

Evidence Base: Leading Teams

Leadership has been identified by team researchers as an important component for effective teamwork¹ by facilitating and progressing team development and performance.^{2,3} Leadership is defined by McGrath (p. 365) as a responsibility “to do, or get done, whatever is not adequately handled for the group needs.”³ It can take the form of one or several individuals internal or external to the team, and it can be established through formal avenues or by leaders informally serving in that role when it is necessary.⁴ Both external and internal leaders provide guidance and support to assist team members accordingly.^{2,4,5}

Effective leadership manages resources and facilitates team actions⁶ to ensure that team members are seeking information, planning and refining team duties, coordinating team actions, resolving conflict among themselves, and providing coaching and feedback.¹ Furthermore, effective leadership must balance the role of handing down solutions to problems with that of facilitating team problem solving.

Specifically, leadership helps to resolve problems by offering guidance in difficult situations through direction setting, role modeling, sense making, and framing.⁷ Leaders may also increase team effectiveness by facilitating team problem solving through developing a shared vision or plan; facilitating coordination and collaboration; and motivating team members to succeed.⁸

Development of this culture of shared understanding and awareness is initiated through briefs, debriefs, and huddles. The effectiveness of these strategies continues to be evident. Increases in individual and team performance⁹ as well as more effective outcomes¹⁰ have been associated with effective team debriefs. The use of huddles has been found to increase satisfaction with working relationships between interprofessional teams;¹¹ and the use of structured briefs¹² has been linked to a reduction of communication errors.

Proper leadership has been demonstrated to be effective within the health care context. That is, several systematic reviews have suggested that proper leadership promotes team performance,¹³ safety,¹³ and well being.¹⁴ Conversely, researchers have posited that subpar leadership negatively influences teamwork and increases patient risks.¹⁵

As expected, attaining effective leadership is accomplished through training. Specifically, Hynes, et al.,¹⁶ suggest that insufficient training in leadership can hinder leadership behaviors and ultimately the team. Thus, it is imperative to use leadership training to achieve the desired leadership behaviors, team performance, and patient outcomes.

Research has demonstrated that using TeamSTEPPS[®] can enhance core teamwork competencies, including leadership, and patient outcomes (e.g., decreased time to care) within health care environments, such as the trauma bay.¹⁷ Others suggest that TeamSTEPPS is beneficial beyond the practicing environment. That is, McCoy and Carty¹⁸ summarize the results of studies that examined the integration of TeamSTEPPS in medical and nursing education. The positive results indicated by these studies are noteworthy, given that clinicians typically perform

the role of designated leaders within the health care team; however, in older education models, there is no formal training for these leadership roles.

To some, “leadership is the glue connecting all the TeamSTEPPS elements.”¹⁹ Leadership is crucial for sustaining trained behaviors and desired outcomes. For example, one study indicated that team and department leaders served as champions to a TeamSTEPPS initiative implemented within the pediatric and surgical ICUs.¹⁹ Because leaders were actively supporting and encouraging the team training, clinical outcomes improved for as long as 8 months posttraining, and team performance was sustained even longer (i.e., 12 months posttraining).

In summary, the evidence suggests that effective team leaders:

- Are responsible for ensuring that team members are sharing information, monitoring situational cues, resolving conflicts, and helping each other when needed;
- Manage resources to ensure the team’s performance;
- Facilitate team actions by communicating through informal information exchange sessions;
- Develop norms for information sharing; and
- Ensure that team members are aware of situational changes to plans.

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Additional Resources

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