

Professional Standards and Skills

Learning to lead: A pilot study on dietitians' reflections on critical experiences that required leadership

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Introduction: New competency areas create opportunities to explore how current curricula may meet requirements and identify learning gaps that must be addressed through curricular redesign or development. It is anticipated that there will be new performance indicators related to leadership for dietitians in Canada; however, few studies have explored experiences of dietitians in leadership.

Objective: To determine what experiences, both positive and negative, dietitians experience early in their careers that require leadership skills.

Methods: The participants (n=17) were all dietitians recruited through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included dietitians who demonstrated leadership or worked in a leadership capacity and affiliated with a university nutrition program. Semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher, each < 30 minutes, were based on a Critical Incident Technique interview guide. The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and thematic analysis was conducted by two researchers to inductively elucidate code and generate themes.

Results: Themes were compared to the LEADS Leadership Framework. Situations where dietitians used their leadership skills early in their careers were in a managerial capacity or as part of an interprofessional team. Situations were coded as positive (desirable) or negative (undesirable) experiences towards leadership skill development. Positive experiences were related to advocating for oneself or others or experiencing personal/professional growth. Negative experiences were related to communication challenges among interprofessional team members, gender dynamics, and lack of recognition of the dietetics profession. All participants thought leadership skills can be taught in undergraduate curriculum.

Conclusion: Developing leadership skills essential for entry-level dietitians requires an introduction to key concepts through academic and internship experiences. To improve our understanding of how dietitians function as part of a health system, it becomes essential to understand their workforce experiences.

Significance to the Field of Dietetics: To increase the ability of entry-level dietitians to use leadership skills in workforce situations they might encounter.