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LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN ELDERLY CARE INSTITUTIONS: EMPATHY, LISTENING, EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

Population aging will significantly impact the elderly care system in the European Union. While most discussions on this topic focus on potential technological solutions and the creation of programs intended for older persons, this paper highlights the importance of leadership development in elderly care institutions. The aim of this paper is to advance understanding and give suggestions on how certain leadership capabilities can be developed that could be considered key in the given context: empathy, listening, and empowerment. Empathy is a precondition for deep listening, while both empathy and listening are essential ingredients of empowerment. All three of these leadership capabilities could improve the well-being, engagement and retention of employees in elderly care institutions. They can also create transferable experiences and values, as employees could further integrate them into their work, consequently improving the well-being of older persons. Public policy makers can integrate this leadership development framework into capacity building programs, while management at all levels in both public and private elderly care institutions can use it for learning and development.

Keywords: *leadership development, elderly care, empathy, listening, empowerment*

1. INTRODUCTION

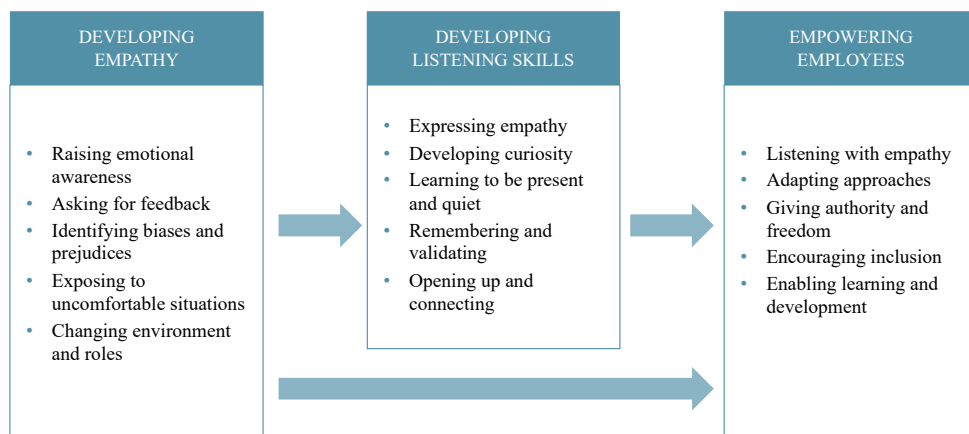
Population ageing will significantly impact the elderly care system in the European Union. According to the projections, the number and share of older persons will rapidly increase in the population of the EU over the next few decades as a result of accelerated ageing trends. The population of older persons (encompassing those aged 65 years or more) in the EU-27 is expected to rise from 20.3% at the start of 2019 to 29.4% by 2050, while the number of very old persons (aged 85 years or more) is projected to more than double in the same period (Eurostat, 2020). Expanding the capacity of existing public and private elderly care institutions and establishing new ones will require effective leadership.

While most discussions on the topic of population ageing focus on potential technological solutions and the creation of programs intended for older persons, this paper highlights the importance of leadership development in elderly care institutions. In addition to emotional pressure, stress, and dissatisfaction with the organizational leadership and working conditions as personal factors at the employee level, prior research indicates that the organizational factors reflecting the problems in elderly care institutions are high employee turnover and limited opportunities for personal and career development (Keisu et al., 2018). Considering that leadership can influence these factors to a certain degree, its development could contribute to the improved well-being, engagement and retention of employees in elderly care institutions and, consequently, improved well-being of older persons.

Leadership development is a multilevel process. It refers to developing reciprocal commitments and relationships necessary for effective leading-following processes within a given social context (DeRue & Myers, 2014). Leadership development is aimed at raising awareness of individual and collective purpose and values, identifying development needs, priorities and intended outcomes, acquiring leadership knowledge and skills through facilitated experiences, integrating all these elements into leadership practice, and continuously reflecting on the development processes. It is therefore more complex and comprehensive than leadership education and leadership training. Leadership development programs within organizations can be designed and implemented by internal learning and development specialists in collaboration with the organizational leadership and/or by engaging external consultants and using digital learning platforms. The interventions through which leadership development occurs may include classroom training, coaching, mentoring, job assignments, team-based learning exercises, case analysis, self-leadership projects, etc. To enhance the effectiveness of individuals, groups and organizations, leadership development frameworks must be meaningful, focused, and adaptable to cultural and organizational contexts.

The aim of this paper is to advance understanding and give suggestions on how certain leadership capabilities can be developed that could be considered key in elderly care institutions: empathy, listening, and empowerment. The term elderly care institutions commonly refers to nursing and retirement homes. However, the proposed leadership development framework (Figure 1) is applicable to management at all levels in health and social care institutions that are providing services to the older population.

Figure 1: Leadership development framework



Source: Author's work

2. EMPATHY

Empathy in leadership is a reflection of humanity. In today's continuously changing, complex, and uncertain environment prone to crises, a leader's capability to express empathy is particularly valued. Empathy is a key emotional intelligence competency that can be developed throughout life. It is the foundation for effective relationship management, along with emotional self-control (Goleman, 2006, 2007). According to Goleman et al. (2017), three aspects of empathy are recognized in the neuroscience and psychology literature: cognitive empathy (the ability to understand another person's perspective and to reflect on the mental state of others); emotional empathy (the ability to feel what another person feels and be emotionally in tune with feelings of others); and empathic concern or compassion (acting on an inclination to relieve the distress of another person).

Prior research indicates that empathy enhances leadership effectiveness through its impact on the level of leader, followers, and organization (Živković, 2022). On the level of the leader, empathy contributes to raising self-awareness

ss which leads to enhanced verbal and non-verbal expression, developing listening and mentoring skills due to the capability to perceive and care about the needs of others, and improving relationships with stakeholders both within and outside the organization. The outcomes of empathy in leadership on the followers' level include improving employee mental and emotional well-being due to the leader's caring attitude and a more favorable work climate, empowering through recognition and development, and providing role models in developing emotional intelligence. Empathy enhances organizational effectiveness by fostering diversity and inclusion, increasing employee engagement and retention, and building a culture of care, responsibility, and innovation.

The following strategies for developing empathy are proposed to be an integral part of leadership development programs:

- *Raising emotional awareness:* To empathize with the emotions of others, it is necessary for leaders to recognize, understand and accept their own emotions. Observing emotions as they arise in the present moment, reflecting on how we felt in the past in certain situations and with certain people, and naming emotions are practices that could improve emotional awareness.
- *Asking for feedback:* How we see ourselves, our behaviors and our reactions is often not how others see us. It is therefore important that leaders ask for feedback regarding their (non)expression of empathy from both their teams and peers to identify development needs.
- *Identifying biases and prejudices:* Feeling and expressing empathy can be selective in the way that it exists only toward people with similar backgrounds. Therefore, it is necessary to identify according to which groups of people with different national, racial, religious, professional, and other backgrounds a leader has prejudices. To abandon or reduce such prejudices, it takes conscious effort and more interaction with diverse groups.
- *Exposing to uncomfortable situations:* It is in human nature to avoid uncomfortable emotions. However, engaging in uncomfortable conversations and tasks, reading uncomfortable books, or watching uncomfortable movies that are meaningful, bring new perspectives and offer insight into various human experiences across cultures can contribute to the development of empathy.
- *Changing environment and roles:* Visits to other places and cultures allow a better understanding of diversity. Openness to engaging in roles other than managerial, such as volunteering, mentoring, and assistance to people in need, expands the leader's capacity to empathize with others.

3. LISTENING

Listening is essential in leadership that inspires positive change. However, leadership development guidelines and programs are mostly emphasizing how leaders should speak and not so how they should listen. As a multidimensional skill, listening involves hearing, perceiving, understanding, assigning meaning, remembering, evaluating, and responding (Flynn et al., 2008). Two types of listening that are considered most relevant to leadership practice are active and deep listening. Active listening implies that the listener remains sensitive to the message's meaning, asks questions to understand the context, responds to emotional reactions during the conversation, and notices both verbal and non-verbal cues (Rogers & Farson, 1987). In active listening, the full attention of the listener is on the speaker. Deep listening focuses on opening up to new possibilities, new perspectives, and new ways of thinking and acting, connecting with others, and deepening understanding of one's self and others (Laryea, 2018). In deep listening, the attention of the listener is both on oneself and the speaker. Such an approach to listening can result in generative conversations and change on multiple levels.

In their review of research on listening in the workplace, Flynn et al. (2008) indicate that managerial listening can improve communication, collaboration, employee morale and retention, learning and productivity in organizations, and result in stronger perceptions of trust, supportiveness, and motivation. Listening becomes more critical to effectiveness as individuals move into senior management positions (Brownell, 1994). Therefore, the development of listening skills is important at both lower and middle management levels, as it contributes to the preparation of individuals for leadership positions and improves effectiveness within the organization.

The proposed strategies for developing listening skills within leadership development programs include:

- *Expressing empathy*: To express empathic concern by listening, it is key to recognize, reflect on and acknowledge the mental and emotional state of others. It is challenging yet beneficial to recall and be aware of how much it would mean to us if someone listened to us.
- *Developing curiosity*: Listening to learn driven by curiosity can diminish the urge to express an opinion and give advice after we listened to others. Curiosity can be developed and expressed by asking thoughtful questions, noticing and interpreting non-verbal cues, and nurturing a sense of awe.
- *Learning to be present and quiet*: Listening with the intention to truly understand and support others requires being present in the moment, a capacity built on self-awareness and self-control. It is crucial not to

interrupt others during the conversation. Instead of commenting or asking questions immediately after the person says something, it is often more supportive to remain quiet and make pause despite the awkward silence since this can create a space for a person to open up more and say what is of substantial importance to them.

- *Remembering and validating*: Repeating or paraphrasing to others what they said during the current conversation, as well as in previous ones, is a way to show that we listened carefully and to make the other feel respected and valued. The validation of what we have heard and seen through non-verbal cues does not imply agreeing with the other but rather acknowledging the situation and emotions of the other.
- *Opening up and connecting*: Being open to being touched by what we hear implies vulnerability and the courage that goes with it. It enhances the leader's capability to connect with others and, consequently, improve relationships, collaboration and effectiveness.

4. EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment of others is one of the key leadership roles. Teams and organizations consisting of empowered individuals can more effectively adapt to continuously changing environments, create solutions to emerging problems, implement new technologies, and deal with increasingly complex demands of multiple stakeholder groups. Empowerment leadership includes managerial practices and/or the provision of technology that can enhance employees' self-leadership and self-efficiency (Liu, 2015). Among various factors at the individual, leader-subordinate, organizational, and cultural levels, the leader's trust in subordinates can be considered the most relevant predictor of empowerment leadership behavior (Hakimi et al., 2010). According to Linuesa-Langreo et al. (2016), empowerment can exist at two levels: psychological empowerment at the individual level defined as intrinsic task motivation that increases employee engagement and commitment; and empowerment climate at the group level intended to decentralize power and authority to make the organization more responsive and effective. Employees are empowered through an enhanced sense of meaningfulness, choice, competence, and impact (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Based on the review of prior research, Liu (2015) indicates that empowerment leadership enhances effectiveness at the individual level through the mediating effect of psychological empowerment and results in improved responsibility-oriented in-role behavior and challenging external role behavior. On the group level, empowerment leadership has a positive influence on team productivity, proactivity, and customer service quality, as well as on job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

The following strategies for the empowerment of employees are proposed to be implemented into leadership development programs:

- *Listening with empathy:* Both expressing empathy and listening contribute to enhanced well-being of employees which could lead to psychological empowerment. By listening to employees and recognizing their mental and emotional state, a leader can more effectively identify their potential and needs for empowerment.
- *Adapting approaches:* Based on identified diverse abilities and needs, leaders should adapt their approaches to the extent possible. Some employees prefer to work in accordance with clear guidelines and focus on competencies development, while others have an inclination toward more flexibility, creativity and impact creation.
- *Giving authority and freedom:* Within certain boundaries and depending on the workplace characteristics, leaders should allow employees to make some decisions on both the individual and team levels. The freedom of choice when and where they will work is increasingly important to employees.
- *Encouraging inclusion:* Leaders should build a culture where employees are invited to share their ideas and opinions, identify problems, and propose solutions. They could be involved in decision-making processes relevant to both their work environment and the organization's development.
- *Enabling learning and development:* Learning and development programs, such as group training and individual mentoring by leaders, should be designed and implemented in a way that individuals and teams find them meaningful to their work.

5. CONCLUSION

The proposed leadership development framework focused on empathy, listening, and empowerment is relevant and applicable in most organizational contexts. However, it is of particular importance in elderly care institutions. The leadership of those institutions must be able to express empathy toward its employees due to the exceptional sensitivity and demandingness of their workplaces. Listening represents fundamental socio-emotional support leaders can provide to employees. Leadership committed to empowering at all levels through recognition, inclusion and development can make elderly care institutions and their employees more resilient and effective. Empathy is a precondition for deep listening, while both empathy and listening are essential ingredients of empowerment. All three of these leadership capabilities could improve the well-being, engagement and retention of employees in elderly

care institutions. Institutions that will be recognized as those that care about their employees could also attract additional talent. Empathy, listening and empowerment by leadership also create transferable experiences and values, as employees could further integrate them into their work, consequently improving the well-being of older persons. Public policy makers can integrate this leadership development framework into capacity building programs, while management at all levels in both public and private elderly care institutions can use it for learning and development.

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RAZVOJ VODSTVA U INSTITUCIJAMA ZA SKRB O STARIJIM OSOBAMA: EMPATIJA, SLUŠANJE, OSNAŽIVANJE

SAŽETAK RADA

Starenje stanovništva značajno će utjecati na sustav skrbi o starijim osobama u Europskoj uniji. Dok se većina rasprava na ovu temu usredotočuje na potencijalna tehnološka rješenja i kreiranje programa namijenjenih starijim osobama, ovaj rad ističe važnost razvoja vodstva u institucijama za skrb o starijim osobama. Cilj ovog rada je unaprijediti razumijevanje i dati prijedloge o tome kako se mogu razviti određene sposobnosti vodstva koje bi se mogle smatrati ključnima u danom kontekstu: empatija, slušanje i osnaživanje. Empatija je preduvjet za duboko slušanje, dok su i empatija i slušanje bitni elementi osnaživanja. Ove sve tri sposobnosti vodstva mogle bi poboljšati dobrobit, angažman i zadržavanje zaposlenika u institucijama za skrb o starijim osobama. Također mogu stvoriti prenosiva iskustva i vrijednosti, jer bi ih zaposlenici mogli dalje integrirati u svoj rad, posljedično poboljšavajući dobrobit starijih osoba. Kreatori javnih politika mogu integrirati ovaj okvir za razvoj vodstva u programe izgradnje kapaciteta, dok ga menadžment na svim razinama u javnim i privatnim institucijama za skrb o starijim osobama može koristiti za učenje i razvoj.

Ključne riječi: razvoj vodstva, skrb o starijim osobama, empatija, slušanje, osnaživanje