

Promoting Psychological and Mental Well-Being Competencies in Nursing Leadership: Advocating the Adoption of the 2025 National Nursing Leadership Competency Framework in South Africa

Lindiwe Zungu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5820-0281>

Department of Health Studies,

University of South Africa

zunguli@unisa.ac.za

Mirriam Matandela

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7910-7471>

Nursing Services, National Department

of Health, South Africa

Abstract

Nursing leaders in South Africa play a pivotal role in shaping healthcare outcomes, yet their psychological and mental well-being often remains overlooked. This neglect contributes to burnout, reduced effectiveness and compromised patient care. This perspective article argues for the urgent integration of psychological and mental well-being competencies into leadership development, grounded in the newly developed Nursing Leadership Competency Framework by the national Department of Health. Drawing on the framework as a guiding reference, the article highlights the strategic importance of resilience, stress management and emotional intelligence as leadership competencies. It further situates these within broader national and global priorities, including the National Development Plan 2030, Agenda 2063 of the African Union and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Strategic recommendations emphasise structured interventions, formal support systems, policy advocacy and research. The article concludes with a call for expanded research and scholarly engagement to sustain momentum in advancing nurse leaders' psychological well-being.

Keywords: Nursing Leadership Competency Framework; psychological well-being; mental health; nurse leaders; South Africa

UNISA 

New Voices in Psychology

Volume 15 | 2025 | #20449 | 5 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2958-3918/20449>

ISSN 2958-3918 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2025



Published by Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Background

This perspective article makes a strong case for elevating psychological and mental well-being as a core leadership competency in South Africa's nursing profession. Anchored in the 2025 National Nursing Leadership Competency Framework (NLCF), adopted by the national Department of Health (DoH) in July 2025, it calls for urgent action to embed these competencies into policy, practice and professional development. The framework represents a milestone in leadership development for South Africa's nursing profession, and offers structured guidance for building leadership capacity that is aligned with evolving healthcare priorities.

While the framework covers a wide range of leadership domains, this article narrows its focus on the psychological and mental well-being competency, an area that is both timely and urgent. Nurse leaders often function in environments characterised by high patient volumes, limited resources, workforce shortages, and complex clinical and administrative demands. These conditions heighten their vulnerability to psychological distress, burnout and compromised decision-making. Despite this reality, mental well-being has historically received insufficient attention in leadership development models.

This article argues that the 2025 NLCF (Department of Health [DoH], 2025) provides an unprecedented opportunity to institutionalise psychological well-being as a core leadership competency. By doing so, South Africa can cultivate leaders who are resilient, emotionally intelligent and better equipped to navigate the pressures of modern healthcare systems while ensuring sustainable improvements in patient care and workforce well-being.

The Importance of Psychological and Mental Well-Being Competency

Psychological and mental well-being competencies encompass self-awareness, emotional regulation, stress management, resilience and the capacity to promote well-being in teams. Nurse leaders who cultivate these competencies are better positioned to thrive in volatile challenging healthcare environments.

For example, nurse leaders can mitigate burnout by identifying stressors early and applying targeted strategies to reduce emotional exhaustion for themselves and their teams. They also enhance decision-making, and sustain clarity and sound judgement even under high-pressure circumstances (Shanafelt et al., 2015). In addition, leaders who model healthy coping practices promote team well-being, and strengthen morale, engagement and staff retention (West et al., 2018). At the organisational level, such leaders improve outcomes, which contribute to operational efficiency, staff cohesion and patient safety (Aiken et al., 2014).

The 2025 NLCF (DoH, 2025) provides a critical reference for embedding psychological well-being into leadership expectations. Through structured interventions, nurse leaders can develop resilience and mental health literacy, which ensure that leadership

effectiveness is not only sustained but also enhanced, even in high-stakes healthcare contexts.

Alignment with National and International Frameworks

The institutionalisation of psychological well-being within nursing leadership aligns closely with national and international policy frameworks. At the national level, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 emphasises the creation of a capable, developmental state underpinned by competent and resilient leaders (Republic of South Africa, 2012). Similarly, the Human Resources for Health Strategy 2030 underscores the importance of strengthening leadership and management capacity across healthcare institutions (DoH, 2023). Integrating mental well-being competencies into leadership pathways directly supports these strategic goals.

Regionally, Agenda 2063 highlights the need for human capital development and resilient institutions, and recognises that leaders who are mentally healthy are essential to the delivery of quality healthcare across Africa (African Union, 2015). Globally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3 (good health and well-being) and Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), underscore the necessity of workplace mental health and sustainable leadership practices (United Nations, 2015).

By situating the NLCF within these broader frameworks, South Africa affirms its commitment to cultivating resilient nurse leaders whose well-being is integral to achieving both national and international health objectives.

Strategic Recommendations

Promoting psychological and mental well-being as a leadership competency requires deliberate and coordinated strategies. Central to this is the integration of well-being competencies into the NLCF, which codifies resilience, stress management and emotional intelligence as essential capabilities (DoH, 2025).

The development of structured interventions, including short learning programmes (SLPs), workshops and modules for continuous professional development, will ensure that leaders acquire practical tools to prevent burnout and foster resilience. Alongside this, the setting up of robust support systems, such as peer networks, confidential counselling services and mentorship programmes, will provide ongoing emotional and psychological reinforcement.

Equally critical is the ongoing monitoring and assessment of nurse leaders' well-being through routine mental health assessments, wellness surveys and organisational climate evaluations. Such monitoring will enable proactive responses to emerging challenges. Furthermore, policy and advocacy efforts must be strengthened through collaboration with the DoH, academia, the South African Nursing Council, professional associations

and advocacy groups to institutionalise psychological well-being within leadership standards.

Finally, research and evaluation should underpin all initiatives, and ensure that interventions are evidence-informed, scalable and continually refined to meet evolving needs.

Way Forward

The path forward requires the national adoption of the NLCF with explicit emphasis on psychological and mental well-being. By doing so, the framework can serve as both a policy anchor and a practical roadmap for strengthening leadership capacity in the health system.

Practical steps include the development and roll-out of SLPs and continuous professional development modules on mental health competencies, tailored to the realities of the nursing workforce. Equally, the setting up of formal support structures such as peer networks and counselling services will provide leaders with safe spaces to seek guidance and support.

To ensure sustainability, continuous monitoring, evaluation and research must inform the design and implementation of interventions, which create feedback loops that refine practices over time. Ultimately, multi-stakeholder collaboration is indispensable. Policymakers, academic institutions, professional associations and advocacy groups must collectively align their efforts with the priorities of the national DoH, while situating interventions within the broader context of the SDGs, Agenda 2063 and the NDP.

Conclusion

Prioritising psychological and mental well-being in nursing leadership is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity. The 2025 NLCF of the DoH offers a robust foundation for embedding these competencies into leadership development and operational practice. By leveraging this framework through targeted interventions, supportive structures and policy integration, South Africa can foster resilient nurse leaders who advance healthcare quality and workforce sustainability.

Such investment not only strengthens individuals but also enhances organisational culture and system performance, and aligns with both national and global health development goals. Moving forward, there is a pressing need for further research and scholarly contributions that deepen understanding, evaluate interventions and generate innovative solutions in this emerging field. Journals such as *New Voices in Psychology* provide a crucial platform for this dialogue, and submissions that focus on the psychological well-being of nurse leaders are both timely and urgently needed.

References

- African Union. (2015). *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want*. African Union. <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>
- Aiken, L. H., Clarke, S. P., Sloane, D. M., Sochalski, J. A., Busse, R., Clarke, H., Giovannetti, P., Hunt, J., Rafferty, A. M., & Shamian, J. (2014). Nurses' reports on hospital care in five countries. *Health Affairs*, 23(3), 71–83. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.20.3.43>
- Department of Health. (2023). *Human resources for health strategy 2030*. Department of Health. <https://www.health.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2030-HRH-Strategy-Final.pdf>
- Department of Health. (2025). *Nursing leadership competency framework*. Department of Health.
- Republic of South Africa. (2012). *National development plan 2030: Our future – Make it work*. The Presidency.
- Shanafelt, T. D., Gorringer, G., Menaker, R., Storz, K. A., Reeves, D., Buskirk, S. J., Sloan, J. A., & Swensen, S. J. (2015). Impact of organizational leadership on physician burnout and satisfaction. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 90(4), 432–440. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mayocp.2015.01.012>
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
- West, C. P., Dyrbye, L. N., Erwin, P. J., & Shanafelt, T. D. (2018). Interventions to prevent and reduce physician burnout: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet*, 388(10057), 2272–2281. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)31279-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31279-X)