

Evolving the Role of Leaders in Healthcare: Empowering and Mentoring the Future of Nursing

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Healthcare is undergoing rapid and sustained transformation, driven by workforce shortages, financial constraints, increasing patient acuity, and heightened expectations for quality, equity, and safety. In this complex environment, nurse leaders are expected not only to manage operations but also to serve as emotionally intelligent change agents, collaborative partners, and stewards of professional practice. Preparing nurses for these expanded leadership expectations is critical.

The ANA-MI Empowered Leader Series (ELS) was created to meet this need by providing nurses who are interested in or currently serving in leadership roles with structured opportunities to explore evidence-based leadership principles and apply practical strategies within their teams and organizations. Delivered through seven two-hour virtual sessions, the program emphasizes skill-building, reflection, and peer connection. The 2025 cohort included participants from Michigan and Iowa, strengthening professional networks and fostering cross-state collaboration.

Establishing a Foundation for Empowered Leadership

The 2025 cohort, which began in October, opened with a keynote address from Dr. Barb Medved, DNP, RN, FAAN, President of ANA-MI. Dr. Medved highlighted the current state of nursing and emphasized the pivotal role of empowered nurse leaders in shaping the future of the profession. Her remarks underscored that leadership is not limited to formal titles; rather, it is a professional responsibility shared across practice settings.

The series was grounded in four foundational leadership pillars:

1. Becoming a leader

2. Leading people
3. Leading collaboratively
4. Leading change

These pillars provided a framework for thoughtful discussion, shared learning, and applied reflection among participants, many of whom represented diverse clinical, academic, and administrative roles.

Leadership Topics Aligned With Contemporary Challenges

To address the evolving demands of healthcare, the 2025 ELS curriculum focused on leadership competencies that have been shown to influence engagement, retention, and team performance. Topics included:

- Leading with heart and mind: Emotional intelligence, trauma-informed care, and radical empathy
- Leading others and pivoting in one's career
- Leading diverse teams and patient populations
- Restoring collaborative relationships and navigating conflict
- Navigating finance for empowered leaders
- Leading through change
- Leading with Polarity intelligence

These topics reflect evidence demonstrating that effective nursing leadership requires both relational awareness and systems thinking. Research indicates that leaders who demonstrate emotional intelligence, effective communication, and inclusive decision-making positively influence team well-being, organizational culture, and patient outcomes (Välimäki et al., 2024).

Expert Facilitation and Real-World Perspectives

The 2025 ELS was facilitated by Kari Szczechowski, DNP, RN, PCCN, a member of the ANA-MI Nursing Education Committee, adjunct faculty member at the University of Michigan School of Nursing, and Director of Quality, Safety, and Experience at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital and Von Voigtlander Women's Hospital, part of Michigan Medicine.

Dr. Szczechowski invited nurse leaders from a range of practice settings to share their expertise with the cohort. This approach provided participants with an eclectic mix of perspectives, practical examples, and leadership tools, reinforcing the value of learning from peers who are navigating similar challenges across healthcare environments.

Learning Beyond Scheduled Sessions

While the virtual sessions offered structured learning, the cohort also engaged through an online platform between sessions. Participants used the space to seek advice, share resources, express gratitude, and continue leadership conversations. These interactions fostered psychological safety and peer support—elements consistently identified in the literature as critical for leadership development.

By the conclusion of the program, participants reported not only strengthened competencies but also expanded professional networks. Many noted increased confidence in their leadership identity and a shared understanding that all nurses are empowered leaders contributing to the advancement of nursing practice.

Program Impact and Participant Outcomes

Evaluation data from the 2025 cohort demonstrated strong overall satisfaction and meaningful leadership growth.

Participants consistently rated the series as excellent, describing it as relevant, engaging, and immediately applicable to their work. Many reported increased intentionality and confidence in their leadership approach.

Across sessions, participants identified actionable growth in several core leadership skills, including emotional intelligence, conflict management, communication, coaching, accountability, and leading through change using polarity thinking rather than default problem-solving.

The most highly valued topics included emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, change leadership, and polarity intelligence. Panel and discussion-based formats were especially appreciated for making the content feel authentic and applicable.

Participants also described concrete practice changes, such as increased self-reflection, more intentional listening, greater comfort addressing conflict and providing feedback, application of DEI principles, and improved transparency and financial literacy to better support teams.

Requests for future programming frequently centered on mentorship and coaching development, ethical leadership, giving effective feedback, advanced conflict resolution, and expanded use of case-based learning.

Lisa Firestone, 2025 ELS Program Participant

“The Empowered Leadership series has had a meaningful impact on both my leadership skills and my confidence as a nurse leader. Each session encouraged me to pause, reflect, and evaluate how I show up for others. I found myself becoming more intentional in how I communicate, how I manage stress and how I support those around me. One of

the greatest lessons learned is that effective leadership is not about having all the answers, but about creating an environment where others feel heard, valued, and supported. This shift in perspective has helped me approach challenging conversations with more openness and emotional intelligence.”

Mentorship as a Cornerstone of Nurse Leadership Development

The strong interest in mentorship expressed by participants aligns with a growing body of evidence supporting mentoring as a key strategy for developing nurse leaders. Studies consistently demonstrate that mentoring programs improve leadership confidence, stress management, career satisfaction, and organizational commitment among nurses in leadership roles (Lysfjord & Skarstein, 2024).

Scoping and systematic reviews further show that mentoring contributes to improved retention, reduced burnout, and enhanced professional identity, benefiting nurses, organizations, and patients alike (Mínguez Moreno et al., 2023). Structured mentoring programs have been associated with reductions in nurse turnover and improvements in job satisfaction, which are especially critical in the current workforce climate (Gill-Bonanca, 2024).

Emerging mentorship frameworks emphasize relational, learner-centered approaches that integrate experiential learning and real-time application. Such models recognize that leadership development is continuous and that mentoring relationships can support nurses across all career stages (Appiah et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The ANA MI Empowered Leader Series was widely viewed as impactful, confidence-building, and practical. By combining evidence-based leadership education with peer connection and opportunities for mentorship, the program helped emerging and experienced nurse leaders strengthen core competencies and feel

better equipped to lead through complexity, conflict, and change.

As healthcare continues to evolve, intentional investment in leadership development—and in mentoring nurse leaders—will remain essential to sustaining the profession and advancing nursing practice. Programs such as the Empowered Leader Series demonstrate the power of connection, reflection, and shared learning in shaping the future of nursing leadership. ■

References

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