if you do not know something.' A hallmark of a leader is the degree to which a competency, for example, a willingness to lead, is an integral characteristic of an individual and the degree to which it influences the individual leader's behaviour (Botha, Kiley & Truman, 2009). *Motivation:* Motivation is described as the force 'responsible for why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity and how hard they are going to pursue it' (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). While applying self-leadership, individuals positively influence themselves in such a way that they direct and motivate themselves to achieve higher levels of personal and professional performance, as well as effectiveness (Houghton & Yoho, 2005). One participant mentioned the moving forward with energy after disappointments: 'I feel motivated and energised to develop the dreams and potentials that have been buried under disappointments.' Another participant described the need for motivation in self-leadership as: 'In self-leadership, you need to be motivated and enthusiastic.'

Academics become more intrinsically motivated by a new drive, commitment and interest in their work. Participants stated that they were interested in being taught to become a leader: 'Learning to help the team move forward ...' and ... 'I'm daring to unleash the leader that I know is inside me'. On the other hand, followers who practise self-

leadership help to reduce unnecessary demands on the leader because it promotes employees' capacity to take more responsibility for their own direction and motivation (Lovelace, Manz & Jose, 2007). This was confirmed by a participant who stated: 'I wish to contribute to the team spirit ... positively.'

*Self-reflection for development:* In an ever changing work environment, an individual leader has to have self-awareness and adaptability to learn new skills or competencies (Gallagher & Costal, 2012) such as leadership. Self-development is the process of not only acquiring new skills but also gaining an understanding of the leader's environment and self through new experiences and activities, such as seeking out mentors or developmental work assignments (Boyce, Zaccaro & Wisecarver, 2010). One participant mentioned: 'Self-identification (self-reflection) will also assist me ... and find ways of using, creating, or developing necessary criteria, whereby, we can measure ourselves to develop.'

## **Theme 2: Responsibilities towards the group**

Theme 2 indicates that the meaning of self-leadership includes the responsibilities of the nurse academics towards the leadership development group.

Giving support could mean to offer assistance and to be enthusiastically interested in and concerned about the accomplishment of the team to which one belongs. Findings from this study showed an important responsibility resulting from self-leadership that the nurse academics in the leadership group had pointed out, which was offering assistance and help to other members of the group. One participant wrote: '... giving them support in all our endeavours'.

A particular area of leading themselves was the ability of the nurse academics to have the confidence to exert their power and be at the forefront of leading other people towards the actualisation of the objectives of the team. That was evident in the affirmation of one of the academics: 'I must guide others to obtain the goals of the project by using my authority to gain resources to conduct the different stages of the project.' The findings indicated the likelihood to produce a flexible and self-motivated leadership structure, and that the foundation (underpinning / groundwork) of a project was of the utmost importance to ensure the success of a project (Andersen, Grude & Haug, 2009).

The narratives indicated that the nurse academics on their own initiative had to conduct a personal analysis as part of their individual appreciation of self-leadership within themselves, as well as of their workplace environments in order to identify the key issues that required structuring. An excerpt from a narrative indicated: "Clarifying for myself what are the key areas of interest.' Similarly, another quotation stated: 'This means self-inspection and the workplace (SON) inspection and find the challenges or gaps.'

The nurse academics pointed out that as members of the leadership group, they were enthusiastic about and committed to the collective accomplishment of the leadership team. In the exact words of one of the participants, the effect of self-leadership was described: '... would cause a person to motivate, discipline, commit, and give herself to the actual cause and can only result in a positive outcome'.

*Ensuring goal attainment:* The attainment of a set goal by an individual or a team often results in a feeling of self-fulfilment and accomplishment. One of the participants mentioned: 'The main goal will be reached whereby of [sic] one's self-leadership and building in academia takes place, empowerment of individuals, colleagues, academics, and communities.'

This finding was encouraging because it demonstrated that the leadership development programme had a significant impact on the self-leadership of the group members.

In this study, it was indicated that the nurse academics had a high regard for one another, since they valued the contributions that other members of their team had made. An excerpt from a narrative reads: 'I also feel I can learn from everyone in our group'. Empirical studies (Jooste & Cairns, 2014) demonstrate positive relationships between self-leadership and teamwork.

In their narratives, the nurse academics emphasised the importance of collaboration and cooperation with members of their team in order for them to actualise their goals, as well as their collective objectives. This was indicated by the following excerpts from some of the nurse academics' narratives: 'It also means collaborating and interacts [sic] actively with my group members' and 'You must also participate fully to make the project a success'.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate the meaning that nursing academics attach to self-leadership is fundamentally driven by motivation and self-influence to direct themselves with the aim of achieving optimum performance in the programme. In a broader sense, it seems that the meaning that academics attach to self-leadership also links to assemblage leadership (Jooste, 2011), since their meaning includes the concepts of shared leadership, reflective leadership and collaborative leadership. The results of the study further confirm the framework of Jooste (2011) by indicating that leadership development of academics is progressing from personal to group leadership.

The leadership framework of Jooste (2011) indicates a person must first be able to lead himself/herself before the next level of effective group leadership can be attained. The researcher assumed that leadership development was taking place during the programme. In terms of personal attributes, five categories emerged, namely: (i) taking responsibility, (ii) innovative thinking, (iii) willingness to lead (learn), (iv) motivation, and (v) self-reflection for development.

The findings indicated the self-responsibility aspect during self-leadership because people took personal responsibility, directed their own efforts, motivated themselves, and renewed their thinking patterns. People with a desire or predisposition to take responsibility act independently and make decisions about their job; they are regarded as employees with a high need for autonomy (Norris, 2008). Individuals who use self-leadership strategies enhance their personal effectiveness by means of behaviour-focused, natural reward, and constructive thought strategies (Rumsey, 2013; Van Zyl, 2013). This aspect is associated with self-directed leadership. It was encouraging that the

participants demonstrated self-direction, since that facilitated the leadership development processes and the identification of the resources. Self-development is the process of not only acquiring new skills but also gaining an understanding of the leader's environment and self through new experiences and activities, such as searching for mentors or developmental work assignments.

Self-leadership may lead to shared leadership and empowering leadership. Shared leadership requires individual employees to guide and lead themselves by stepping out into the spotlight and providing leadership to either other employees or members of their own team (Stewart, Courtright & Manz, 2011). This supports the concept of empowering leadership. Empowering leadership is a leadership process that includes exerting influence over other members of a group (Rumsey, 2013).

### **Recommendations**

It seems that self-leadership skills of academics are critical for initiating innovative actions. The innovative process entails the leading of other people by sharing ideas, as well as creating internal and external legitimacy and support of a healthcare organisation. Individuals with high levels of self-leadership can lead other people to support their new ideas and solutions.

Self-reflection should be an essential attribute of an academic, and during this process, individuals should learn to lead themselves (Carmeli et al, 2006). This could establish a connection between leadership and motivation, since leaders who are capable of creating an environment that influences and directs the activities of other people to such an extent that people become motivated, involved, and committed to their work (Northouse, 2013).

The study strongly suggests responsibilities of academics in self-leadership in terms of seven categories; namely: (i) support, (ii) taking the lead, (iii) situation analysis, (iv) dedication to team success, (v) ensuring goal attainment, (vi) valuing team members' contributions, and (vii) collaboration.

Academics should be supportive in the academic environment. Self-leadership should enable an academic to offer assistance to other members of staff in which they function and consequently while increasing team productivity. Self-leadership is an essential component of facilitating the empowerment of employees to offer assistance to other people and permitting them to exert their influence over work processes (Stewart et al, 2011).

Academics should be dedicated to their teams. Nurse academics should be interested in actualising their responsibilities as individuals, as a group, and to the benefit of the organisation. It creates ideal circumstances for personal development. A person's self-accomplishments often engender or promote a high self-esteem, self-confidence and foster self-improvement. Besides, efficient leaders often have a high self-concept and are highly motivated (Northouse, 2013). Academics should also value their team members and hold them in high regard. It encourages team spirit and solidarity and builds a cohesive and efficient team.

**Limitations of the study**

The study was contextual and only a small team of academics served as the sample in the study. However, this is the first leadership research nursing group established at a South African university and therefore the results are ground breaking.

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