



## Key Roles of the Public Health Leader February 12, 2021 Revised

It is a common misconception in public health that only a Subject Matter Expert (SME) can effectively lead and manage the subject matter and the experts in the organization. There is a similar misconception when certain credentials are factors such as an MD or PhD requirement.

While some credentials or expertise may be essential, the real issue is experience and interest in leadership.

- One exceptional local public health leader in action was a former emergency room doctor who returned to school to obtain an MPH to make sure he understood public health, and an MBA to make sure he was proficient in organizational leadership.
- At the CDC, a highly effective long-term Team Lead and Branch Chief is a PhD Epidemiologist, but a long-time student and practitioner of management and leadership.
- A national leader in public health holds an MD and an MPH, but explains, "My job is to make sure the expertise and capacity is in place, and then to lead forward."

For twenty-five years, the most common challenges and problems in public health settings that have needed attention have not been subject matter expertise, competence or even funding. Over and over again we can trace matters back to leadership and management shortcomings.

Here then is a framing of leadership and its trajectory. Please note, leadership and management style and practice are ultimately a very personal matter, yet it always hinges on these. That said, it all revolves around the principles of leadership, management, organization development and performance, and change management.

- Clarity of Direction – Without clear direction that is well communicated and understood throughout an organization, there can be little effective followership. Further, motivation and commitment of staff are invariably undermined when there is insufficient clarity or understanding. Whether a leader uses planning that is strategic, growth, program, agile, or long-term, it must produce a clear sense of a future state to be realized, the means by which it will occur, and the essential priorities or levers that will be focused upon.
- People and Talent – The magic elixir for the great leader is to enable excellence through the people who will achieve the direction. This too is not merely a matter of subject matter expertise, rather talent, aptitude, attitude and alignment. The largest predictor of success is fit between person, role and setting. Whether the strategy is recruitment, development or retention, the right people produce great results.
- Ecology and Culture – In public health we know that people cannot succeed where the ecology does not support that success. This includes positive workplace climate, effective core business processes, excellent internal communications, and strategies for developing people, processes and culture. Senior leaders must fully own and develop such a culture for it does not manifest without such investment.
- Resource Generation – The greatest public health impact comes through other people's resources. The needs of communities always far exceed funding lines. Therefore, leaders must spend increasing amounts of their time focused on leverage and influence not just through partners and core funders, though they are essential, but through strategies for leveraging with policies, systems, and other revenue producers. This is more recently characterized as the Chief Health Strategist in public health.

Over time leaders should see a progression of attention and effort in these arenas. Increasingly, and with successful development, that should become increasingly focused not on operations, but on organizational excellence and performance through these arenas.

***Leading is its own practice, other disciplines are not a sufficient substitute.***

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