**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)**
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TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND RESISTANCE TO ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE AMONG NURSING STAFF: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Article Info:

To cite this document:

Mohd Nor, N., Leong Abdullah, F. A., & Soon, L. K. (2026). Transformational Leadership and Resistance to Organisational Change Among Nursing Staff: A Systematic Literature Review. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling, 11* (62), 76-85.

Abstract:

Organisational change in healthcare frequently provokes psychological and behavioural resistance among nursing staff, potentially undermining implementation effectiveness and workforce well-being. Transformational leadership has been widely recognised as a leadership approach capable of mitigating such resistance by fostering trust, empowerment, and psychological readiness for change. However, empirical evidence remains fragmented, particularly regarding the mechanisms and contextual factors influencing this relationship within nursing populations. This systematic literature review examines how transformational leadership influences resistance to organisational change among nursing staff, identifies mediating psychological mechanisms, and explores contextual moderators shaping leadership effectiveness. Guided by the SALSA framework and reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines, 243 records were identified from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Following screening and eligibility assessment, 25 empirical studies published between 1993 and 2025 were included for synthesis. Thematic analysis revealed that transformational leadership consistently reduced resistance to change through enhanced trust, empowerment, communication clarity, and psychological safety. Organisational culture, hospital type, and demographic characteristics moderated these effects. This review contributes to organisational psychology and counselling-informed leadership literature by clarifying how transformational leadership operates as a psychosocial mechanism

in managing resistance to change among nursing staff. Practical implications for leadership development and change implementation are discussed.

Keyword:

Healthcare Leadership; Nursing Staff; Resistance to Organizational Change; Transformational Leadership

Introduction

Healthcare organisations operate in increasingly complex environments characterised by rapid technological advancement, policy reform, and escalating service demands (Warrick, 2011; Oreg & Berson, 2019). While organisational change is essential to maintain care quality and operational efficiency, resistance to change among frontline healthcare workers, particularly nurses, remains a persistent challenge. Nurses constitute the largest professional group within healthcare systems and play a pivotal role in translating organisational change into clinical practice. Resistance among nurses may therefore compromise implementation fidelity, staff morale, and patient outcomes.

Resistance to organisational change is widely recognised as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses (Bateh, Castaneda, & Farah, 2013; Oreg & Berson, 2019). In nursing contexts, resistance often arises from perceived threats to professional autonomy, increased workload, uncertainty, and inadequate involvement in decision-making. These responses highlight the psychological nature of resistance and underscore the importance of leadership approaches that address emotional and relational dimensions of change. From a psychological perspective, employees' readiness for change reflects shared beliefs regarding the necessity of change and collective confidence in the organisation's capacity to implement it successfully (Rafferty, Jimmieson, & Armenakis, 2013). Transformational leadership plays a critical role in shaping readiness by influencing cognitive appraisals, emotional security, and behavioural intentions during organisational transitions.

Transformational leadership, characterised by idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, has been identified as particularly effective in guiding employees through change (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Eisenbach, Watson, & Pillai, 1999). Transformational leaders articulate a compelling vision, foster trust, and encourage participation, thereby enhancing readiness for change and reducing resistance. Empirical studies across organisational settings suggest that transformational leadership positively shapes attitudes towards change by strengthening commitment and reducing fear and ambiguity (Taylor, Cornelius, & Colvin, 2014; Faupel & Süß, 2019).

Despite growing scholarly interest, existing studies examining transformational leadership and nurses' resistance to change remain fragmented. Many focus on general organisational outcomes rather than resistance-specific responses, while others overlook the psychological mechanisms and contextual conditions through which leadership influences change acceptance. Accordingly, a systematic synthesis of existing evidence is required to consolidate current knowledge and inform leadership practice in nursing contexts. This systematic literature review addresses the following research questions: (i) How does transformational leadership influence resistance to organisational change among nursing staff? (ii) What psychological mechanisms mediate this relationship? and (iii) What contextual factors moderate the effectiveness of transformational leadership during organisational change?

Literature Review

This literature review synthesises current scholarship on transformational leadership and resistance to organisational change, particularly within nursing contexts. Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping how nurses perceive and respond to change, making it essential to examine the theoretical and empirical foundations that inform this relationship. Accordingly, this review discusses five key points: the role of transformational leadership in healthcare, the concept of resistance to organisational change, the mechanisms linking leadership and resistance, the contextual factors influencing this relationship, and the existing gaps that justify the present systematic review.

Transformational Leadership in a Healthcare Setting

Transformational leadership has long been recognised as a critical leadership approach in dynamic and high-pressure environments such as healthcare. Defined by behaviours that inspire, intellectually stimulate, and individually support followers, transformational leadership promotes alignment between employee values and organisational goals. In healthcare settings, where change is frequent and emotionally demanding, such leadership behaviours are particularly salient (Williams, Ehrhart, & Aarons, 2024).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that transformational leadership enhances employee commitment, job satisfaction, and readiness for change (Eisenbach et al., 1999; Warrick, 2011). Within nursing contexts, transformational leaders foster teamwork, psychological safety, and open communication, which are essential during organisational transitions. By encouraging innovation and shared responsibility, transformational leadership supports nurses' adaptive capacity and reduces defensive responses to change.

Conceptualising Resistance to Organisational Change

Resistance to organisational change is conceptualised as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components (Oreg & Berson, 2019). In healthcare, and nursing in particular, resistance often arises from concerns about increased workload, disruption to clinical routines, uncertainty, and perceived threats to professional identity. Scholars emphasise that resistance is not inherently negative but may reflect legitimate concerns requiring leadership attention (Bateh et al., 2013). Nevertheless, unmanaged resistance can compromise change initiatives, impede workflow efficiency, and negatively impact employee morale and patient outcomes. As healthcare organisations undergo continuous restructuring, understanding resistance as a complex behavioural response is crucial for designing effective leadership and change strategies (Holten & Brenner, 2015).

Mechanisms Linking Transformational Leadership and Resistance to Change

The relationship between transformational leadership and reduced resistance to organisational change is mediated through several key psychological and relational mechanisms. First, transformational leaders are known for communicating clear and coherent messages about the purpose and benefits of change, which reduces uncertainty and enhances staff understanding (Taylor et al., 2014). Second, TL encourages trust-building through supportive and transparent interactions, fostering confidence in leadership decisions (Faupel & Süß, 2019). Third, empowerment and participatory practices enable nurses to feel valued and involved in decision-making, thereby reducing oppositional behaviour (Santhidran et al., 2013). Empirical research further suggests that employees' emotional strain and stress reactions significantly shape attitudes towards change, indicating that leadership behaviours which mitigate stress and enhance affective commitment are particularly effective in reducing resistance (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). These mechanisms demonstrate how TL translates leadership behaviours into positive attitudes and improved change acceptance among nursing staff.

Contextual Factors Influencing Leadership Effectiveness During Change

Although transformational leadership generally improves change acceptance, its effectiveness is highly dependent on contextual moderators. Organisational culture is a major determinant, with open and participatory cultures amplifying the impact of TL, whereas rigid, hierarchical cultures may limit its influence (Boga & Ensari, 2009). The type of healthcare organisation public or private, specialised or general also shapes nurses' responses to leadership behaviours. Research further indicates that demographic attributes such as tenure, age, and professional experience influence nurses' readiness for change and perception of leadership effectiveness (Faupel & Süß, 2019). These contextual variations highlight the importance of tailoring leadership strategies to specific organisational environments and workforce characteristics.

Gaps in Existing Literature and the Need for a Nursing-Focused Review

Despite extensive research on transformational leadership and organisational change, several gaps remain in the current body of knowledge. Many existing systematic reviews adopt broad perspectives that encompass general healthcare or organisational settings without addressing nursing-specific contexts (Kafwimi & Qutieshat, 2024). Additionally, although mechanisms such as trust, communication, and empowerment are frequently mentioned, they are seldom

examined systematically across empirical studies. Further, contextual moderators such as organisational culture or demographic factors are often under-investigated despite their documented influence on change outcomes. The literature is also dominated by quantitative studies, limiting deeper insights into the lived experiences of nurses. These gaps underscore the importance of a comprehensive systematic review specifically focused on transformational leadership and resistance to change among nursing staff.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review design guided by the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, Analysis) (Grant & Booth, 2009) and reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review focused on empirical studies examining transformational leadership and resistance to organisational change among nurses.

A structured search strategy based on the PEO framework was applied across Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Boolean combinations of keywords such as "transformational leadership," "resistance to change," and "nursing" were used. Following screening and eligibility assessment, 25 studies were included for synthesis.

Table 1: Distribution of Included Studies by Study Design (n = 25)

Study Design	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Quantitative Empirical Study	13	52.0
Mixed-Methods Study	4	16.0
Qualitative Study	3	12.0
Conceptual / Methodological Review	3	12.0
Systematic Review	2	12.0
Total	**25**	**100.0**

The search strategy was designed to capture relevant studies that addressed the core components of the research questions, using the PEO framework (Population: nurses; Exposure: transformational leadership; Outcome: resistance to change). Keywords were identified through an initial scan of titles and abstracts from seminal papers in the domain. Searches were conducted across the following databases:

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- Google Scholar
- ScienceDirect

Boolean operators and keyword combinations included: **("Transformational Leadership" AND "Resistance to Change" AND "Nursing" OR "Nurses")**, **("Change Management" AND "Healthcare Leadership")**, and variations of these terms.

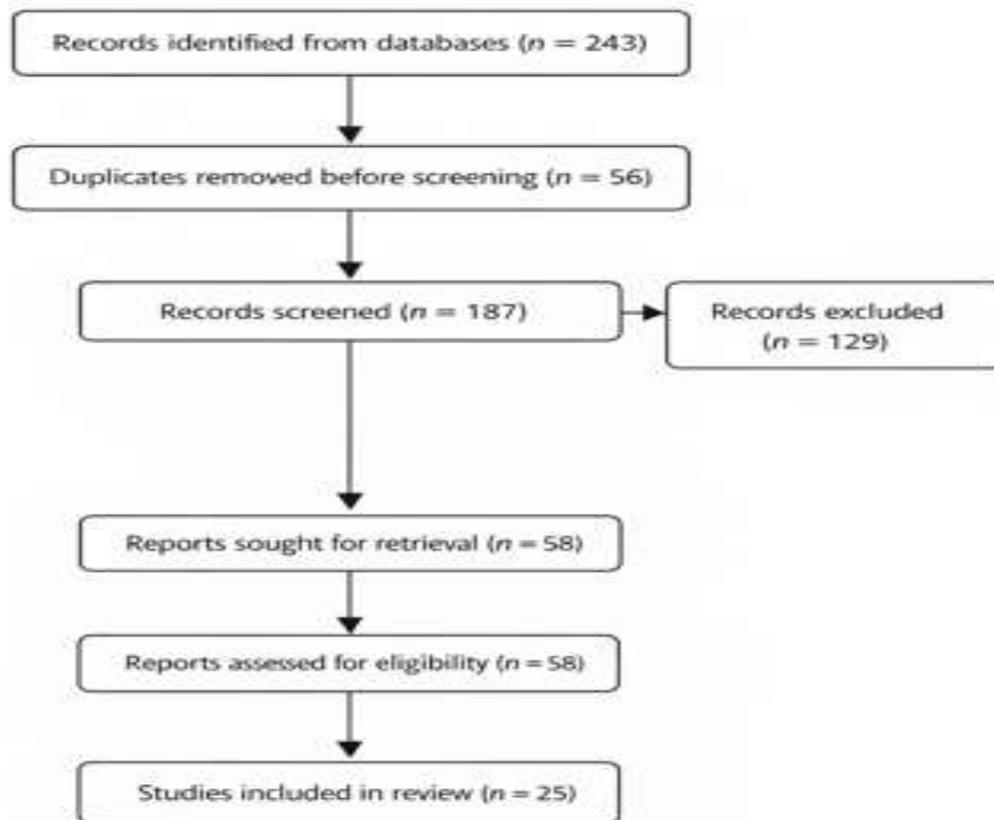A total of 243 articles were initially retrieved, published between 2000 and 2024.

Table 2: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Result

Twenty-Five empirical studies published between 1993 and 2025 were included in this review. The majority were quantitative studies, supplemented by qualitative and mixed-method designs. The findings demonstrate a consistent inverse relationship between transformational leadership and resistance to change among nursing staff. Transformational leadership was found to reduce resistance through enhanced trust, effective communication, and empowerment. Contextual moderators such as organisational culture, hospital type, and nurse tenure influenced the strength of these relationships. The increasing number of publications after 2013 reflects growing scholarly interest in leadership-driven change within healthcare settings.

Discussion

The findings align with previous leadership research that underscores the importance of transformational leadership during organisational change (Warrick, 2011; Taylor et al., 2014). However, this review extends existing knowledge by focusing specifically on nursing staff and by synthesising mediating and moderating variables. Unlike earlier systematic reviews that adopted broad leadership perspectives, this review highlights how trust, empowerment, and communication function as central mechanisms in reducing resistance. Consistent with nursing leadership scholarship, transformational leadership has also been shown to improve work

environments, staff engagement, and psychological well-being among nurses, particularly during periods of system-wide change (Cummings et al., 2018). Furthermore, the inclusion of contextual moderators provides a more nuanced understanding of leadership effectiveness in diverse healthcare environments.

Review of Previous SLRs

Previous systematic literature reviews on leadership and organisational change have offered foundational insights into the role of leadership styles, especially transformational leadership, in influencing change outcomes. These reviews typically aimed to:
- Assess how leadership impacts organisational performance.
- Explore correlations between leadership styles and employee attitudes.
- Identify effective leadership traits during organisational transformation.

However, most prior SLRs were broad in scope, focusing on multiple leadership styles or change management frameworks without isolating the effect of transformational leadership on resistance to change among nursing staff. Methodologically, many relied heavily on quantitative meta-analyses or focused on general healthcare settings, without delving into nursing-specific contexts.

Furthermore, previous SLRs often excluded:
- Mixed-method or qualitative studies that provide deeper contextual understanding.
- Thematic synthesis approaches capable of uncovering subtle mechanisms and mediators.
- Analysis of contextual moderators like hospital setting, staff demographics, or organisational culture.

Thus, although they contributed valuable overviews, these reviews did not offer a nuanced or targeted synthesis relevant to frontline clinical roles such as nursing.

Identified Research Gaps

The current review has identified several notable gaps in the existing literature:
- Outdated Scope: Few reviews have captured studies published after 2019, missing insights from a period marked by unprecedented global healthcare change (e.g., post-pandemic leadership adaptations).
- Underexplored Mechanisms: Key mediating factors such as trust, empowerment, and communication clarity are often mentioned but seldom systematically examined.
- Neglect of Contextual Moderators: There is limited investigation into how hospital type, team structure, or nurse demographics influence the effectiveness of transformational leadership.
- Lack of Nursing-Specific Focus: Most studies reviewed in prior SLRs examined leadership from a managerial or physician-centric perspective, neglecting the unique organisational role of nurses, who are often both implementers and subjects of change.
- Methodological Narrowness: Heavy reliance on quantitative-only studies has left a gap in understanding the "how" and "why" behind resistance to change from the perspective of nurses themselves.

Contribution of This SLR

This systematic review makes several distinct contributions to the literature:

- Updated and Targeted Scope: By including studies published through 2025, this SLR reflects the most recent findings, offering a contemporary understanding of leadership in changing healthcare environments.
- Focused Population: Unlike earlier reviews, this study focuses specifically on nurses, acknowledging their frontline role and unique experience with organisational change.
- Exploration of Mechanisms and Moderators: This review identifies and synthesises the mediating mechanisms (e.g., trust, empowerment) and contextual factors (e.g., hospital setting, culture) that shape the TL–resistance dynamic.
- Methodological Breadth: By incorporating qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies, this SLR provides a more holistic and nuanced synthesis that accounts for both outcomes and experiences.
- Actionable Insights: The findings offer practical guidance for healthcare leaders seeking to implement transformational leadership strategies that are sensitive to context and tailored to nursing staff dynamics.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review confirms that transformational leadership plays a pivotal role in mitigating resistance to organisational change among nursing staff. By fostering trust, empowerment, and clear communication, transformational leaders create supportive environments that facilitate acceptance of change. The effectiveness of such leadership depends on organisational and contextual factors, underscoring the need for adaptive leadership strategies. Future research should prioritise longitudinal and qualitative approaches to further explore nurses lived experiences of organisational change.

Author Contribution Statement:	All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. [Author 1] was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. [Author 1&2] handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. [Author 2&3] contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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