




REFLECTION

The organizational culture in times of COVID-19 pandemic: repercussions on specialist nurses and nurse managers


A cultura organizacional em tempos de pandemia pela COVID-19: repercussões nos enfermeiros especialistas e gestores

La cultura organizacional en tiempos de pandemia por COVID-19: repercusiones en enfermeros especialistas y gestores


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ABSTRACT

Objective: to reflect on the organizational culture, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the repercussions on the professional practice of specialist nurses and nurse managers. **Method:** theoretical-reflective study, carried out between October and November 2020, based on a review of the literature and the authors' experience. **Results:** in the face of difficulties, never experienced before, health institutions are dealing with several challenges. Having an established organizational culture is highly relevant, showing the institution's dynamics to society and the common objective of all its health professionals. Specialist nurses and nurse managers play a prominent role with the teams, through leadership and care management strategies, employing reflection on the practice and training of general care nurses. **Conclusion:** specialist nurses and nurse managers in a pandemic context may be elements that promote organizational culture, ensuring the quality of health care.

Descriptors: Organizational Culture. Coronavirus Infections. Nursing. Nurse Specialists. Nurse Administrators.

RESUMO

Objetivo: refletir sobre a cultura organizacional, em contexto de pandemia pela COVID-19, e as repercussões no exercício profissional dos enfermeiros especialistas e enfermeiros gestores. **Método:** estudo teórico-reflexivo, elaborado entre outubro e novembro de 2020, a partir da revisão da literatura e experiência dos autores. **Resultados:** perante uma adversidade, nunca antes vivida, as instituições de saúde são confrontadas com inúmeros desafios. A existência de uma cultura organizacional consistente torna-se fundamental, mostrando a dinâmica da instituição para a sociedade e o objetivo comum de todos os seus profissionais de saúde. Os enfermeiros especialistas e enfermeiros gestores desempenham um papel de destaque junto das equipas, através de estratégias de liderança e de gestão de cuidados, recorrendo à reflexão sobre a prática e à capacitação dos enfermeiros de cuidados gerais. **Conclusão:** os enfermeiros especialistas e gestores em contexto de pandemia poderão ser elementos promotores da cultura organizacional, garantindo a qualidade da assistência em saúde.

Descritores: Cultura organizacional. Infecções por Coronavírus. Enfermagem. Enfermeiras Especialistas. Gestor de Saúde.

RESUMÉN

Objetivo: reflexionar sobre la cultura organizacional, en el contexto de una pandemia por COVID-19, y las repercusiones en la práctica profesional de enfermeros especialistas y gestores. **Método:** estudio teórico-reflexivo, realizado entre octubre y noviembre de 2020, basado en revisión de literatura y experiencia de los autores. **Resultados:** ante esta adversidad, las instituciones de salud enfrentan innumerables desafíos. La existencia de una cultura organizacional coherente se vuelve fundamental, mostrando la dinámica de la institución para la sociedad y el objetivo común de todos sus profesionales de salud. Los enfermeros especialistas y los enfermeros gestores juegan un papel destacado con los equipos, a través de estrategias de liderazgo y gestión del cuidado, a partir de la reflexión sobre práctica y formación de los enfermeros de cuidados generales. **Conclusión:** enfermeros especializados y gestores en un contexto pandémico pueden ser elementos promotores de la cultura organizacional, asegurando la calidad de la atención en salud.

Descriptor: Cultura Organizacional. Infecciones por Coronavírus. Enfermería. Enfermeras Especialistas. Gestor de Salud.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational culture has been object of study and reflection, since the 1980s, as an important strategic component within institutions. It works as the social or regulatory environment that holds an organization together, expressing the social values and beliefs shared by its elements. It is characterized as a system of shared values and beliefs that permeate people, organizational structures and organization systems.⁽¹⁾

The organizational culture underpins formal aspects, namely the policies, methods, procedures, objectives, organizational structure, and the technology adopted. In contrast, there are other components, defined as informal, such as feelings, attitudes, values, and group rules are an example, which they accept as a hidden dimension of this culture, and are more difficult to understand and interpret.⁽²⁾

This organizational culture is closely related to the work environment and can generate positive results for clients, professionals, and institutions. It is worth mentioning that in the work environment, the concern about organizational culture supports the achievement of institutional objectives. It is evident that, the promotion of positive work environments facilitates the involvement of people in carrying out activities and an organizational climate capable of enabling their satisfaction. Effectively, the organizational climate, at work, reflects the way people interact with each other and the way they respond to work challenges.⁽²⁾

In this sense, in the health field, a favorable organizational culture and organizational climate may be observed in customer satisfaction, decreased hospital stay, hospital mortality and infection rates associated with health care.⁽³⁾

Currently, a well disseminated organizational culture among the various members of the institutions, namely hospitals, has assumed a prominent role in the face of the Coronavirus Disease pandemic (COVID-19). For the national health system, in general, and for health institutions, it has been a challenge, given the number of people infected and the need for resources to deal with the disease⁽⁴⁾, whether material or humans.

It is worth saying that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the beginning of a decade, changing the normal course of a year, which for Nursing, was a significant milestone in its history. During the "International Year of Nursing", the role of nurses in fighting this pandemic was underpinned, in assisting clients and in the management of institutions. The SARS-CoV-2 infection enforced health institutions the determine safe practices and organized activities, to reduce the incidence of this disease⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾ and in line with the recommended organizational culture.

Within each health organization, the fight against COVID-19 requires professional diversity, that goes from health professionals working to support services to the provision of care⁽⁷⁾, so cultural aspects and the organizational climate are key, so the implemented interventions succeed.

METHOD

Theoretical-reflective study, carried out between October and November 2020, based on the authors' experience, and using bibliographic review, focused on providing subsidies for a better understanding of the subject under analysis.

Regarding organizational culture, the study was based on the Chiavenato framework⁽²⁾, whose expertise influences the definition and application of modern and innovative administrative concepts in successful organizations.

As to specialist nurses and nurse managers, the authors were guided by the Regulation of the Specialist Nurse Competency⁽⁸⁾ and the Regulation of the Nurse Manager Competency⁽⁹⁾, recommended by the Portuguese Order of Nurses, where respectively, the scientific, technical and human competences are established to provide specialized nursing care in all contexts of health care and the competencies that guarantee the quality of nurses' professional practice. Their specific knowledge was crucial in coping with this disease, through the assessment of each situation and the conception of specialized nursing care. On the other hand, their specialized skills allowed the management of care and the development of professional learning within each team.⁽⁸⁾

As for the aspects related to the COVID-19 pandemic, we chose to list only those that allow us to reflect on the repercussions of the organizational culture on the performance of specialist nurses and nurse managers and not an in-depth approach to the disease caused by the new coronavirus, neither the state of the pandemic, since it is not the defined objective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To allow reflection and facilitate the reader's understanding, we divided this section of the paper into three topics, which emerged from the literature review carried out (Figure 1):

Organizational culture and the COVID-19 pandemic

Each organization involves cultural, symbolic and imaginary systems with values and rules that guide the behavior of its members, becoming the result of the reality of the institution and the cultural dynamics with the society in which the institution is inserted.⁽¹⁰⁾

Trusting that the mission and vision of health institutions are controlled by quality health care, the assurance of customer-centered care is achieved by

professionals' involvement⁽¹¹⁾, as well as by the feeling of belonging among all.



Figure 1 - Findings from the literature review. PT, 2020.

Hospital institutions, considered a reference in the provision of health care, were decisive during the COVID-19 pandemic, since the coping ability they evidenced resulted from an earlier path directed towards the treatment of more complex diseases.⁽¹²⁾

Given this unique context, of deep changes in society and the economy, there was a need for changes in the organization and functioning of the national health system.⁽¹³⁻¹⁴⁾

It is evident that, health care institutions had to reorganize in a way never seen before, to attend effectively to the current citizens' health care needs.⁽¹³⁾

In this context, a well-established organizational culture has become highly relevant for the successful implementation of actions, favoring the behavior, communication, and decision-making of professionals, leading to the efficiency of the organization.

This aspect contributes to establishing an organization's identity and is believed to be its foundation, enabling the achievement of the defined institutional objectives, with all the professionals involved, also recognizing the particular culture of the diverse elements.⁽¹⁵⁾ Each organization have their own culture, which is manifested through the behavior patterns adopted by professionals.⁽¹⁶⁾

Given the significance of COVID-19, its spread and worldwide prevalence, health institutions are making efforts to assist clients infected by SARS-CoV-2, specifically in personnel sizing, buying equipment, in figuring out different operating plans in a contingency situation, according to the advancement of knowledge and the various manifestations of the disease.^(6,12) Nevertheless, the chosen strategies are subsequently acknowledged by the entire hospital community, to promote high-quality care.⁽¹²⁾

It is important to mention that several strategies were reinforced and conceptualized, to guarantee and preserve the organizational culture, for example the creation of working groups; teams for the

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management of hospital admissions; the switching of surgical wards into wards for the care of patients infected with SARS-CoV-2, as well intermediate care units to intensive care units; reorganization of urgent and non-urgent surgical activities; restructuring of medical consultations, defining in-person and teleconsultations. There were also changes concerning logistical conditions and the redistribution of human resources. Thus, the mobilization of nurses, many of them volunteers, for services adapted to care for SARS-CoV-2 patients^(6,12,17), expressed the professionals' feeling of belonging to an institution that enthusiastically sought to respond to emerging needs.

The organizational climate and the COVID-19 pandemic

The great changes in the functioning of the health system, specifically in health organizations, because of the pandemic context, have become challenging for the dynamics of the institutions. Further to the organizational culture, these changes also have an impact on the organizational climate, which is understood to be an important component in the organizations' structuring.⁽¹⁸⁾ Looking at an institution's organizational climate allows understanding the perception of professionals, relatively leadership, motivation, working conditions, that is, their environment and work context. In fact, it is reflected in the motivation of the team, in their degree of satisfaction and in the quality of their work.⁽¹⁹⁾

In this regard, a positive organizational climate provides an environment with high motivational factors, improves interpersonal relationships, increases the professional's satisfaction and guarantees the quality of the organization's assistance.⁽²⁰⁾

In this sense, the pandemic context that we are experiencing is characterized by a set of requirements for professionals and, therefore, for institutions, through the promotion of adequate working and safety conditions, both for the professional and for the assistance to patients⁽²¹⁾, highlighting the aspects inherent to the organizational climate.

Effectively, in this pandemic period when health professionals were required to do their best, reinventing and relearning, in the face of challenges⁽⁷⁾, the existence of this positive organizational climate is crucial for care centered on clients and suitable to their individual needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic: repercussions on the organizational culture and professional practice of specialist nurses and nurse managers

It is known that the role of health professionals is highly important in providing health care to patients, especially when the context is a pandemic. In fact, teamwork is only effective when all elements are considered essential.⁽²²⁾ Nurses have, in a pandemic context, the opportunity to show the particularity and importance of their practices, as well as

exposing the working conditions in different contexts of care.⁽⁵⁾

The role of all nurses, in particular specialist nurses, has been vital in this time of the pandemic. Holders of specialized training, with a comprehensive view, these professionals have become fundamental links in communication, organization and care management.⁽²²⁾

In this sense, intrinsic to the common competencies of specialized professional practice, in addition to professional, ethical and legal responsibility, as well as the constant improvement of quality, the specialist nurse supports the management of care and the development of professional learning.⁽⁸⁾

Thus, considering the restructuring of clinical services, the hiring of new professionals, such as nurses, and the constant updates regarding the care to be implemented for patients infected with SARS-CoV-2, resulted in a set of influencing and determining aspects for assistance in quality health.

In this scenario, the compliance of the professional competence of the specialist nurse, related to the care management, has allowed the optimization of the nurses' responses, in the face of the clients' health problems, in the same way as the articulation with the various elements of the health team.⁽⁸⁾

In addition, the training/qualification of nurses, in a sense of safety, is essential, allowing the team to be trained in the care of the client infected with SARS-CoV-2.⁽²³⁻²⁴⁾ This nursing role, inherent to the profile of competencies of the Specialist Nurse, allows the transfer of knowledge, related to the handling of personal protective equipment and the care related to the patient with suspected or confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Further, it should be observed that the success of interventions in the fight against COVID-19, implies, with the teams, the constant presence of nurse managers who guarantee safe practices, as well as management with a focus on people.^(6,9) For this purpose, we understand that leadership is a central and outstanding aspect in facing the pandemic, since it is a process of guiding people's behavior towards achieving the defined objectives, which may consist of leading, motivating, guiding or aggregating people and ideas.⁽²⁵⁾

In this sense, given the pandemic scenario, nurse managers were challenged with leading health organizations, to provide quality health care and with effective benefits for clients. The characteristics inherent to this context highlighted an essential rule of leadership, which states that the results of teams and organizations come not only from the contributions of leaders, but also from those they lead.⁽²⁶⁾

Leading in times of COVID-19 implies transformational leadership, which contributes to increasing motivation and job satisfaction for professionals, promoting communication and active listening, leading to organizational commitment.⁽²⁷⁾ This approach guarantees quality care, namely nursing care, in the field of management, education, as well as assistance⁽²⁸⁾, so this leadership style

should be privileged by all managers in the health area, namely nurse managers.

As to limitations, we understand that, despite the number of increasing studies on the current pandemic context, this fact was impairing, since the literature fails to report this theme of organizational culture related to the professional performance of nurses, namely of specialists and managers. In this matter, there was a need to bring together two areas of knowledge, to answer to the outlined objective.

The study contributed to evidence that a well-established organizational culture expresses itself in the performance of specialist nurses and nurse managers, to deal with the changes imposed by COVID-19, always fulfilling the mission and perspective of the hospital to which they belong, fostering in all professionals a feeling of belonging and safety and quality health care.

CONCLUSION

The uniqueness of each institution allows it to have its own unique culture, also encompassing and respecting the professional's individual culture. It allows to perceive and understand the functioning of the organization itself and should be a resource for managers that contributes to achieving the objectives outlined.

A well-established organizational culture with positive characteristics promotes performance and an organizational climate capable of being the driving force for professional satisfaction and the achievement of the best results for the patient and the institution. Especially when it comes to a pandemic scenario, an organizational culture aimed at high levels of excellence and competence, allows for an adequate conception and provision of health care to patients, guaranteeing them the best assistance and obtaining health improvements, as well as reinsertion after experiencing this health/disease transition.

Imbued by the effects of an organizational culture, which to grants institutions before society, specialist nurses and nurse managers in the face of this unique context have played a prominent role in on-site training and the monitoring of their peers, when providing health care. On the other hand, the partnership work with the nurse manager, in the sense of creating and guaranteeing adequate working conditions and compliance with safe practices has greatly shaped the success of the actions developed daily in the different contexts of clinical practice.

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