

# SENSE MAKING AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER: CAPTURING THE KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM OF NURSING LEADERS



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Experienced nurse leaders possess leadership wisdom that must be passed on in thoughtful, systematic ways to younger leaders. Sense making is an intentional process that has been useful in bringing forward a leader's implicit knowledge and wisdom gained over the years. This article examines leadership wisdom, complexity, and knowledge in the context of today's dynamic environment—and offers a concrete example of how the sense-making methodology can work. (Index words: Sense making; Knowledge complexity; Knowledge transfer; Leadership development; Wisdom leadership) *J Prof Nurs* 31:290–297, 2015. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

AS THE DEMOGRAPHICS of the nursing profession change and seasoned nursing leaders begin to retire, there is a need to capture the leadership wisdom of these experienced nurses so that lessons learned over a professional career might be recorded and communicated to the next generation of leaders. Understanding the different types of learning and the varied sources of knowledge and wisdom is a key component of effective leadership. How we support sense making and systems thinking about the complex challenges nurse leaders face in both clinical and academic settings is one crucial element of the new leadership challenge (Grossman & Valiga, 2013).

## Purpose

The purpose of this article is to examine a methodology for capturing and sharing the wisdom of experienced nursing leaders and, thus, provide lessons for current nursing leaders

to employ in managing complex environments. Connecting Verna Allee's Knowledge Complexity Archetype (Allee, 1997, 2011; Allee & Schwabe, 2011) and Brenda Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (SMM) (Dervin, 2010; Dervin, Foreman-Wernet, & Lauterbach, 2003) provides valuable insights into the concepts of complexity, knowledge management, and leadership (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Appreciating the complexity of knowledge and the role wisdom plays in leadership are important elements in fostering knowledge transfer from expert leaders to novices. Suggestions are offered for applying the principles of sense making in improving the leader's own leadership capacity, while enhancing that of their colleagues and subordinates. Furthermore, leadership capacity is linked to identity, reputation, and legacy management (Pesut, 2015). An exemplar using Sagis' adapted model of sense making is described and used as a method of illustrating how tacit knowledge can be made explicit through eliciting the career wisdom of one nursing leader.

## Knowledge and Wisdom

Jennifer Nagel (2014) observes that knowledge is a link between a person and a fact. Davenport and Prusak (2000) note that knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. Knowledge originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. The authors contrast explicit knowledge as that which we can put into

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word and can be stated, written down, and transmitted. Explicit knowledge is easily captured and stored electronically. In contrast, tacit knowledge is what we do not know that we know. Tacit knowledge includes “know how,” judgment, experience, insights, rules of thumb, and skills that exist in a context.

Wisdom can be conceived as “the capacity to both appreciate the wholeness of life with an expanded, deepened perspective – and to act on that appreciation to serve the long-term common good and to learn life-serving lessons” (Co-intelligence Institute, 2003). Sternberg (2004, p. 287) asserts that wisdom is “...the application of intelligence, creativity and knowledge to the common good by balancing intrapersonal (one’s own), interpersonal (other’s) and extra personal (institutional or other larger) interests over the long and short terms, through the mediation of values, so as to adapt to, shape, and select environments.” Both definitions share common aspects: (a) wisdom is knowledge that has an expanded, broader viewpoint; (b) wisdom requires a length of time to develop; and (c) there is a component of serving the common good. Wisdom is not acquired quickly but is, rather, the accumulation of a variety of experiences, over a “long enough” period of time, in which the individual can discern the nuances and shadings that impact a situation or decision, and act in service to the broader group or community.

### Complex Systems and Knowledge Complexity

The science of complex systems has provided conceptual frameworks and terminology to examine contemporary issues in a very dynamic way and to yield knowledge. Davidson, Ray, and Turkel (2012) suggest that complexity perspectives provide new insights about the value of nursing perspectives for supporting well-being and helps us gain new insights regarding leading and managing. From previously viewing situations in a structured and linear manner toward recognizing the very real conditions of uncertainty and unpredictability, we now have the ability to deal with issues of boundaries, self-organization, emergence, and transformation. Merali and Allen (2011) note that “Over time the focus of systems’ thinking has shifted from structure (reflected in the use of modularization to deal with complexity), to organization or form (accentuated in the cybernetic approaches) to the network dynamics of adaptation and transformation (within the paradigm of complex systems science).”

Along with appreciation for the fluidity and complexity of the systems comes a recognition of the complexity of the knowledge required to operate within these systems. “As intelligent beings, we act, survive and prosper on the basis of knowledge that we deploy as an adaptive response to the diversity of phenomena we encounter and have to adapt to” (Boisot, 2011). Increasingly, we encounter information from multiple, interconnected, competing, and sometimes conflicting sources. The question has been asked: Does the availability of new information and communication technologies add to our knowledge or merely to the complexity of our task to

manage it? Another interesting question: Is complexity inherent in a system or situation, embedded in an individual’s personal ability to function within a system or situation, or some combination of both?

Boisot (2011) suggests that the Royal Society in Britain in 1660 may have led the first efforts to “systematically manage the creation, dissemination and employment of knowledge,” followed by the *Académie des Sciences* in France. Thereafter, other European and then American universities followed suit. At least three views of knowledge management have evolved over time:

- The techno-economic perspective with knowledge as an economic asset, embodied in individuals and/or organizations.
- The ecological perspective where knowledge emerges “through complex networks of social interaction, and then either dissipates or gets internalized to guide the action of individuals or groups” (Boisot, 2011).
- The organizational perspective with knowledge being used to achieve particular goals through thoughtful, coordinated action, or collective sense making (Weick, 1993).

Capturing the knowledge and wisdom of experienced nursing leaders challenges us to embrace the complexity of knowledge and grapple with ways and means to harvest the knowledge, experience, and insights of successful leaders who have developed wisdom over time based on their experiences. Sullivan (2013) asserts that such development supports and nurtures the influence that nurses need to intentionally lead and manage.

### Knowledge Complexity and Nursing Leadership

In *Executive Leadership Lessons for Nurses: Claiming the corner office*, Curran and Fitzpatrick (2013) suggest that nurse leaders must value and understand the implications of a knowledge economy and the value of knowledge work in service of leadership development. Within academic health centers, the mantra most often heard is that the tripartite mission of the institution is to promote education, practice, and research; however, there are derivatives that are every bit as important as nursing education, practice, and research and need to be highlighted and developed. Pesut (2004, p. 24) once observed ...“we create *knowledge through research*. We derive *learning through education*. We provide *service through practice*. We provide *leadership through social responsibility*. We build *community through relationships*. We *transform lives through caring*... We must talk about education, practice, and research as well as knowledge, learning and service in the same breath and within a unified frame of reference with attention to the greater good.” Insights into the complexity of knowledge provide guidance regarding learning, performance, and action.

The person who seems to have best outlined the complexity of knowledge and the corresponding consequences for learning, action, performance, and leadership is Verna Allee (1997, 2011). Allee and Schwabe (2011)

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