



# Joy and Meaning in Nurse Manager Practice

## *A Narrative Analysis*

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Nurse managers are an integral part of the healthcare system and have powerful influence at the point of service. The experience of joy and meaning in the work of healthcare contributes to achievement of positive outcomes. This study aimed to learn how nurse managers described joy and meaning in their practice. Results included 5 themes: to mentor and be mentored, to focus on the patient, to create and cultivate environments, to be optimistic, and to be empowered by leaders. The themes are described and illustrated with participant quotes. Specific implications for organizations and leaders are discussed.

Nurse managers are an integral component of the healthcare system, and their performance has been inextricably linked to patient, staff, and healthcare organizational outcomes. The nurse manager role can bring great satisfaction and fulfillment but is fraught with challenges, pressure, and frustration. Nurse managers are experiencing high levels of stress, burnout, work-life imbalance, and heavy workloads, which has negatively impacted intent to stay in their roles.<sup>1</sup> With projections for unprecedented levels of nurse manager vacancies in the future, it is essential that nurse leaders act to create environments where nurse managers will thrive and continue to contribute to positive healthcare environments and outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

Bodenheimer and Willard-Grace<sup>3</sup> implicated burnout and staff dissatisfaction as negative influences on the Triple Aim (improved population health, positive care

experience, and reduced costs). Sikka et al<sup>4</sup> advocated for the addition of a 4th aim to improve the experience of providing care. They emphasized the importance of joy and meaning for all members of the healthcare workforce, including leaders. In 2017, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement provided a framework for Improving Joy in the Workplace, highlighting action steps for organizations.<sup>5</sup> Many of the action steps involve executive and frontline leaders, such as nurse managers, implementing practices to enhance joy for their employees. According to Edward Deming, “management is responsible to create a system in which everybody can thrive, connect to their meaning, and experience joy in their work.”<sup>6</sup> It is essential that in the course of this important work, leaders also benefit from environments that foster meaning and joy in their leadership practice. There is limited research on what joy and meaning in work is from the nurse manager perspective.

There have been multiple qualitative studies conducted to uncover role identity of the nurse manager, from the viewpoint of both the managers and their staff. In these studies, managers address meaning and joy. Solbakken et al<sup>7</sup> led focus-group interviews of first-line nurse managers in Norway, who described the meaning of their work as “safeguarding”<sup>7(p1243)</sup> patients and creating a trusting environment for their staff. An interview study by Hagerman et al<sup>8</sup> produced themes such as “enjoying a meaningful job”<sup>8(p1211)</sup> among nurse managers. Other themes of “it’s not easy but it’s worth it,”<sup>8(p1211)</sup> coupled with the “complex and demanding”<sup>8(p1211)</sup> role, demonstrate the multifaceted perceptions of nurse managers’ work.<sup>8(p1210)</sup> Themes of juxtaposing perceptions, both positive and negative, are recurring in the literature.

Another recurring theme included staff as a source of joy for nurse managers. Raso<sup>9</sup> discussed survey results that showed “hearing compliments about my team”<sup>9(p29)</sup> as a positive indicator for nurse manager wellness. In a phenomenological research

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study, millennial nurse managers discussed staff satisfaction as an indicator of how they have “made an impact”<sup>10(p369)</sup> in their role. Some of the participants linked staff and patients by saying, “If your staff is satisfied, your patients will be satisfied.”<sup>10(p369)</sup> The close connection between manager, staff, and patient satisfaction is an important concept when creating and studying environments that promote meaning and joy.

It is important to note the difference between “meaning” and “satisfaction” in the context of nurse managers. A sense of meaning in your role as a nurse manager is a significance that transcends the daily work of a manager. It goes beyond the superficial contentment that signifies satisfaction. Finding meaning in your work does more than satisfy a nurse manager; it involves passion, inspiration, potential, and fulfillment.

Quantitative research has examined how nurse manager behaviors correlate to satisfaction and intent to leave among their staff nurses. Caring behaviors of nurse managers that have emerged in the literature include “promoting professional growth” and “supporting work-life balance.”<sup>11</sup> These caring behaviors in nursing leadership are positively correlated with job satisfaction and intent to stay among their staff nurses.<sup>12</sup> Thus, nurse managers' attitudes and presence have important implications for staff retention.

Various studies have been conducted to report nurse managers' perspectives of their role in the health-care system. No studies have sought to link meaning and joy in nurse managers to joy in the nursing team and patient outcomes. It is essential to discover the impact of nurse managers' emotions and work meaning on the care delivered in their practice areas. This will aid in the development of interventions directed toward nurse managers to influence patient outcomes.

## The Study

A qualitative descriptive study to explore nurse manager experiences with meaning and joy in their practice was conducted after expedited internal review board approval at 2 study sites. Twelve individuals in nurse manager positions in hospital settings were interviewed by 2 of the authors. Nurse managers in this study were defined as those with 24/7 responsibility for a clinical unit. A snowball and purposive sampling technique was used, and nurse managers from 3 Magnet<sup>®</sup> hospitals, 1 on the east and 2 on the west coast, participated. Nurse managers had 24/7 accountability for a clinical unit. Participants were recruited until thematic saturation occurred.

A confidential demographic form was completed for each participant. Each nurse manager was asked to describe what brought them meaning and joy in

their work. An occasional follow-up question was used, but for the majority, the nurse managers shared their thoughts on meaning and joy in their work without guidance. Interviews were audio taped and stored in a password-protected audio-recording device and transcribed. The population in this sample was highly educated with 2 earned doctorates, 2 with baccalaureate degrees and currently enrolled in master's degree programs, and the remaining 7 with master's degrees. Except for 1, all identified as female, and their ages ranged from 37 to 70 years with a mean calculated at 51 years, which is slightly older than the average age of all nurses at 50 years. Their titles were assistant director,<sup>1</sup> unit director,<sup>5</sup> and nurse manager.<sup>5</sup> All spoke of their role as manager at the unit level.

The authors independently coded the transcribed interviews and then reviewed the coding for consistency and agreement. Sixteen broad topics were identified, which were collapsed into 5 themes: to mentor and be mentored, to focus on the patient, to create and cultivate environments, to be optimistic, and to be empowered by leaders. Each theme is described below, and quotes directly from the participants are provided to illustrate the impact of the theme.

### To Mentor and Be Mentored

Nurse managers shared that mentoring and developing others are a significant source of joy and meaning. They saw it as their primary role to mentor others, whether that be in clinical practice, in promotion and advancement, in return to school, or in conflict resolution. A strong component of mentoring was role modeling by demonstrating the way to address sticky situations with coworkers and with patients. One manager shared, “I think what's been meaningful in my practice is the opportunity to mentor other nurses that are young in their career and to be able to help guide their career.” Another described the experience of “those individuals that you have helped mentor, and then they have achieved something, and they are so thrilled, and they did not think that they were capable of doing something like that, and then they do it... it's very meaningful, and it brings a lot of joy.”

The managers also spoke about the importance of having mentors. They appreciated being mentored, and when it was a solid relationship, the actual experience of being mentored brought them joy. One shared learning from this relationship,

I had a great relationship with [mentor]... She really respected our opinions. She took the time to listen. She was just a fantastic role model in that you never saw her upset. Never said anything negative. You never heard a negative thing come out of her mouth. And she taught you how to look at situations from all

different perspectives. You may sit there and say, "This happened, and I can't believe it!" (She'd say) "Well let's look at it from the other end. How do you think they were feeling at this time?" It taught me a lot.

The managers valued the duality of mentoring... to be a mentor and to be mentored. Each brought them meaning and joy.

### To Focus on the Patient

The managers first and foremost identified themselves as nurses. They believed that a patient focus was what brought them into the profession and brought them meaning. "The majority of us went into nursing because we wanted to care for others; we wanted to make a difference and have an impact." Nurse managers continue to focus on the patient, even though they are no longer the direct caregivers. The managers embrace the belief that if it remains about the patient, then best decisions are made, ultimately having a meaningful impact on the nurses as well as patients. The patient was the fulcrum for meaning and joy. One nurse manager said, "I was able to get them to understand this wasn't about them... It's about taking care of the patient... So I think my strength is sometimes to be able to have them see and understand the big picture on the why we are doing this, and it's not about us." Another manager reflected, "I see a need here. I'm willing to go out on a limb to take care of this need when it comes to patient care." Managers appreciated that in their roles, there is a sense of greater flexibility, and therefore they can do things on different timeframes. This benefits the patient as they can make on-the-spot adjustments without concern that another patient will be disenfranchised by this action of committed time.

### To Create and Cultivate Environments

Nurse managers appreciated and accepted their role in creating environments in which others could thrive. When this was successful, meaning and joy were the outcomes for the managers. A nurse manager said, "It is the manager's responsibility to be there for the staff... they are the managers' clients." So while patients are important, and their outcomes essential to address, the managers also appreciated that their staff must thrive for positive patient outcomes to occur, and the manager's role is to create the environment wherein the staff can thrive and engage as professionals, team members, and caregivers. Participants reflected on their leadership role in creating healthy practice environments.

...that our definition of us is that we provide not only exceptional care, but in a really happy and healthy

work environment where people can talk to each other and have frank conversations without fear of reciprocity or diminishing relationships.

This next quote illustrates the complexity of a nurse manager's role and the coalescing of multiple activities to produce meaning and joy.

She came back to me and said, "This has really empowered me. It has helped me to believe in myself." To me as a leader, that's meaningful. It helps me find meaning in my work. I just really love developing people, helping people grow, creating an environment that people want to work. Recently, my unit was in tier 1 in the Employee Engagement Summit. To me as a leader, I felt like I found meaning in my work because for our staff members to feel that way it really shows that they enjoy their work environment, and that's what I want to continue to create an environment where people truly enjoy being in.

### To Be Optimistic

Nurse managers have a commitment and a responsibility to be the positive force on their units. They embrace the role of being the one who sees the glass half-full and the one who models and encourages the use of optimism to deal with the challenges of working in healthcare. They described a "we have got this!" attitude when approaching problems and challenging situations. Fun and humor were important elements of optimism. One nurse manager placed Disney figures around her office. It served to lighten the mood, served as a distraction when needed, and reinforced that the nurse manager was human too. This facilitated conversation in a dynamic of collaboration rather than hierarchy. No matter how old one is or how experienced, one does not want to feel like they are "called to the principal's office." Nurse managers did everything possible to provide feedback in constructive ways so that growth occurred. One shared the power of positivity as her "#1 strength."

Optimism also carried over to themselves. One nurse manager shared a poignant story of how she learned to perceive feedback with optimism, as a gift for the seeds of growth.

...and I was struggling with some really hard feedback that was given to me. He reached over, and he touched my leg and he says, "Honey, this is a gift." I looked at him and frankly said, "What... are you talking about 'This is a gift'?" He says, "No. I need you to reframe your thought process with this. Anytime somebody has the strength to provide you with feedback, that feedback is a gift, and you can use this gift to produce a better you in the end, or do things in

a different way because right now you're beating yourself up over different things.”

### To Be Empowered by Leaders

The last of the 5 themes related to empowerment. This applied to the managers themselves and to the act of management. The managers believed that joy and meaning were present when they enabled and facilitated others to do their job, as well as when they were empowered to do their own. One described how she grew as she learned to engage and empower her staff,

From my own personal perspective, the way that I had viewed nursing leadership in the beginning was that it was my job to answer all the questions and fix all the problems. Now I have a completely different focus on that so now what I learned, ...and what I continue to learn, ...is the importance of empowering and engaging the people that you're working with to identify what the real problems are.

In addition to empowering others, nurses felt connected to their joy and meaning. A nurse manager described her autonomous relationship with her director, “She gives me a canvas, and she allows me to paint, and so I flourish.”

### Discussion

Nurse managers who participated in this study found meaning in the everyday, in the complex and in the human-to-human connections. They embraced the opportunity to make change, to help others grow, and to make a meaningful difference as a nurse. While patient care was no longer a daily activity for these managers, they appreciated that patient care was the focus of everything they did. It was the ultimate result, and they needed to create environments in which nurses could thrive as they cared for patients.

This study provided rich themes to inform us on the sources of joy and meaning in the work of nurse managers. Autonomy, patient-centeredness, and learning and growth align with results of a similar study by this team with participants that included clinical nurses.<sup>13</sup> The results of this study provide us with explicit examples from the manager perspective. These are refreshing, in that these managers so deeply want to make a difference and have stepped up to the plate. We know that not all nurse managers feel joy and meaning at work and that this role is critical to the

nurses and patients they serve. This study provides us with a view of work as perceived by nurse managers and exemplars of positive experiences.

### Implications for Organizations and Nurse Leaders

We need to remove barriers and provide support for nurse manager joy and meaning to occur and to foster connectedness to their purpose and subsequently improve outcomes. Systemic changes including mentorship, cultures that foster trust, support for autonomy, and formal support structures to allow them to connect with and build their teams are needed. The National Academy of Medicine<sup>14</sup> has published a report with recommendations to improve professional well-being. Although well-being is context dependent, the report validates the themes in this study. Organizational values of respect and compassion including peer support and nurturing are presented as core elements of designing well-being systems as described in the report.<sup>14</sup> Foundationally, nurse managers must have formal development and mentorship. They need to develop confidence in their challenging roles through ongoing learning and camaraderie of peers. We need to listen deeply to their needs and ensure that they have the autonomy to lead at the unit level. Manager span of control must allow for them to connect with their team members as individuals and continue to relate to patient care needs and sense of purpose. Nurse managers are balancing many responsibilities, which are complicated by their sandwiched position between upper management and those providing direct care. Their joy and meaning and well-being are critically important to fuel their ability to make change and support direct care nurses in the context of the business of healthcare in a time of complexity.

Joy and meaning remain elusive for some however this study enabled us to more clearly understand what joy and meaning looks and feels like to nurse managers. They have provided descriptions of what it is that fills them up; what makes them get up and face every day with a lens of opportunity and possibility. These themes are actionable and focusing on them will benefit nurse managers, clinical nurses and patients. In the end, the joy and meaning of the nurse manager is the ability to provide clinical nurses joy and meaning in their work through leadership and connectedness to patient care.

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