Organization Development in Public Health:

Step Zero

By Ron Chapman © 2012

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Late on the morning of the second day of the retreat, three leaders had tears in their eyes. While that was not part of the facilitation plan, and very uncomfortable for all concerned, it was apparently necessary.

The first day of the retreat had been one of the hardest in my career as a facilitator. We had made little progress toward the goals of the retreat. There was an obvious undercurrent, though no one could or would name it.

After that first day, I called my long-time mentor. With his counsel, I structured the beginning of the second day deliberately to flush out what lurked beneath the surface. It succeeded.

These leaders had a long history together that included unresolved conflicts. And beneath the façade of pleasant interaction there were some significant emotions as well as information that could not surface because of those unexpressed feelings. In short, valuable knowledge was blocked from leadership.

In the framework presented by Patrick Lencioni in his groundbreaking book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, this leadership group practiced artificial harmony, which is not a compliment. Because of a lack of trust that had grown through their common experiences, they were unable to take necessary risks in their dialogue. The result was an inabilty to engage in the kind of productive conflict that a great leadership team needs.

This inabiilty to surface or openly discuss a problem or situation always guarantees an inability to find a solution. If we can't or won't talk candidly about something, we can't tackle it.

This is step zero in leadership effectiveness. Why step zero? Because leaders and their teams cannot take the first real step in problem solving and decision making without forthcomingness and essential creative conflict. Granted there is the appearance of the ability to make decisions, but without real and substantive issues included in dialogue it is extremely unlikely for permanent solutions to emerge. This is true whether a matter is conceptual, strategic or operational.

An experience with another public health entity illustrates the point. This organization was seeking to integrate several disciplines that had long been isolated from each other despite being heavily interrelated. New leadership realized the health impact they sought would require the end of isolation so they convened a process of old and new leaders to tackle it.

Three half-day sessions later, the tension in the dialogue was palpable, and no progress had been made. In the fourth session the arguments and explanations were circling yet again like a puppy chasing its tail. Finally toward the end of the session, one of the leaders announced with exasperation, “Okay, here it is. No one is owning it, but we’re fighting over turf.”

A deep silence settled over the group, a kind of protracted pause. A few heads nodded; chagrined chuckles followed. Strangely enough the truth was not really that painful to see. In fact, they agreed that their protective behavior was really quite commmon and probably pretty normal. Better still, with the truth on the table, it became possible to navigate a formerly intractable issue and resolve it. While the dialogue was still uncomfortable and fairly challenging, the problem became solvable as soon as the secret was out and the group could deal with it.

A client once asked, “Is it because public health people are just too nice?”

Certainly the professional and personal values of those in public health contribute. Belief in the inherent value of every person and a desire to be considerate of others are core tenets for public health practitioners.

Yet another element is simply an aversion to conflict. Regrettably this too often results in depriving others of critical information for decision making as well as valuable developmental feedback. In our seeming efforts to be kind we are in fact impairing the growth and effectiveness of organizations and individuals.

During a sizable agency overhaul, one operational leader was relieved of her managerial responsibilities after ten years of apparent success including positive evaluations and awards. She was dumbfounded. After a number of efforts she was

finally able to speak to senior leaders who advised her that in fact she had never met the desired requirements for operational management. There is no doubt this was a failure of evaluation and her leaders, but the more important point is the inability of those leaders to deal with the confict inherent in giving someone crucial feedback.

Needless to say the operational leader was devastated. In a series of coaching sessions it was necessary to first deal with her feelings of betrayal, then to process and apply the feedback for her development. Fortunately that process led her to a very satisfying non-managerial position in which she was able to thrive because it represented a very good fit for her.

There is a very simple tool for conveying difficult information that dates back to at least the time of Socrates. Before communicating (or not communicating), honestly answer three questions:

1. Is what I am going to communicate true? (Another communications expert suggests also asking ourselves, “Can I be sure it’s true?”)
2. Is it necessary to convey it? (This cuts two ways. Do they need to hear it, and is it really necessary for me to say it?)
3. WIll it be communicated in a way that is kind?

If upon reflection the communication seems appropriate, proceed in good conscience. And as my mentor has long suggested, if it passes the test of reasonability and a problem ensues with the recipient, it is unlikely that there is fault in our communication.

There is another aspect to step zero that resides in the background. One client calls this a “safe-to-say” environment, a culture that encourages, welcomes and ultimately embraces difficult dialogue and challenging feedback. For this we need enlightened leadership.

What is enlightened leadership?

In his book and framework, Good to Great, Jim Collins examines common themes that appear in most if not all organizations that consistently outperform their peers. These themes appear to be applicable across sectors, albeit with some nuances.

The first principle in the framework is that all exceptional organizations have, develop and nurture Level 5 Leaders. While there is a rich body of information about such enlightened leadership, I like to simplify it as follows:

- Level 1: Leadership based on position – People follow a leader because they hold the position.
- Level 2: Leadership based on personality – The leader has followers because they are likeable.
- Level 3: Leadership based on credentials – This is a leader who has academic, professional or performance credibility as demonstrated by degrees, publications, results or other measures.
- Level 4: Servant leadership – Followers know this leader will be responsive to their needs and desires.
- Level 5: Leadership embodiment – A mission, values or principles emanate from a leader and naturally galvanize followership.

There are several key factors in the framework. First, it is unusual to find Level 5 Leadership in young men or women. There is no established curriculum that develops level-five-ness. The levels can be progressive, for example one can demonstrate levels one through four simultaneously. But it is unusual for levels to be skipped, i.e. it is unlikely you will find a leader with level-one-ness and level-five-ness without the

intermediate levels also being represented.

Of particular note from my practice is the transition between Level 3 and Level 4. There is an important transformation that takes place. The focus shifts from the leader to the people or something transcendent. In other words, leadership ceases to be about the leader.

Why is enlightened leadership so important to creating a safe-to-say environment in which necessary dialogue and conflict can occur?

While I do not have hard evidence to prove the point, my organization development practice in public health has with great regularity uncovered a strong connection between higher levels of leadership and a focus on the environment or culture for which the leader is responsible to create and sustain. It is quite uncommon for an organization with underrealized leadership to demonstrate the kind of culture that embraces conflict.

In one setting at the state level of public health I had the opportunity to faciliate planning and teambuilding processes before and after a transition in leadership. The initial leader had a very strong personality and clearly met the requirements for Level 1 and Level 3, though a need for a high degree of control sometimes interfered with likeability associated with Level 2.

On one occasion I literally had to place myself physically between staff members embroiled in a bitter and longstanding dispute. The discomfort in the team was very high. Interviews with staff confirmed a long history of dysfunctional interaction.

Fast forward seven years. The initial leader had been promoted, and a long-time public health leader was hired. He clearly embodied the mission of the organization. As

one staff member noted, “It oozed out of him.” He was deeply committed to desired outcomes, and the evidence suggests he had his ego reduced.

The behavior in the organization was notably different after his arrival. There was little disruptive conflict, and a great degree of freedom of dialogue even with contentious issues. The team’s performance was markedly improved. After the departure of a few cantankerous staff hired by the previous leader, the team exhibited a high degree of cohesion and effectiveness.

When I asked the leader about the changes in people, he shrugged. “They decided to move on.” I suspect, as is true of many higher level leaders, he is somewhat unaware of the humiliity that marks him as a Level 5 Leader.

Higher level leadership creates a culture in which candor and creative conflict are possible. The results are clearly significant.

Let’s return to the story that opened this paper, a leadership team with a long history, unresolved conflict and unexpressed feelings. Lencioni says that vulnerabiltiy provides for possibility. The design for the second day of their retreat opened them up. The tears that followed allowed discussion that was long overdue. By one o’clock in the afternoon they had dealt with their history. At the end of the day, they reported they had covered more ground in the final three hours than in the previous seven annual retreats.

The ultimate result of candor and creative conflict is a safe-to-say environment, which then permits an ability to perform. Leaders make this possible.