

**The Role of Character and Competence in Canadian Nursing Leadership:  
Show me how you Lead and I will tell you who you are**

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**Abstract**

The role of character and competence in effective leadership is significant. Who the leader is as a person often manifests in how they lead. Leadership effectiveness could be obtained through the process of continuous, intentional, and purposeful commitment to acquiring empirical education, as well as a commitment to other ways of acquiring knowledge. Education, especially university education, could open the door for epistemic transformation as well as personal transformation. Leadership in Canadian nursing profession is evident in every area and context of nursing practice, including in the frontline nursing. Canadian nurses, therefore, need to make conscious commitment to acquiring continuous leadership education that could translate to both epistemic transformation and personal transformation, which could lead to the acquisition of skills and technical competencies for effective leadership.

**Keywords:** character, effective leadership, Canadian nursing, leadership competence, knowledge

**Introduction**

The reality of incompetence, ethical, and moral misconduct in leadership in general, cannot be denied. Leadership in professional nursing practice is not absolutely devoid of ethical and moral misconducts, including character flaws, at all times and in all circumstances. Due to the catastrophic and devastating impacts of erosion of ethical and moral values sometimes evidenced in management and leadership, the need for morally and skilfully competent leaders is crucial. In other words, people are yearning for leaders who are technically, emotionally, and cognitively competent; leaders who understand the practical and cognitive contexts and implications of putting oneself into the shoes of the other person, and immersing oneself into the reality of the other. Leaders who aspire to understand the feelings and perspectives of others, and who are open and receptive to constructive feedback. Leaders who understand that allowing oneself to be relationally vulnerable is not a sign of weakness, but rather, an important aspect of effective leadership. (Brown, 2018).

The qualities that leaders have, their character and values, or lack of values and character flaws, significantly influence how they lead. Elaborating on the necessity and the relevancy of character and competence in leadership effectiveness, Hananah and Jennings (2013) underscored that “leaders must have both character and competence -and either by itself is deficient” (p.8).

*Succinctly put therefore: show me how you lead, and I will tell you who you are, is the core idea that the author of this article is hoping to persuasively contend.*

### **The Meaning of Leadership and Leadership Competence**

Good leadership is like a light that shines clearly on the top of the mountain; it cannot be hidden. In other words, people know good leaders when they see them. Nurses also know good leaders when they see them. And, just as good leadership is known when it is seen, bad leadership and bad leaders are not clandestine, they are conspicuous. Good leadership is necessary since we have strong evidence that suggests that good leadership contributes to organizational effectiveness, productivity, and positive culture (George, 2010).

Leadership has been defined in so many ways by different scholars, in part, because leadership has so many meanings to so many people (McKimm & O’Sullivan, 2016). Therefore, it becomes an elusive concept to craft a comprehensive definition of leadership, which according to McKimm and O’ Sullivan (2016), is because, leadership, like education, is informed by different theories, concepts, and models from social, behavioural, and management sciences.

Despite the ambiguity and complexity surrounding crafting a comprehensive definition of leadership, leadership is commonly defined as a process whereby a person influences a group of people toward accomplishing a common goal (Northouse, 2013). This definition of leadership has four necessary components that need to be underscored. First, leadership is a process. Second, leadership happens in a group. Third, leadership involves influence. Fourth, leadership leads to accomplishing common goals.

Canadian nursing leadership has been conceptualized as a shared responsibility that is not exclusively reserved for nurses in management positions. Instead, Canadian nursing leadership should occur in every area where nurses work (CNA, 2002). Canadian nurse leadership scholars promote nurses who are consciously aware that the development of nursing leaders must necessarily start at the onset of every nursing education program and continue for the entire career of every nurse (CNA, 2002).

Leadership competencies are often explained in the context of knowledge acquisition, moral values, technical and emotional skills that leaders possess, which enable them to create visions, gain the team’s trust and commitment, and influence the team toward accomplishing both organizational and employees’ goals, which are not mutually exclusive, and ethically, should happen simultaneously. Leadership competencies are the conglomerations of leadership skills and actions that contribute to effective leadership and higher productivity.

Canadian Nurses Association (2000) defined competence nursing practice as “an integration of the attributes that comprise competent nursing care within a specific setting and context.” By expansion and extension, leadership competence in Canadian nursing practice includes those attributes and skills that the leader possesses, which translate to effective leadership within the particular setting and context of nursing practice. I contend that good character, social and

emotional skills, as well as technical competence, are equally indispensable for effective Canadian nursing leadership.

### **The Meaning of Character and its Impact on Leadership Style**

Character in leadership is often understood in the context of integrity, values, authenticity, ethics, and morality, to mention but a few. Due to the complexity surrounding the definition of character, it is almost impossible to claim to possess a comprehensive definition of character in its entirety. Character is the unique and distinguishing qualities that a person displays, which could be either inherited, acquired or both, over a period of time, in our interaction with our environment and other people, since human life is both lived and shared. Nucci (2019) explained character as a system that entails moral cognition, social and emotional abilities, and skills, as well as skills for executive control and self-regulation, including communicative skills for engagement and commitment to moral change. Hannah and Avolio (2011) contended that “character is an indispensable component of leadership and its development” (p.979), and as well, explained character in the context of stratified and complex hierarchical structure that is integrated within the identity of a leader.

A leader’s character, therefore has a tremendous impact on how they lead. Leaders’ character traits manifest and reflect in their manner of approach, and in the way they relate to others, especially, but not exclusively, to their followers or employees.

Nothing happens in a vacuum. It is illogical for individuals to give what they don’t possess. There are values that we know from experience and from research that are often associated with what the society accepts, perceives, and demands from their leaders. These values often manifest as virtues as well. The character of a leader matters. Integrity, honesty, empathy, accountability, patience, humility, technical and emotional competence, to mention but a few, are important in leadership, and the public demands these character traits from their leaders.

I do not intend to suggest that leaders should be perfect individuals. Neither do I advocate for the public to hold the leaders to the litmus test of perfection. Instead, I contend that there are character traits that are fundamental and foundational to effective leadership, which, when leaders are bereft of these character traits, could translate to leadership ineffectiveness and a total disservice to the people.

The impact of the character of leaders on their styles of leadership is significant. A leader with good character and strong ethical and moral values, anchored in technical competence, could be able to build trust and establish rapport with the team, and as well, could be able to influence the team toward accomplishing both organizational and employees’ goals. Leaders with good character are often known by the way they relate with, and interact with their teams, which often translates to high productivity, good organizational culture, and good organizational climate as well. Such leaders could likely influence the team toward accomplishing common goals.

The character of the leader can influence organizational behaviour in significant ways. Effective leadership is grounded in ethical values. These moral and ethical values include: accountability, honesty, integrity, caring, and self-discipline, to mention but a few. Leaders increase their leadership credibility if what they are saying is grounded in values and are consistent with their actions (Malphurs, 2004).

A leader who understands leadership as an opportunity to serve, and who aligns with the worldview that leaders should serve the needs of the follower as a matter of priority, could easily align their leadership style with the servant leadership model, where leadership is anchored in servant hood (Greenleaf, 1991; Sendjaya, 2015). Also, a leader who perceives leadership as an opportunity to control the team, and use the means of control to achieve the organizational goals, could align with the autocratic leadership style (Northouse, 2013). In other words, people can tell who the leader is by their leadership style. To put in another way, show me how you lead, and I will tell you who you are. I am not advocating for a one style fits all leadership style, for that is fundamentally a flawed thought process and elusive concept, because context is essential to leadership effectiveness. But I contend that people can tell a lot about who a leader is from the leaderships style or styles they use, and from the way they lead.

#### **Leadership as a Process of Growth and Development.**

The author of this paper is not trying to suggest or to advance the idea that leaders are born, not made, or to claim that effective leaders are born with extraordinary traits that are innate and intrinsically fixed in them alone. Instead, the author perceives leadership as a process, a journey, a lifelong process of ongoing relationship, growth, and development between the leader and team members toward accomplishing common goals. While it is a common knowledge that there are character traits that are indispensable for effective leadership, it is important to underscore that those character traits can be learned. As a matter of fact, personality plays a vital role in leadership, and some scholars (Skills Approach to Leadership) contend that knowledge, skills and abilities are indispensable for effective leadership, and can be learned (Northouse, 2013). Leadership, when viewed in this context, calls for a commitment to the process of learning, development, and growth to acquire those necessary character and skills/abilities for effective leadership.

Skills Approach scholars advance the idea that there are necessary skills, knowledge, and abilities that are required for effective leadership such as: technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills (Northouse, 2013). Technical skills are related to the mastery of specific knowledge required to do specific work. Human skills are related to the knowledge and insight required to work competently with people. And, conceptual skills are related to the capacity to work with concepts and ideas (Northouse, 2013). Ciulla (2004) positioned good leadership in moral goodness and technical goodness. In other words, according to Ciulla (2004), good leadership is anchored in moral and technical competence and effectiveness

The champions of skills leadership approach, located leadership within the reach of everyone, while underscoring the commitment to the acquisition of the technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills that are needed for effective leadership. Therefore, “when leadership is framed as a set of skills, it becomes a process that people can study and practice to become better at

performing their jobs” (Northouse, 2013, p. 58). And I want to highlight the idea that through a commitment to the pursuit of necessary knowledge through scholarship and through other ways of knowing, people can gain the competencies and skills, including human skills, technical skills, and conceptual skills to become effective leaders.

### **The Need for a Commitment to Leadership Development through the Education of the Whole Self**

The idea of education of the whole self is not new in scholarship. Education has long been perceived as having a transformative power that informs and influences the lens through which we perceive, judge, and interpret reality, including ourselves and our position in the world. The concept of transformation often suggests a change, a re-orientation of the mind, will, and action. Educational transformation could lead to increased knowledge and self-awareness to gain insight through hindsight into who we are, and what needs to be changed to continue to grow.

Succinctly put, “a successful university education can transform through creating a distinctive, mentally significant kind of epistemic transformation that, in turn, creates personal transformation” (Paul & Quiggin, 2020, p.565). The idea that a successful university education could translate to both epistemic transformation and personal transformation is both robust and fascinating. This type of education unlocks the door, and provides the opportunity for transformation and education of the whole self. Epistemic transformation relates to the kind of cognitive change that expands our knowledge of the world, and the discovery of new kind of concepts. Whereas, personal transformation, while relying on, and drawing from epistemic transformation, could transform who we are, and could lead us to change our character flaws. (Paul & Quiggin, 2020).

Educational transformation could open the door for reflective experience, an opportunity to ponder and deliberate on experience. John Dewey (1933) was right when he argued that “we do not learn from experience. We learn from reflection on experience (p.78). Sadly, not every education or every student engages in the reflective activity that could shine a bright light toward obtaining insight that makes a lasting and significant impact, which could translate to both epistemic and personal transformations.

The insight gained from transformative education informs our worldview. Our worldview helps us to interpret and attach meaning to our lives; it allows us to organize our life experiences and decisions into an accurate and clearer perspective, just as the reading glasses put the world into a clearer and better focus for many people (Cosgrove, 2006). Worldview is a “commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart that can be expressed, which may be true, partially true or entirely false, that we hold consciously or unconsciously about reality, that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being” (Sire, 2009, p.20). Indeed, educational transformation that positively changes the worldview could positively change mind and behaviour. A positive change in worldview could positively change the world viewed. Leadership education when grasped and perceived as having a transformative capacity, and with genuine human commitment, could provide opportunity for leadership effectiveness, development, and growth.

Therefore, commitment to the education of the whole self is the key that unlocks leadership development and leadership effectiveness. Commitment to education of the whole self here is explained in the context of intentional and conscious effort made by people aspiring to lead in variety of settings to become better. It is a commitment with a purpose and intention to allow oneself to be engaged in, and be transformed into something better in the context of continuous development and acquisition of skills and competence for effective leadership.

### **Conclusion**

I contend that leadership happens in every area of nursing practice, and that frontline Canadian nurses also exercise leadership within the context of their practice. I underscore that every Canadian nurse, not exclusively those in management positions, needs to make conscious and intentional effort toward commitment to the education of the whole self through the advancement of college/university education, as well as advancement in other ways of acquiring knowledge to become effective leaders. I contend that commitment to both epistemic transformation and personal transformation, especially, but not exclusively, through the pursuit of empirical knowledge, could translate to the development and the acquisition of those character traits, skills, and competencies required for effective leadership. Leadership education, when viewed in the context of transformation, opens the door to everyone who is ready and willing to make commitment toward acquiring the necessary skills and competence for effective leadership. *I submit that who we are manifest in how we lead. Succinctly put therefore: show me how you lead, and I will tell you who you are, is the core idea that the author of this article has persuasively argued.* This work does not claim to be a conquest, but rather a call for engagement and further thoughtful deliberations on the impacts of character and competence in leadership effectiveness.

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