

# Sustaining e-caring leadership in a post-pandemic world

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## Article info:

Received: 20 January 2022

Revised: 20 February 2022

Accepted: 21 February 2022



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E-ISSN: 2477-4073 | P-ISSN: 2528-181X

## Abstract

At the convergence of the “new normal” from the COVID-19 pandemic and the combination of caring, leadership, and technology, a new environment for organizational culture was formed. The injection of technology into how leaders provided care to their organization launched e-caring, and this is now considered a key in employee engagement and retention post COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this editorial is to briefly reflect on the importance of e-caring for leadership during the crisis and increase the commitment of nursing leaders to continue their great works even after the pandemic with an organizational culture infused with e-caring.

## Keywords

COVID-19; caring; leadership; new normal; technology; nursing; sustainable development

## Editorial

It has been two years since the world was tumultuously turned upside-down with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the entire world adjusted to living with COVID-19. The pandemic has changed the way we live and how we work. Luckily, with advanced information technologies, we are still able to continue the working process and virtually connect to each other. Some call the use of technology to enable working from home, Work from Home (WFH), telework, or remote work, and this is possible with the help of internet connectivity. In the healthcare setting, the terms telehealth, telemedicine, and telenursing are used to describe electronic communication and patient care that occurs via technology without an in-person visit. We have learned many lessons in these two years to understand the positive and negative aspects of the pandemic and adapt to the situation as a “new normal.”

The new year 2022 is highly anticipated to be the last year for the pandemic. Still, the various strains of the virus, including the Omicron variant, continue to disrupt life. In fact, a new wave in some countries, such as Indonesia, Thailand, and others, creates additional challenges for healthcare workers, especially nurses, who never stop fighting against the virus (Marzilli, 2021). Therefore, we cannot discontinue our support to the front-line workers; instead, we must continually motivate them out of necessity (Marzilli, 2021).

Leadership is one of the significant supports for nurses and other healthcare professionals (Oducado, 2021). However, with the physical distancing protocols during the pandemic, nurse leaders and managers needed to adopt a new strategy to connect with others. This led to the adoption of “e-caring

leadership,” as a combination of “e-leadership” and “caring” concepts.

According to Avolio et al. (2014), e-leadership refers to a process of social influence mediated by advanced information technologies to produce a change in attitudes, ways of thinking, behavior, and performance with individuals, groups, and organizations. The technologies include the internet, intranet, instant messaging, email, blogs, document sharing, video conferencing, smart apps, and social media (Avolio et al., 2014). While caring, according to Watson (2012), is the essence of nursing or a moral imperative to preserve human dignity and help achieve a higher degree of harmony within the mind, body, and soul through a transpersonal relationship (Gunawan et al., 2022). So, e-caring leadership can be defined as the interpersonal connection between leaders and subordinates, in which the leaders are able to take care of the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health as well as the quality of life of the employees, mediated by advanced information technologies. In other words, the fundamental principle in e-caring leadership is the ability of leaders to detect the condition of the employees and to be present via technology. The purpose of this technology-enabled presence, or e-caring, is to create mutual trust and genuinely elicit employee engagement levels even in the most difficult challenges, such as during the pandemic. At this point, the leaders virtually act proactively and frequently check-in, acknowledge, share, care, counsel, and provide assistance via technology. Leadership is not about being in charge but about taking care of those under their charge (Gunawan et al., 2022). Caring leaders can be seen from their sensitivity to others as a unique individual (Watson, 2012). We sincerely acknowledge all nurse managers and leaders worldwide who

keep showing care and concern to nurses in continuing to battle the virus.

Additionally, while it is essential that leaders engage in caring practices such as e-caring, it is also important to emphasize that leaders should engage in self-care first before caring for others. Engaging in self-care allows leaders to be their best version of a leader. In contrast, lack of self-care or insufficient sleep will render a leader to be less supportive, less creative, and poorly attentive to their staff (Gunawan et al., 2022). Moreover, self-care is not selfish and empowers a leader to provide the necessary care and support to their team. Self-care enables the caring leadership that should be grounded in every leader so caring via e-caring is communicated clearly across technology-based communication modalities.

This leads to the question, "What will happen post-COVID-19?" "Will nurse managers and leaders revert back to their old leadership styles?" These particular questions should be noted, and e-caring leadership must be maintained in the post-pandemic era. The reasons for this are very simple and three-fold.

First, it is noteworthy that, after two years of showing caring behavior virtually, nurse managers and leaders finally (wholly or partly) improved their information technology skills, compared to the era before the pandemic. They have also been empowered to get to know more about their employees as unique individuals because of the intense chatting, messaging, discussing, and teleconferencing in social media or application-based groups. It is important to note that not all staff nurses can talk or meet with their nurse managers daily because of shift work and the 24/7 nature of healthcare. Virtual meetings are beneficial to improve the interpersonal connection between the leaders and staff.

Second, even before the pandemic, we lived in an information and technology-based world (Nakano et al., 2021), so avoiding e-caring leadership or reverting back to a traditional leadership style may not be possible. The e-caring leaders should be open to new opportunities and emerging technologies to improve communication, develop new health care models, and enhance the quality of care and work-life balance. Nevertheless, it should be noted that being an e-caring leader does not mean that the leader is highly competent in technology; rather, the role of technology is considered a supporting tool in "blending" traditional and innovative skills to show caring and leaders. Minimally, e-caring leaders understand basic information technologies as leaders daily use laptops and mobile phones for work. This technological competency is gradually improving due to the faster movement of disruptive technologies today.

Third, e-caring leadership is a great fit for the culture associated with Generation Y and Z nurses, or digital natives. More interactive technologies to easily establish information exchange and improve engagement and retention are highly desirable. In addition, e-caring leadership offers less seniority or a hierarchical line of organizational structure to develop a solid and trustworthy relationship with employees (Gunawan & Marzilli, 2022). However, this lack of a focus on seniority does not mean there is no respect for senior leaders; rather, the digital native nurses should be taught about e-communication skills to show respect and appreciate the senior nursing leaders.

In conclusion, the idea of sustaining e-caring leadership should not be taken as the replacement of traditional leadership. The leadership styles of the nurse managers can be perceived differently by different nursing staff. Some may be easily motivated virtually, while some prefer a face-to-face meeting. Additionally, some may like both technology-based meetings and in-person meetings. Therefore, the leadership should consider a dynamic approach to showing care and be aware of the situation and open to new ideas and opportunities, such as e-caring. However, it is worth emphasizing that nurse managers and leaders are now working increasingly by combining electronic and traditional leaderships simultaneously. Foundationally, caring should always be the heart of nursing. As Dr. Jean Watson said, if we have no caring in our metaparadigm, we lose nursing practice values, ethics, and moral foundation. Caring is the core of what sustains humanity in the instance of all threats (Morrow & Watson, 2022) and e-caring leadership is an innovative way to sustain nursing leadership in a post-pandemic world.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest in this study.

### Funding

Second Century Fund (C2F), Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

### Acknowledgment

None.

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All authors contributed equally in this article.

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### Data Availability

Not applicable.

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**Cite this article as:** Gunawan, J., Marzilli, C., & Aunguroch, Y. (2022). Sustaining e-caring leadership in a post-pandemic world. *Belitung Nursing Journal*, 8(1), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.33546/bnj.2039>