

Ethical Leadership in Nursing Management

Abstract

In a world where economic, social, political, technical, and behavioral conditions are constantly changing and developing, the importance of ethics in management theories and practices has come to the fore, as behaviors and practices contrary to social values and norms in the field of management have increased. The increase in ethical behavior practices in organizations contributes to the easier execution of management processes that can be realized under the leadership of ethical leaders. As in every organization, ethical leaders are also needed in health institutions. In recent years, scientific literature has investigated the issue of ethical leadership in nursing services management, with studies focusing on patient, employee, and institutional outcomes. Aiming to raise nurse managers' awareness of ethical leadership and its effects, this review contributes to the national literature by offering suggestions that may contribute to the formation of ethical leaders in nursing services.

Keywords: Ethics, ethical leadership, managerial ethics, nursing

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Introduction

With the global Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak¹ and the increase in behaviors and practices that contradict social values and norms in the field of management, the importance of ethics in management theories and practices has come to the forefront.² The Organization for economic cooperation and development emphasizes that ethical management infrastructure in institutions should establish "guidance," "management," and "control" elements that complement and support each other.³

Managerial ethical principles include managers' responsibilities toward the profession, patients, organization, employees, and society. Such principles guide managers in their work, decisions, and choices, providing the assurance of accountability.^{4,5} Professional ethical principles for nurses guide practice. However, managerial ethical principles designed to guide nurse managers in managerial processes have yet to be determined.^{6,7} In Türkiye, the Turkish Nurses Association established "Ethical Principles and Responsibilities for Nursing," which are based on the ethical codes of the international council of nurses (ICN).⁸ However, the literature does not identify ethical principles for nurse managers in Türkiye.

Ethical leaders are essential to the formation of managerial ethics in institutions, management theories, and practices. With the aim of reducing ethical problems and their effects on health services, the World Health Organization draws the attention to the importance of ethical leadership in a world where economic, social, political, technical, and behavioral conditions are constantly developing.⁹ It has been documented that ethical leadership in health institutions creates positive outcomes for patients, employees, and leaders, while ethical conflicts lead to negative consequences.¹⁰⁻¹² In institutions, managerial nurses exhibiting ethical leadership positively contribute to the formation of outputs such as ethical climate in the work environment,¹³⁻¹⁵ organizational commitment,^{12,16-18} organizational justice,¹⁸⁻²² organizational support,¹⁶ organizational identification,¹⁵ and organizational trust.¹⁵ Studies have shown that ethical leadership increases employee job satisfaction^{10,13,14,16,22} and performance,^{10,19} leader job satisfaction,¹⁰ patient satisfaction,¹⁰ and reporting of errors.²³ In work environments lacking ethical leaders, negative outcomes such as job stress¹⁴ and an increase in turnover intention^{16,19,24,25} are observed. This review contributes to

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the national literature by raising the awareness of ethics for nurse managers.

Ethics, Management Ethics, and Ethical Leadership

Ethics is a philosophical and scientific subject that concerns moral behavior, actions, and judgments.² The Turkish Language Association defines ethics as “the science of traditions”: “The whole of the behaviors that the parties should follow and avoid among various professions,” while ethics is defined as “the forms and rules of behavior that people in a society have to follow.”²⁶ In other words, ethics is a systematic approach to understanding, analyzing, and distinguishing between right-wrong and good-bad.²⁷ A review of the literature shows that the concepts of morality and ethics are often used interchangeably.²⁸

From a managerial perspective, managing and leading inherently involve ethical, charged duties, since every managerial decision affects both people and the environment.²⁹ Management ethics is defined as the principles of behavior that guides managers in their actions, ensuring consistency, impartiality, and factuality in the management processes; respect for the existence and integrity of individuals; selection of actions that are best for all; and actions based on universal values such as justice, equality, impartiality, honesty, responsibility, respect, openness, love, democracy, and tolerance.² In this context, ethics is at the very center of management practice.²⁹

Another concept discussed alongside managerial ethics in organizations is the concept of ethical leadership. The ethical leadership approach has been frequently discussed in leadership and management during the past decades of the 20th century.^{10,23} Ethical leadership has been defined as the leadership that demonstrates normatively appropriate behavior in personal actions and interpersonal relationships, guiding followers through two-way communication, support, and decision-making.³⁰ It aims to clarify the ethical dimensions of every managerial decision and to establish ethical principles that guide decision-making processes in organizations.¹⁹

Ethical leadership is a concept that has recently been discussed in the nursing management literature.^{7,31} In nursing, it aims to create an appropriate environment for quality and cost-effective health care for patients and to establish ethical behaviors in employees.¹⁰ There are two perspectives on ethical leadership in nursing. The first is that every nurse is a leader, and therefore ethical leadership is the job of all nurses. The second is related to the ethical leadership behaviors of nurses in the management positions.¹¹ However, the literature mostly investigates the ethical leadership behaviors of nurses in lower, middle, and strategic management positions. In this context, studies investigating the ethical leadership behaviors of nursing practitioners are lacking.

Managerial Ethical Principles

To place the concept of ethics in a concrete application framework, various standards of “ethical principles” have been established. These principles are designed to define job duties and rules. Members are expected to comply with the ethical principles determined by professions and/or institutions, and criminal sanctions can be imposed on noncomplying individuals.³² The establishment of ethical principles for both professional members and managers in organizations contributes to the reduction of unethical behaviors in working environments.

Ethical principles for managers in organizations guide managers in making ethical decisions and engaging in ethical behaviors. Aydın² defined the ethical principles considered intermediate for every profession but essential in the management as follows: “Justice, equality, honesty and integrity, impartiality, responsibility, human rights, humanism, loyalty, rule of law, love, tolerance, secularism, respect, frugality, democracy, positive human relations, openness, rights and freedoms, doing justice to labor, resistance to illegal orders, privacy, and confidentiality.” These basic principles are essential to all professional groups; however, the ethical principles with which managers of each professional group are required to comply have yet to be determined.⁷ The establishment of such principles would ensure that management processes are carried out within the framework of universally accepted ethical principles and/or ethical principles determined by professional organizations rather than according to ethical principles determined by individuals.

According to Ulrich,³³ Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, included statements about ethical behaviors for nurse leaders in her *Notes on Nursing*, published in 1860. Nightingale states that nurse leaders should be “fair,” “honest,” and “impartial,” as well as that they should “recognize their employees and care about the needs of their employees.”³ Curtin,³⁴ who stated that the main ethical responsibility of nurse managers is to ensure patient safety and the personal and professional safety of nurses, proposed ten basic ethical principles for nurse leaders based on universal values in line with this ethical responsibility. These principles are “frugality and therapeutic elegance,” “clinical credibility through organizational competence,” “presence,” “responsible representation,” “loyal service,” “deliberate delegation responsible innovation,” “fiduciary accountability,” “self-discipline,” and “continuous learning.” Shirey¹⁷ identified the ethical principles that nurse leaders should follow to create an ethical climate in nursing practices; these principles included respect for persons, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, veracity, and fidelity.

The “Code of Ethics for Nursing” was first published by the International Nurses Association in 1953.³⁵ Based on the ethical problems experienced by nurses due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, these ethical principles were last renewed in 2021. The ICN Code of Ethics is a recommended guide not only for nurses but also for nurse managers, containing guidelines concerning the provision of human-oriented patient care, the protection and improvement of patient rights/safety, respect for human rights and beliefs, the adoption of professional ethical values, support of professional development, the provision of training on ethical issues, and cooperation with other professionals. It supports the creation of an ethical working environment, in which participation in national nursing associations is supported, technology and social media are used effectively, guidelines for ethical problems experienced in the workplace are established, emergency crisis strategies for pandemic situations are developed, global health problems are discussed, and discrimination among colleagues is prevented.³⁶

The European Nurse Directors Association (ENDA) has also identified the values and principles that guide ethical leadership. Within the framework of these values and principles, ENDA defined the responsibilities of nurse leaders at individual, organizational, and political levels, holding nurse leaders responsible for creating a working environment, in which nurses can practice their professional values.³⁷ A healthy working environment created by nurse managers allows

nurses to more easily fulfill their ethical obligations. The “Standards for a Healthy Nursing Work Environment,”^{38,39} published by the American Association of Critical Care Nurses in 2005 and updated in 2016, offers guidance designed to help nurse managers create a healthy work environment. In addition, a study by Kocaman et al identified 35 standards for healthy working environments that provide safe and quality care to patients in health institutions within the framework of ethical principles.⁴⁰

A review of the literature shows that ethical principles for nurses have been determined in many countries, but these principles do not sufficiently guide nurse leaders in fulfilling their ethical responsibilities.⁶ At the national level, ethical obligations for nurse leaders are different. Therefore, every country should determine ethical principles specific to nurse leaders.⁷ A study conducted by Öztürk Yıldırım et al⁴¹ on nursing services management standards identified two standards related to ethics for nursing services managers: Adherence to the Turkish Nurses Association’s “Ethical Principles and Responsibilities for Nurses” guidelines and the creation and maintenance of an ethical working environment that enables the provision of safe, accessible, egalitarian, and quality health services.

Reflections of Ethics in Nursing Management

Nursing is a profession vital to the health of all nations and is the backbone of the health-care system.^{10,16} The behavior of nurses, the largest employee group in the health-care system, has critical implications for hospitals.⁴² Therefore, creating an ethical climate in organizations results in an ethical working environment for nurses and managers, thereby positively impacting patient outcomes.¹¹ An ethical climate also contributes to the professional development and advancement of the nursing profession.^{10,15}

The formation of an ethical climate in institutions makes nurses more sensitive to clinical issues and encourages them to provide patient-centered service.⁴² Nurse managers also play a strategic role in ensuring patient safety in hospitals. Within the framework of this role, nurse managers should uphold ethical values in all decisions taken for patient safety in organizations, as well as encourage nurses working in the clinic to provide patient care within the framework of these values.⁴³ A study conducted by Lotfi et al¹⁸ with 340 nurses found a significant positive relationship between the ethical leadership of nursing managers and the perception of patient safety culture.

Leaders who adhere to ethical principles and exhibit ethical behaviors increase the quality of patient care and patient satisfaction by motivating their colleagues to provide better service to patients.¹⁰ In a study conducted with 171 nurses working in a surgical ward, Barkhordari-Sharifabad and Mirjalili,²³ found that when nurse managers applied an ethical leadership approach, the error rates of their employees decreased, and the reporting of errors increased. By creating an ethical climate for nursing practices, nurse managers contribute to the achievement of quality patient care outcomes, thus increasing the success of the organization.¹⁷ In a study conducted with 296 professional caregivers and 333 patients, Gillet et al⁴⁴ found a significant positive correlation between perceived quality of care and ethical leadership in oncology services.

Recent studies have confirmed a relationship between ethical leadership behaviors and nurse outcomes; these outcomes include the perceptions of organizational justice, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational support, organizational identification,

organizational trust, motivation, and turnover intention. Some studies reveal a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership behaviors exhibited by nurse managers and employees’ sense of organizational justice,^{18,22} organizational support,¹⁶ and organizational commitment.^{12,16,18}

Studies have concluded that, when nurses work with leaders who provide ethical leadership, nurses’ motivation,^{17,45} job satisfaction,^{10,13-14,16,22} and performance^{10,19} increased, whereas job stress²⁵ decreased. A significant negative relationship has been found between nurses’ perception of ethical work environment and turnover intention.^{16,19,24-25} After conducting interviews with 17 nurses, Esmaelzadeh et al¹⁵ concluded that ethical leaders create an environment of organizational identification, as well as trust and solidarity among nurses.

During the worldwide COVID-19 period, nurse managers acting as ethical leaders have been effective in supporting nursing practices and increasing nurse performance.³¹ To improve patient, employee, and institutional outcomes, leaders who attach importance to ethical values are needed in nursing management.¹⁰ Nurse managers should continue effective management processes by taking into account professional ethical values, thus creating a working environment where employees feel safe.⁷

Suggestions for Creating Ethical Leaders in Nursing Services Management

The process of creating an ethical working environment in organizations can be initiated by including ethical leaders in organizations. Managers should be recruited by placing importance on ethical values in recruitment processes,^{10,15,42} and these managers should act as role models for nurses while carrying out management duties aligned with ethical behaviors.^{10,31,46} In this way, organizations can transfer the culture, knowledge, and values they want to instill in line with specific goals.

The level of nurse managers’ ethical leadership behaviors should be measured using valid and reliable measurement tools.^{10,42,46-49} To measure such ethical behaviors, developed Brown et al⁵⁰ and adapted into Turkish by Tuna et al.⁵⁰ “Managerial Ethical Behaviors Scale.” In addition to developed by Öztürk in 2010 to assess whether nurse managers behave in accordance with managerial ethical principles can be used to measure the ethical behaviors of managers in institutions.

To provide quality health services to society, health professionals should receive a quality education. In nursing education curricula, an increase in student awareness can be achieved by emphasizing management ethics issues, and it is recommended that nursing educators collaborate with nurses working in the clinical field.^{23,35} In today’s world in which current knowledge is growing exponentially, in-service trainings are becoming increasingly important. To support the development of leadership knowledge and skills, regular trainings and workshops should be offered, and an ethical working environment should be provided by ensuring the active participation of nurses in such activities.^{23,42,51}

Ethical standards define and secure nurse managers’ responsibilities toward the institution, staff, and patients. Such standards encourage nurse managers to exhibit ethical behaviors under the guidance of experts in the field.^{4,7,31,49} Adherence to ethical principles should be made visible, with ethical behaviors being rewarded.^{31,49} Unethical

behaviors, on the other hand, should be disciplined so that they are prevented in the future.¹⁰

It is essential that nurse managers not remain silent about ethical dilemmas they encounter. Such dilemmas should be openly discussed and resolved under relevant policies,^{31,46} and problems experienced by nurses at different management levels should be thoroughly investigated.²⁸ As such, the establishment of ethics committees in institutions is critical.¹¹

Nurse managers frequently encounter ethical dilemmas in organizations, and these dilemmas may cause nurse managers to engage in unethical behaviors. Nurse managers can prevent unethical behaviors by systematically approaching the situation (defining the ethical dilemma; clarifying personal, professional, and ethical principles; identifying alternatives; choosing an action; discussing unresolved problems; and generalizing the solution for similar situations).^{24,37,51} In line with these recommendations, health institutions should employ ethical leaders, thereby contributing to the improvement of patient, employee, and institutional outcomes.

Conclusion

The literature shows that the importance of managerial ethics is progressively increasing that managerial ethics in nursing services can be reinforced by ethical leaders, and that ethical leadership contributes to positive outcomes for patients, institutions, employees, and leaders. The international literature contains many studies on this subject, including some recent studies in Türkiye. Further national studies are recommended to determine ethical principles for nurse managers, to monitor the effects of ethical leadership, and to gather more in-depth data on the subject.

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