Developing self-awareness for effective nurse leadership

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Abstract

Self-awareness is a crucial component of effective leadership. Leaders who are self-aware exhibit an understanding of their strengths and limitations, as well as an ability to manage their emotions and those of their team members. Heightened self-awareness and understanding of oneself and others can have benefits in terms of increasing confidence and enhancing communication. Moreover, nurse leaders and managers need self-awareness to identify their strengths and weaknesses, navigate complexities, foster positive relationships and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement. This article defines self-awareness, discusses its importance for nurse leadership and identifies various tools and methods that nurses can use to develop their self-awareness.

 EfFective leadership is central to healthcare provision, and is associated with improved patient outcomes, staff satisfaction and high-quality healthcare services (Cummings et al 2021). Effective leaders promote a collaborative and innovative culture in the workplace, driving continuous improvement and ensuring high-quality patient care (Barr and Dowding 2022).

One of the main attributes of effective leadership is self-awareness (Northouse 2022). Self-awareness enables nurse leaders to navigate complexities, foster relationships and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement (Friedman et al 2021). Hewertson (2014) described self-awareness as the cornerstone of effective leadership. Doherty and Hunter Revell (2020) suggested that low self-awareness may reduce a leader’s ability to meet the needs of others and achieve the objectives of the organisation. Understanding self-awareness and how it can be developed is important for effective nurse leadership.

Self-awareness

Self-awareness has a subjective dimension and an objective dimension (Duval and Wicklund 1972). Subjectively, self-awareness is defined as a state of consciousness where attention is directed towards external events (Carden et al 2022). The individual is consciously attentive and focused on external occurrences that affect them. Objectively, self-awareness is focused on the self and on recognising and understanding one’s thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Wicklund 1975). Using introspective self-evaluation, individuals can understand their strengths and limitations (Kim et al 2022) and recognise how their internal state may affect others (Lage et al 2022). Therefore, self-awareness is multilayered, encompassing a cognitive awareness of external occurrences and a recognition of one’s feelings and how they affect others (Carden et al 2022).

Developing self-awareness is essential for fostering personal and professional growth, since it helps individuals to establish
boundaries, examine their own prejudices and formulate meaningful goals (London et al 2023). Heightened self-awareness increases the potential to shape interactions with others and acts as a compass to guide individuals through personal and professional development (Rasheed et al 2019).

Self-awareness is an essential element of emotional intelligence that enables individuals to perceive, understand and regulate their emotions as well as those of others (Lambert 2021). Goleman (1996) identified self-awareness as one of the five components of emotional intelligence – along with motivation, empathy, self-regulation and social skills – enabling individuals to adeptly navigate social situations and make informed decisions. Heightened self-awareness enables individuals to regulate their emotions and respond to challenges (Clancy 2014). Nurse leaders need self-awareness to manage challenging situations such as breaking bad news or arbitrating conflict. Self-awareness acts as a foundation for developing other aspects of emotional intelligence, which guides behaviour and supports effective communication and relationships with others (Mansel and Einion 2019).

**Self-awareness and leadership**

Self-awareness is a core attribute of effective leadership (Northouse 2022). In the context of authentic leadership, Banks et al (2016) defined self-awareness from an intrapersonal perspective, suggesting that it involves profound self-knowledge, self-consistency and self-regulation. Authentic leaders have a deep understanding of themselves, and are morally grounded, transparent and responsive to their followers’ needs (Gardner et al 2021). In the author’s experience, in high-pressure situations such as staff shortages or high workloads, a nurse leader’s self-awareness can help them to understand their strengths and weaknesses, remain calm and consistently deliver compassionate care, which subsequently earns them trust from patients and the team.

Leaders who authentically enact their values and beliefs can have a positive influence on their followers and support them to develop their strengths (Ilies et al 2005). The authentic relationship encourages followers to embrace authenticity, promoting transparency and support within the team. For example, when a team member raises a concern, they may feel empowered to openly discuss their experience. Such interactions lead to personal identification with the leader and the development of essential qualities such as hopefulness, confidence, resilience and optimism (Avolio and Walumbwa 2014). Self-awareness enables leaders to align their actions with their values, thereby creating an authentic and influential presence.

Conversely, a lack of self-awareness can reduce the leader’s effectiveness. Bellack and Dickow (2019) suggested that disregarding the value of self-awareness contributes to leadership failure. Traits such as arrogance, pride and overconfidence can make leaders oblivious to their weaknesses and jeopardise the effectiveness of their leadership, which can adversely affect staff morale and organisational outcomes (Hartung 2020). Overconfidence, arrogance and assuming that one possesses all-encompassing knowledge can be detrimental (Cassam 2017) and without self-awareness, nurse leaders may struggle with change, establishing trust and maintaining team cohesiveness. Therefore, developing self-awareness is essential for sustaining effective leadership (Caldwell and Hayes 2016).

**Benefits of self-awareness**

The cultivation of self-awareness is associated with several benefits. For nurses, self-awareness has a pivotal role in the development of communication skills (Jantzen 2022) and those with heightened self-awareness are better able to navigate challenging clinical situations (Page et al 2021). A qualitative study by Younas et al (2020) found that self-awareness increased the confidence of nurses working in high-pressure settings, enabling them to overcome obstacles – for example, to manage aggression in mental health settings, to deal with complex cases in emergency care and to support bereaved families. Moreover, self-awareness can enable nurses to deliver culturally competent care, addressing the unique needs of patients from diverse backgrounds (Younas et al 2020).

For nurse managers, self-awareness can enhance their ability to navigate complex managerial scenarios. It contributes to conflict resolution, advocacy and observational skills. Nurse managers with heightened self-awareness exhibit conscientiousness and compassion, applying experiential learning to nurture their managerial capabilities (Younas et al 2021). Seidman et al (2020) identified that leaders who possess heightened self-awareness exhibit greater self-confidence and self-efficacy, which may enhance their decision-making and performance (London et al 2023). For nurse leaders, heightened self-awareness potentially reduces stress levels and the risk of burnout.

**Key points**

- Self-awareness is a cornerstone of effective nurse leadership
- Self-awareness encompasses both the consciousness of external occurrences and the recognition of one’s internal state and how it affects others
- Nurturing self-awareness is important for emotional intelligence, communication proficiency, adaptability and personal and professional growth
- To develop self-awareness, nurses can use tools such as the Johari window and the Keirsey Temperament Sorter and methods such as reflection, coaching and mentoring
Understanding one’s strengths and limitations is associated with better stress management, contributing to a healthier work environment for leaders and their teams (Nason et al 2013, Mansel and Einion 2019).

**Developing self-awareness**

Developing self-awareness is crucial for effective leadership, enabling leaders to understand their strengths, weaknesses and values and thereby fostering authenticity and credibility (Steffens et al 2021). Accurate self-evaluation is essential for professional development, self-efficacy, professionalism and effective patient care (Raake et al 2022). Engaging in self-evaluation provides nurses with opportunities to acquire new insights, enabling professional growth and enhancing patient care (Rasheed 2015).

In nurse education, self-awareness is integral to leadership development (Carson et al 2023). James et al (2022) asserted that developing self-awareness in undergraduate education is essential for learning and developing leadership skills, especially the skills needed to manage emotional challenges in the workplace. In an integrative review examining the effect of nurse leadership education on clinical practice, Page et al (2021) found that leadership education helped nurses cultivate self-awareness and empowerment. Engaging in leadership education enabled nurses to understand their strengths and limitations, subsequently enhancing psychological maturity and promoting reflective practice. The development of self-awareness was also linked with reduced anxiety and improved decision-making, social skills and leadership actions (Page et al 2021).

Developing self-awareness is an ongoing introspective and transformative process (London et al 2023). Nurses can use various practical tools and educational methods to facilitate that process, some of which are described in the next sections of this article.

**Practical tools for developing self-awareness**

**Johari window**

The Johari window (Figure 1) was developed by Luft and Ingham (1955) and can help individuals understand their strengths, weaknesses, biases and how others perceive them. It can be used to determine a person’s level of self-awareness and how to increase it (Mahoney 2019). Through reflection and exploration using the Johari window, aspects of the unknown self may gradually emerge (Lowes 2020).

The Johari window consists of four quadrants (Mahoney 2019):

» Quadrant 1 (open area) – what the person knows about themselves and is known to others. Information in the ‘open area’ facilitates shared awareness of emotions and behaviours (Koca and Erigüç 2020).

» Quadrant 2 (blind area) – what the person does not know about themselves and is known to others. An example is personal traits and habits that the person is not aware of (Lowes 2020).

» Quadrant 3 (hidden area) – what the person knows about themselves and is not known to others. An example is thoughts and emotions that the person is concealing from others (Stonehouse 2015).

» Quadrant 4 (unknown area) – what the person does not know about themselves and that others do not know either. An example is a hidden motive, antecedent or determinant that the person – and others – are not aware of (Mahoney 2019).

Using the Johari window, leaders can gain insights into their strengths, weaknesses and interpersonal dynamics, which in turn can facilitate decision-making, strengthen relationships and promote a positive organisational culture (Welch 2023). Ellis and Abbott (2021) suggested that the transparency achieved through self-awareness promotes trust and collaboration. The Johari window can serve as a transformative tool, illuminating blind spots and enabling leaders to navigate challenges more efficiently (Ellis and Abbott 2023).

Beyond exploring one’s level of self-awareness, the Johari window can also be used as part of coaching, when assessing team members’ knowledge and skills, or to raise the level of transparency between members of a newly formed team (Mahoney 2019). However, not everything that this tool reveals is necessarily suitable for sharing (Halpern 2009) and feedback from it is only valuable if accepted and acted on (Ramani et al 2017).

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**Figure 1. Johari window**

(Adapted from Mahoney 2019)
Keirsey Temperament Sorter
One facet of self-awareness is being aware of one’s ‘personality temperament’, a term used to describe an individual’s disposition demonstrated through their thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Maltby et al 2023). Rasheed (2015) suggested that becoming self-aware requires an individual to know and understand their personality traits.

The Keirsey Temperament Sorter (KTS) (Keirsey 1998) is a self-administered psychometric questionnaire used to identify dominant personality traits. The KTS categorises personality types into four temperaments: artisan, guardian, rational and idealist (Table 1). Using the KTS increases self-awareness by enabling people to identify observable and automatic behavioural tendencies in themselves (Robbins and Ross 2017). Understanding one’s personality, in turn, may help understand other personality types. The KTS is a popular classification system used by leaders to understand personality types – their own and/or that of others.

Identifying and acknowledging leadership traits is one way for leaders to increase their self-awareness. Ezzeldin et al (2019) reported that understanding the personality traits of oneself and others can enable leaders to adjust their approach based on the needs of their followers and organisation. However, there is a debate regarding the reliability of the KTS, since it is self-administered and responses are therefore open to subjectivity bias (Cripps 2017). In contrast, Speer et al (2023) suggested that the forced-choice question format – whereby respondents express a view by selecting, rating or indicating a preference from a predetermined set of options – employed in personality tests such as the KTS enhances reliability and offers substantial benefits.

Nurse leaders should exercise caution when considering using tools such as the KTS to understand themselves or their teams, because personality is complex and multifaceted, which makes it challenging to categorise individuals into one of four personality types. Furthermore, the ability to lead cannot solely be attributed to personality type but instead arises from the dynamic interplay between personality traits, behaviours, situational factors and environmental influences (Northouse 2022).

Educational methods for developing self-awareness
Reflection
Reflection has been described by Bulman et al (2012) as a process that actively seeks solutions to experiences. It is a commonly used method for enhancing self-awareness and learning (Kolb 2014) and is crucial for nurses to become effective practitioners. Engaging in reflection encourages nurses to analyse their experiences (Esterhuizen and Howatson-Jones 2019), determine alternative approaches for similar situations arising in the future (Rolfe et al 2020), maximise their strengths (Patel and Metersky 2022) and identify and address areas for improvement (Sherwood et al 2018).

Reflection is not only undertaken to learn from past issues, but also to decipher experiences that have gone well (Jasper and Rosser 2013). Price and Harrington (2016) suggested that reflection can be used to identify and celebrate effective practice. Although it requires time, may seem mechanistic and carries the risk of being conducted inadequately (Barchard 2022), reflection integrated into daily practice can foster a mindset oriented towards growth and development.

Nurses can enhance their self-awareness through formal and informal reflective activities, including reflective journaling, portfolio development, peer discussion groups, case presentations and debriefing sessions (Bulman and Schutz 2013, Bassot 2016). These activities enable nurses to critically examine their practice, explore their thoughts and emotions, and gain insights into their strengths.

Table I. Four temperaments in the Keirsey Temperament Sorter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artisan</th>
<th>Guardian</th>
<th>Rational</th>
<th>Idealist</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>» Seeks stimulation</td>
<td>» Embraces structure</td>
<td>» Balances abstraction with objectivity</td>
<td>» Seeks meaning and significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Aspires to be an expert</td>
<td>» Approaches decisions rationally</td>
<td>» Maintains self-control</td>
<td>» Is eager to work with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Works to make an impact</td>
<td>» Demonstrates methodical, organised approaches</td>
<td>» Exhibits mastery of knowledge and competence</td>
<td>» Is abstract but compassionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Shows mental agility</td>
<td>» Excels at logistics</td>
<td>» Is strategically oriented</td>
<td>» Possesses a strong desire for unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Is adaptable to change</td>
<td>» Seeks security and belonging</td>
<td>» Excels at logical investigation</td>
<td>» Focuses on personal growth and self-identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>» Excels at troubleshooting and problem-solving</td>
<td>» Has an intense sense of duty and responsibility to others</td>
<td>» Focuses on problem-solving</td>
<td>» Seeks to develop relationships</td>
</tr>
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(Adapted from Gerrard and Shinefield 2022)
and areas for improvement. Combining different reflective activities can support nurses to develop self-awareness, refine practice and improve patient care (Rolfe et al 2020).

Coaching
Coaching is recognised as a method for enhancing self-awareness (Kowalski 2020) and is associated with learning, change and performance (Mühlberger et al 2023), offering individuals a structured approach to achieve personal goals and skill development (Hastings and Kane 2018, Best 2020). Coaching is increasingly used for leadership development among nurses (Narayanasamy and Penney 2014).

Qualitative findings have highlighted the role of coaching in improving nurses’ self-awareness and performance potential (Westcott 2016). Additionally, coaching interventions for nurse managers have been shown to lead to greater self-awareness, resulting in changes in their self-development and interactions with others (Richardson et al 2023). However, lack of access to coaching remains an issue, and when coaching is available its effectiveness may be adversely affected by scheduling issues and conflicting priorities (Knight and Smith 2024). In particular, the absence of dedicated time for coaching can result in meetings between nurses and their coaches being interrupted or cancelled.

Mentoring
Mentoring is a dynamic process for professional advancement (Hastings and Kane 2018), involving interactions between an experienced mentor and a less experienced mentee. It focuses on supporting the development of knowledge, skills and attributes (Toh et al 2022), offering the mentee sustained guidance and support in the medium to long term (Best 2020). In nursing, mentoring is crucial for student learning and for transitioning into new roles (Busby et al 2023).

Systematic evidence has shown that being mentored enables nurses to improve their clinical practice, cope with work-related stress, develop their networks (Kakyo et al 2022) and enhance their leadership skills and self-awareness (Younas et al 2020). Qualitative findings have shown that formal, structured mentorship programmes for nurse leaders enhanced their self-awareness (Wurmser and Kowalski 2020), which was important when navigating new roles and managing challenging situations. Despite barriers to mentorship, such as a lack of support for mentorship in the workplace and limited opportunities to apply the learning gained from it (Rossiter et al 2024), mentorship is an important educational method for fostering self-awareness among nurse leaders, providing positive reinforcement, validation and skills development.

Conclusion
Self-awareness is a fundamental aspect of nurse leadership. For nurse leaders, possessing an understanding of their emotions and personality type is paramount to navigate the complexities of a dynamic healthcare environment. Heightened self-awareness contributes to more compassionate and effective leadership in healthcare. The benefits of self-awareness include improved decision-making, enhanced communication and a positive work culture. Practical tools such as the Johari window and the Keirsey Temperament Sorter and educational methods such as reflection, coaching and mentoring can be used by nurses to nurture their self-awareness and refine their leadership skills.

In healthcare, where empathy and effective communication are crucial, nurse leaders with high levels of self-awareness positively influence patient care, team performance and overall organisational success.

References


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