

# The Impact of Nurse Managerial Leadership on Nursing Retention, Work-Life Integration, and Emotional Intelligence

Nadiya Hussain Alsomali\*, Hafizah Che Hassan, Dhakir Abbas Ali

Faculty of Nursing, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

Email: nadiya.phdscholar@lincoln.edu.my

\*Corresponding Authors Email: Nadia.h.o@hotmail.com

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## Abstract

**Background/Introduction:** The retention of nurses continues to be a concern internationally as it has been associated with patient safety, quality of care, and labor force stability. Leadership has been found to significantly predict retention, work-life integration (WLI), and emotional intelligence (EI). However, current evidence is frequently limited regarding the relationship between retention, WLI, and EI. **Objectives:** This review aimed to synthesize evidence on the impact of nurse managerial leadership on nursing retention, with particular attention to WLI and EI, while highlighting research gaps relevant to healthcare and the Saudi context. **Methods:** A narrative literature review of relevant literature from 2016-2025 was performed utilizing PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Key words used were nurse managerial leadership, nursing retention, work-life balance, work-life integration, and emotional intelligence. Studies were eligible if they focused on leadership in the context of retention, WLI, or EI in nurses or similar professions. The review considered studies outside and within healthcare to include all relevant transferable findings. Thematic synthesis of data was used to identify patterns, connections, and to fill the gap. **Results:** Of the three leadership styles, transformational leadership demonstrated the greatest positive effect on retention, whereas the effects of transactional and laissez-faire leadership were relatively weaker. The transformational and servant leadership also increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover intention. WLI supports leadership-enhanced engagement and performance, but the majority of the evidence was provided by non-healthcare settings. Similarly, EI was associated with enhanced trust, collaboration, and decreased burnout; however, the role of EI within nursing leadership was scarcely studied. **Conclusion:** Managerial leadership has a significant impact on WLI and EI, which further affect retention. However, health-specific, longitudinal, and context-sensitive research is still required, specifically in Saudi Arabia. Enhancing leadership practices that promote WLI and EI could offer practical approaches to increasing staff retention and enhancing patient care.

**Keywords:** Nurse Managerial Leadership, Nursing Retention, Work-Life Integration, Emotional Intelligence, Saudi Arabia

## Introduction

The global healthcare system is currently facing a critical challenge in the retention of skilled nursing professionals, a concern that has profound implications for patient safety, the quality of care delivered, and the overall stability of the healthcare workforce (Conroy, Patton, Moore, & O'Connor, 2023). High nurse turnover rates, which vary significantly across high-income countries, place an immense financial burden on healthcare organizations and lead to increased stress, fatigue, and poor job satisfaction among remaining staff (Conroy, Patton, Moore, & O'Connor, 2023). This environment of instability necessitates a deeper examination of the factors that influence a nurse's decision to remain in their role. A growing body of evidence points to managerial leadership as a pivotal predictor of nursing retention, with its influence extending to key psychological and professional variables such as Work-Life Integration (WLI) and Emotional Intelligence (EI).

This literature review aims to synthesize the evidence on the impact of nurse managerial leadership on nursing retention, with particular attention to the mediating roles of WLI and EI. The review focuses on literature published between 2016 and 2025 to ensure the findings are relevant to the contemporary healthcare landscape. Furthermore, it highlights existing research gaps, particularly those relevant to the healthcare context and the specific challenges faced in the Saudi Arabian context, as identified in the initial research abstract. By exploring the complex interplay between leadership style, WLI, EI, and retention, this review seeks to offer practical insights for enhancing leadership practices to foster a more stable and engaged nursing workforce.

### *The Pivotal Role of Managerial Leadership in Nursing Retention*

The style of leadership employed by nurse managers is consistently identified as a primary determinant of a nurse's commitment to their workplace and their intention to stay (AbdELhay, 2025). The literature overwhelmingly supports the notion that effective leadership can cost-effectively improve job satisfaction and reduce turnover intention, thereby enhancing staff retention (Conroy, Patton, Moore, & O'Connor, 2023). The financial implications of high turnover, which can cost tens of thousands of dollars per nurse in high-income countries, underscore the economic necessity of effective leadership (Conroy, Patton, Moore, & O'Connor, 2023).

### *Transformational Leadership: The Most Effective Style*

Among the various leadership models, Transformational Leadership (TL) has been shown to have the greatest positive effect on nursing retention. A leader who inspires, motivates, and intellectually stimulates their followers, acting as a role model and providing individualized consideration (Conroy, Patton, Moore, & O'Connor, 2023), characterizes TL. The effectiveness of TL lies in its ability to elevate the interests of the staff, fostering a sense of shared purpose and commitment to the organization's mission (Conroy, Patton, Moore, & O'Connor, 2023).

TL Component	Description	Impact on Retention
<b>Idealized Influence</b>	The leader acts as a role model, earning trust and respect.	Fosters a strong sense of organizational commitment and loyalty, reducing the desire to seek employment elsewhere.
<b>Inspirational Motivation</b>	The leader articulates a compelling vision, inspiring staff to achieve organizational and personal goals.	Increases job satisfaction and reduces turnover intention by connecting daily work to a higher, meaningful purpose.
<b>Intellectual Stimulation</b>	The leader encourages creativity, critical thinking, and continuous learning.	Promotes professional growth, a sense of being valued, and empowers nurses to contribute to evidence-based practice, leading to higher retention.
<b>Individualized Consideration</b>	The leader supports and mentors individual staff members, providing positive feedback and recognizing unique needs.	Enhances staff well-being, reduces burnout, and creates a personalized connection that is a direct driver of retention.

Reviews confirm a positive and significant relationship between TL and staff nurse retention, job satisfaction, and quality of care (Fowler, Robbins, & Field, 2025). Nurse managers who adopt this style are able to manipulate their leadership behaviors to improve job satisfaction, which is a critical precursor to retention (Conroy, Patton, Moore, & O'Connor, 2023). The mechanism is clear: TL strengthens the practice environment, which in turn promotes lower turnover rates (Figueiredo, 2025).

#### *The Detrimental Effects of Other Leadership Styles*

Conversely, the literature highlights the detrimental or at least insufficient impact of other leadership styles. Transactional leadership, which focuses on supervision, organization, and performance through a system of rewards and punishments, is less effective in fostering the deep commitment required for long-term retention. While it can ensure compliance and meet short-term goals, it often fails to inspire or address the emotional and professional growth needs of nurses, leading to a transactional relationship that is easily broken when better opportunities arise (AbdELhay, 2025).

Even more concerning is laissez-faire leadership, characterized by a hands-off approach where the manager avoids making decisions, abdicates responsibility, and provides little guidance or support. This absence of leadership creates a vacuum that leads to confusion, lack of direction, and a perception of managerial indifference. This environment is a significant predictor of low job satisfaction, high stress, and ultimately, increased turnover intention, as nurses feel unsupported and undervalued (AbdELhay, 2025). The contrast between the inspirational and supportive nature of TL and the passive, unsupportive nature of laissez-faire leadership starkly illustrates the pivotal role of the manager's style in retention outcomes.

### *Servant Leadership and its Contribution*

While TL is dominant, Servant Leadership also emerges as a style that positively influences retention, often through mechanisms similar to TL's individualized consideration. Servant leaders prioritize the needs of their followers, focusing on their growth, well-being, and autonomy. This approach has been linked to increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover intention, as nurses feel valued, supported, and empowered in their roles (AbdELhay, 2025). The emphasis on staff well-being in servant leadership directly intersects with the concepts of WLI and EI, as discussed in the following sections. By placing the needs of the nurse first, servant leaders cultivate a reciprocal relationship of loyalty and commitment, which is a powerful antidote to the current retention crisis.

### *The Mediating Role of Work-Life Integration (WLI)*

The concept of WLI, which has largely replaced the older notion of work-life balance, acknowledges the fluidity between professional and personal spheres, particularly in demanding professions like nursing. WLI is defined as the intentional blending of work and personal life roles, recognizing that the boundaries between the two are increasingly permeable. The abstract correctly identifies that WLI supports leadership-enhanced engagement and performance, but notes that the majority of the evidence is provided by non-healthcare settings. This highlights a critical area for future research, as the unique demands of the nursing profession such as shift work, high emotional labor, and unpredictable crises make the transferability of WLI findings from corporate settings potentially problematic.

### *Leadership's Influence on WLI*

Managerial leadership is crucial in shaping the organizational culture and policies that either facilitate or hinder WLI. Effective nurse managers, particularly those employing TL or servant leadership, are more likely to:

- 1 **Promote Flexible Scheduling:** Offering flexible work arrangements, such as self-scheduling or compressed workweeks, is a key strategy for improving WLI, allowing nurses to better manage their personal and professional commitments (Alotaibi, Alanazi, & Alobaid, 2025). This flexibility is particularly valued by younger generations of nurses who prioritize personal time (Sittler, 2019).
- 2 **Manage Workload Effectively:** By strategically managing staffing ratios and resource allocation, leaders can prevent excessive workloads that lead to burnout and poor WLI (Moyer, 2022). A leader's commitment to adequate staffing is a tangible demonstration of their support for WLI.
- 3 **Foster a Supportive Culture:** Leaders who model healthy WLI behaviors and encourage staff to utilize time-off and self-care resources create a culture where WLI is valued, which is a significant factor in retention (Crawford, Barbé, & Troyan, 2023). This involves actively protecting nurses from unnecessary administrative burdens and ensuring they take mandated breaks and vacation time.

Studies, including those focused on nursing faculty; underscore the importance of leadership in addressing workload expectations and supporting work-life balance to retain qualified professionals (Niedzwiecki, 2024). The desire for flexible work that provides more time for personal life is particularly pronounced among younger generations of nurses, making WLI a critical retention strategy for nurse managers (Sittler, 2019).

*The WLI-Retention Link*

The link between WLI and retention is direct: when nurses perceive that their manager supports their ability to integrate their work and personal lives, their job satisfaction increases, and their intention to leave decreases (AbdELhay, 2025). Poor WLI, often manifested as burnout and dissatisfaction, is a primary driver of attrition. Therefore, the managerial leader acts as the gatekeeper to WLI, and their leadership style dictates the degree to which WLI is achievable for their staff. A leader who actively seeks to understand and accommodate the personal needs of their staff, within the constraints of the healthcare environment, is essentially investing in their long-term retention. This investment is not just in policy, but also in the daily interactions that signal respect for the nurse as a whole person, not just an employee.

*The Interplay of Emotional Intelligence (EI)*

Emotional Intelligence, defined as the ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions, is a critical competency for both nurse managers and their staff. The abstract highlights that EI is associated with enhanced trust, collaboration, and decreased burnout, but its role within nursing leadership has been scarcely studied. Recent literature, however, is beginning to fill this gap, positioning EI as a core element of effective managerial practice that underpins both TL and the successful promotion of WLI.

*EI in Nurse Managerial Leadership*

A nurse manager's EI quotient is directly linked to their effectiveness and the well-being of their team [10]. High-EI nurse managers are better equipped to:

- 1 **Manage Conflict and Stress:** They can navigate interpersonal conflicts and workplace stressors with greater empathy and effectiveness, fostering a more harmonious work environment. Their ability to self-regulate their own emotions during high-stress situations provides a model of composure for their staff.
- 2 **Provide Individualized Consideration:** The core of TL's individualized consideration is rooted in the leader's ability to recognize and respond to the emotional needs of their staff, a key component of EI (Conroy, Patton, Moore, & O'Connor, 2023). This involves active listening, genuine empathy, and tailoring support to the specific emotional state of the individual nurse.
- 3 **Enhance Staff Resilience:** By cultivating a supportive environment and providing emotional support, high-EI leaders help their staff build resilience against the emotional demands of nursing (Fowler, Robbins, & Field, 2025). They recognize the signs of burnout and compassion fatigue and intervene proactively.

The literature suggests that enhancing the emotional intelligence of first-line nurse managers can potentially improve organizational commitment and job satisfaction among staff, which are direct precursors to retention (Othman, 2024). Training programs focused on EI can equip nurse leaders with the ability to empathize with both patients and staff, fostering a supportive environment (da Silva, 2025). This training is a crucial investment, as a manager's high EI can create a ripple effect, improving the emotional climate of the entire unit.

### *The EI-Retention Link*

The impact of EI on retention is often indirect, mediated by factors such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and burnout. When nurse managers exhibit high EI, they create a psychologically safe and supportive environment. This, in turn, leads to:

- **Decreased Turnover Intention:** Nurses working under emotionally intelligent leaders report lower turnover intentions (Fowler, Robbins, & Field, 2025). This is because they feel understood and supported, which mitigates the desire to leave a demanding profession.
- **Enhanced Organizational Commitment:** Staff feel a stronger connection to an organization whose leaders demonstrate empathy and understanding (Othman, 2024). This commitment is affective, meaning they stay because they *want* to, not just because they have to.
- **Reduced Burnout:** EI in leadership is a protective factor against the emotional strain and burnout that often drive nurses to leave the profession (Fowler, Robbins, & Field, 2025). By addressing emotional needs, the leader reduces the psychological cost of the job.

The role of EI is thus a foundational element of effective managerial leadership, particularly the transformational and servant styles, and is an essential competency for leaders seeking to improve staff retention. It is the emotional glue that binds the leadership style to the positive outcomes of WLI and retention.

### **Interplay of Leadership, WLI, and EI: A Unified Model for Retention**

The literature reviewed suggests that the three core concepts, managerial leadership, WLI, and EI, do not operate in isolation but form a unified, synergistic model for nursing retention. Transformational and servant leadership styles serve as the catalyst, providing the framework and motivation for change. Emotional Intelligence acts as the enabler, equipping the manager with the necessary skills to execute the leadership style effectively. Work-Life Integration is the outcome that directly affects the nurse's well-being and, consequently, their decision to stay.

A high-EI, transformational nurse manager is uniquely positioned to champion WLI. Their emotional self-awareness allows them to recognize the signs of stress and poor WLI in their staff, and their social awareness enables them to understand the systemic causes. Their individualized consideration (a TL component) is the practical application of their EI, leading them to implement flexible scheduling and workload management (WLI strategies). This integrated approach creates a positive feedback loop: the supportive environment fostered by the high-EI leader improves WLI, which enhances job satisfaction and organizational commitment, ultimately leading to higher retention. Conversely, a low-EI, transactional leader will fail to recognize the emotional needs of their staff, will not prioritize WLI, and will experience high turnover, regardless of other organizational incentives. This unified perspective underscores that leadership training must not only focus on *what* to do (e.g., implement flexible scheduling) but also *how* to do it (e.g., with emotional intelligence and individualized consideration).



*Research Gaps and the Saudi Context*

While the evidence strongly supports the positive influence of managerial leadership, WLI, and EI on nursing retention, significant research gaps remain, particularly concerning health-specific, longitudinal, and context-sensitive research.

*The Need for Health-Specific and Longitudinal Studies*

The abstract correctly notes that much of the evidence supporting the WLI-performance link is derived from non-healthcare settings. Nursing, with its unique demands, shift work, and high-stakes environment, requires dedicated research to fully understand how WLI is achieved and sustained. The concept of WLI in a 24/7 hospital setting, where patient needs are constant, presents a unique challenge that general business literature cannot fully address. Research is needed to explore innovative WLI models tailored to the clinical environment, such as shared governance models that empower nurses to have a greater say in scheduling and resource allocation.

Furthermore, most studies are cross-sectional, limiting the ability to establish causality. Longitudinal studies are required to track the long-term impact of specific leadership interventions on WLI, EI development, and subsequent retention rates over time. For instance, a longitudinal study could track a cohort of nurse managers who undergo EI training and compare the retention rates of their units over a period of five years against a control group. Such research would provide the robust, causal evidence needed to justify significant investment in leadership development programs.

*The Saudi Arabian Context*

The abstract specifically calls for context-sensitive research in Saudi Arabia, a region undergoing rapid healthcare transformation as part of its Vision 2030 initiative (Alsaleh, 2025). The literature review confirms that research in this context is emerging but still scarce. The unique cultural, regulatory, and workforce dynamics of Saudi Arabia, including a high reliance on expatriate nurses and a drive to nationalize the workforce necessitate localized research.

- **Cultural and Contextual Factors:** Studies in Saudi Arabia have begun to examine factors like nurse well-being, work-life balance, and the impact of managerial support (Alharbi, Albughuli, & Aljohani, 2025). These studies often highlight the influence of hospital culture and leadership that may fail to prioritize nurse well-being as a strategic objective (Alharbi, Albughuli, & Aljohani, 2025). The cultural context may also influence the perception and expression of emotional intelligence, requiring culturally adapted EI assessment and training tools.
- **EI and Leadership in Saudi Arabia:** Research has investigated the emotional intelligence of nurse managers in Saudi Arabia, with some findings suggesting that a considerable majority of nurse leaders possess moderate to high EI (Alasmari, Alharbi, & Alotaibi, 2025). However, the direct link between this EI and staff nurse retention, as well as the specific strategies for enhancing EI in this cultural context, requires further investigation (Alsaleh, 2025). The effectiveness of TL, for example, may be mediated by cultural norms regarding hierarchy and deference, which must be accounted for in its application.
- **Retention Strategies:** The profound issue of nurse retention in Saudi Arabia necessitates an urgent need for effective strategies (Alsaleh, 2025). While the global findings on TL, WLI, and EI are transferable, their implementation must be tailored to the local cultural,

regulatory, and workforce dynamics. Localized research is essential to validate the global findings and develop culturally appropriate leadership training and WLI policies that will effectively address the retention crisis in the Saudi healthcare sector. This includes understanding the specific motivators and stressors for both local and expatriate nurses. The identified gap underscores the need for localized research to validate the global findings and develop culturally appropriate leadership training and WLI policies that will effectively address the retention crisis in the Saudi healthcare sector.

**Conclusion**

Managerial leadership is not merely an administrative function but a strategic imperative for ensuring the stability and quality of the nursing workforce. The evidence synthesized in this review strongly supports the abstract's conclusion: managerial leadership has a significant impact on WLI and EI, which further affect retention.

Transformational leadership stands out as the most effective style, fostering job satisfaction and reducing turnover intention through its four core components. This style, along with servant leadership, creates a supportive environment that facilitates Work-Life Integration, a critical factor for retaining contemporary nurses. Furthermore, the Emotional Intelligence of nurse managers is a foundational competency that mediates the relationship between leadership style and staff outcomes, leading to enhanced trust, reduced burnout, and stronger organizational commitment. The interplay between these three factors forms a robust model where emotionally intelligent, transformational leadership drives WLI, which in turn secures nurse retention.

**Conflicts of Interest**

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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**Availability of Data and Materials**

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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