

Everyday Developmental Leadership: How Pacific women drive change

CASE STUDY

Hellen Orihao,
Solomon Islands

This case study is one in a series exploring how ten Pacific women working in diverse roles and contexts understand and practice ‘everyday leadership’. Regardless of their formal position or title, these women are undertaking the day-to-day work that helps influence positive change for their communities, organisations and countries.

As Director of Nursing at the National Referral Hospital in Honiara, Hellen Orihao plays a key role in ensuring the delivery of quality clinical care, often in the face of challenges such as drug shortages, insufficient beds, and limited nursing staff. Through Hellen’s leadership, there have been significant improvements in coordination among hospital stakeholders and delivery of clinical services. Hellen also plays an important role in building future capacity within the health sector by mentoring other staff.

In this discussion with Lanique Pitasua, Hellen reflects on what leadership means to her, how she tackles challenges, and the ways she has worked to strengthen clinical care in the Solomon Islands. For Hellen, leadership is about building relationships, delegating effectively, working as a team, and advocating for the needs of both patients and nurses.

To start with, do you see yourself as a leader? Why or why not?

Currently, I'm happy to say that I do see myself as a leader. This is because within the division I work in — the nursing division of the hospital — I hold the position of Director of Nursing. In this role, I oversee more than 522 nurses, ensuring quality patient care, managing resources and implementing policies. I am responsible for giving advice, providing direction, and listening to nurses' concerns before making decisions. This is the highest post in the nursing division at the National Referral Hospital.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders develop their identity as a leader by reflecting on themselves and the roles they play as well as through their observations about how others act towards them.

What does leadership mean to you?

To me, as a nurse, leadership is shown when someone takes the initiative to make plans and find ways forward. As a leader, when I walk around the hospital wards, I make sure that I “walk the talk” and always follow the nursing codes. As a leader in nursing, I must also listen to both nurses and patients. Whenever I do my rounds, I stop to say hello and talk with them. I've realised that because they see me as a leader, they are usually open to having conversations with me.

You mentioned that when you walk around the wards, you often talk to people — both nurses and patients. This shows that relationship building is part of your leadership. Do you see this as an important skill to have as the Director of Nursing?

Yes. In this role, building strong relationships with nurses and patients is very important. I also see delegation as a key leadership skill. A leader shouldn't take on every task themselves but should identify someone with potential and hand the responsibility over — while still offering support. I recognise that I can't do everything alone. There are qualified and capable nurses who take ownership of their work. It's a team effort where everyone contributes. If we don't work as a team, we will fail.

Can you tell me about a time when you have had to bring people with different interests together to achieve change?

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders build trust and shared responsibility by being approachable, listening attentively, and demonstrating care for others.

At the National Referral Hospital, we hold quarterly meetings with the clinical nurse consultants — which was also my previous role before becoming Director of Nursing. One of the challenges I faced was a backlog in reporting. During these meetings, I raised the issue and explained how important timely reporting is for monitoring our work and gathering data on patient admissions and daily patient categories. This data helps us advocate for more nurses when needed. Some clinical nurse consultants were very good at submitting reports on time, but others struggled due to workload or inadequate resources.

So, I wanted to understand why. After looking into it, I found that the consultants were expected to complete a lot of different data entry forms, on top of their usual patient care duties. It was simply too much, and that's what caused the delays. Once I understood the root cause, I decided to simplify things. I drafted a new data entry form that was easier to fill in and called a meeting with all the clinical nurse consultants to get their feedback.

We had a good discussion during that consultation. Everyone gave their input, and we made changes together before finalising the form. After that, we piloted it for about two to three months to see how well it worked. The results were positive, so we rolled it out across the hospital wards. I also told the consultants that we'd review it again after two years to make sure it still met our needs.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders listen to people's concerns and views, and find solutions that consider what's best for everyone.

What I really appreciated was how actively everyone participated in the process. They felt that their opinions mattered, and that gave them a sense of ownership over the change. Some of their feedback was incredibly valuable and helped make the form even better.

Have there been times when the change you have been advocating for has involved risks? How have you handled this?

In the hospital's clinical setting, a common challenge is the shortage of essential nursing tools and equipment such as stethoscopes, penlights, scissors, thermometers, pulse oximeters, blood pressure machines, urinals, and bedpans. A patient may be severely ill, but without the necessary equipment, nurses can't perform initial observations before the physicians arrive.

These shortages directly affect patient care, which deeply concerns me. Sometimes when I walk around the wards and see these issues firsthand, I feel disheartened because it reflects on my management: as Director of Nursing, it's my responsibility to ensure that nurses provide quality patient care.

I often wish I could do more, but addressing these issues is difficult. There are systemic challenges — the procurement process is lengthy, and financial constraints often arise even when we follow proper procedures.

Still, I continue advocating to the national nursing director and my executives, explaining that without a sustainable supply of equipment, nurses can't provide the quality of care expected and that this can contribute to poor patient outcomes.

It sounds like speaking out and advocating for change is important to you as a leader.

Yes, communication is vital. I must tell the executives the reality of what's happening inside the wards because then they can assist to address our concerns or even escalate it further.

As a woman leader, have you faced any challenges linked to your gender? Do you think men and women lead differently?

I've noticed that my male colleagues often approach me to ask about upcoming meetings, share their concerns, and offer advice on how I should present issues. They encourage me to speak out, which I see as a strength.

When my colleagues come directly to me with their concerns, I take it positively — it shows trust and open communication. Culturally, there may be differences, but in this professional space, the men I work with are very supportive. They even ask me for career advice, which I'm happy to give.

What has helped you become a leader?

I've worked with many leaders who have shaped my leadership in different ways. Some told me that no matter what challenges I face, I must keep moving forward and uphold my principles. These lessons don't always come from formal education — you learn them through experience, observation, and reading. I also came from a chiefly background, and I see this as the backbone of my day-to-day leadership and something I value.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

The day-to-day work of everyday leaders involves creating and nurturing the relationships that enable people to work together.

Nowadays, I also look up to women leaders and think, "If they can do it, I can too." Teamwork is very important to me. I don't make decisions alone; if an issue requires expert input, I consult the relevant nurses. For example, if it concerns the paediatric unit, I consult the paediatric nurse. When we receive external training or workshop invitations, I work with our nursing training unit to identify the need and who should attend.

Who have been your support systems in your leadership journey?

My faith is my driving force. It has given me the confidence to become who I am today. I was raised in a Christian family and community, and I continue to uphold those values.

At work I have nurse leaders that support me, and we share our achievements and challenges. When we face a problem, we seek solutions and get advice from the executives, clinicians and other stakeholders so we can make continuous improvements.

Another major support system is the leadership team at the National Referral Hospital. With 13 wards, each led by dedicated leaders, we rely on each other for support. This teamwork extends from the executives, heads of departments, clinicians, supporting services and the corporate services. Each person contributes to keeping the hospital running smoothly, and together we create a strong, supportive community that enhances patient care and safety.

Most of our nurses are women, and sometimes their husbands prevent them from working night shifts and late drop offs. To help, I instruct drivers to pick up nurses from their homes so their husbands see it's official hospital transport and ask them to drop off nurses after the pm shift as early as possible. This helps ensure nurses get to work safely and arrive home on time.

As a leader, you may have a lot of priorities and deadlines. How do you manage your energy levels and care for yourself?

It can be very challenging. If I don't prepare for the day, it becomes harder. At home, I make sure to rest and communicate well with my family. I believe this is very important. I share details about my workday and what's expected of me, so they understand and support me.

KEY LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Everyday leaders value teamwork and collaboration, offering guidance to others while also seeking advice when needed.

At work I attend to priority tasks according to importance and urgency. I delegate tasks to responsible officers and nurses, and I use these opportunities to build the capacity of the team.

At home I plan my schedules with my family so our routines align. My 23-year-old daughter still lives with me, and I often share my experiences with her. She helps ensure I eat properly and take care of myself.

I'm also involved in church ministries, which gives me a break from work and helps me focus on something different than my day-to-day leadership. With friends outside work, I enjoy talking about food, new recipes, or jewellery making, sewing, and storytelling. These activities recharge me and help me support other nurses who may also feel stressed.

Self-care has helped promote my health and wellness. I always remind myself that people are watching me — as a leader, an employee, a nurse, a family member, and a mother — so I must take care of myself to fulfill my day-to-day role as a leader.

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