



Adaptive Leadership for Public Health Podcast Series

Episode #6: Leading Change

Hello everyone, and welcome to Adaptive Leadership for Public Health, a podcast created to help you address the complex challenges of public health leadership by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader. This podcast is sponsored by the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University.

My name is Brandy Walker, and I am faculty at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, a unit of Public Service and Outreach at the University of Georgia. I'll be your host as we explore various aspects of adaptive leadership through our podcast. Today's episode is about leading change.

Chances are that you have experienced change in your life, whether you have been the one leading it or not. As public health professionals, your work involves being part of change efforts both internally in your organizations, and externally with communities and stakeholders associated with your programs. And I'm sure that your experience has been that everyone involved in change efforts are enthusiastic about the change, and that they fully embrace the change they are offering or receiving. Right? If you just said yes, I don't think you were listening. Change is not always everyone's friend. When we're on the leading end of a change that we're excited about, change can be a welcomed thing. But if you're not a fan of the change, or happy where you are, change can feel like a threat, something disruptive, scary, jarring, and unwelcomed.

We know from the article "A Survival Guide for Leaders" which we've referenced in previous episodes, that experiencing change generally involves experiencing LOSS. And people don't usually enthusiastically embrace a loss that may be difficult, even if it is sometimes necessary. Change can involve some high-stakes risks. Leading people through an organizational change or transformation is an adaptive challenge. In organizations, and in communities, this type of change will often create an unnerving sense of imbalance, uncertainty, and instability.

In this session, I'm going to give you some context for thinking about change and some leadership strategies for managing change.

Let's start with some responses to change. Have you heard the expression "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." Well, when you're leading change, you're bound to face people who are resisting that change. And, most likely, you too have been resistant to

some changes in your career. In our public health leadership trainings, I always like to ask people to share an example of a change effort that they resisted. This is one of my favorite responses. Let me read what this person told me: “I thought the change was an unnecessary, egotistically founded, expensive, time-consuming, labor-intensive, unrewarding, and thoroughly unproductive.” She paused at this point, and then her tone changed: “until my boss assigned the task to *me*, and I had to find a way to make it work!”

Reflecting on our own reasons for resisting change can help us address concerns that others will have when we are leading change efforts.

Here is another example from a public health professional. He says “the change effort I resisted was the re-structuring of our health department leadership. The reason was that I did not like the unknown...Would I have a job? Who will my supervisor be? Will I be moved to a different department? So many factors that evoked fear. The biggest thing the change leaders could have done was one word, communicate.”

How DO we communicate change effectively? Let me share with you a 3-pronged approach:

First, talk to the “head” to reach people’s thinking and understanding. Second, talk to the “hands” to address people’s behaviors. And third, talk to the “heart” to address people’s motivations and emotions. Really, these can be done in any order, depending on where the person’s concerns are.

First, the head-talk: when you talk to the head, you’re answering the question: “Why should I change?” This type of communication shares the reason, logic, and explanations behind the change, and gives people a sense of certainty about why the change is happening.

Second, the hands-talk: when you talk to the hands, you’re answering the question: “*What* do I need to *do* differently? What’s the behavior?” This type of communication shares the actions, the new learning, what needs to be done, and helps people maintain a sense of autonomy as they make these choices.

And third, the heart-talk: when you talk to the heart, you’re answering the question: “What’s in it for me?” This type of communication addresses the values, emotions, a person’s status as a valuable person in the change effort and helps with a sense of fairness.

Now, just because you communicate the change effectively, doesn’t mean it still won’t face opposition. Let’s talk about some common barriers that can cause change efforts to fail. Before I list some of these barriers, think about a recent change effort that you were part of or that you knew a lot about that was not successful. Pause if you need to in order to get that example in your mind. Now as you listen to my list of reasons why change efforts can fail, see if you recognize a reason that the example you’re thinking didn’t work.

If there is an unclear vision for the change or a lack of buy-in, then the change effort can fail.

If not enough people are involved to move the change forward, it can fizzle.

If people are not ready for change, then the resistance can be too strong. Sometimes you hear this as people being “stuck in their ways”, or you may hear the expression “we’ve always done it this way! No need to change!”

If the people involved in the change are interested in it, but not really invested, there may not be enough energy to move the change forward.

If people don’t understand how the change is worthwhile it will not have a clear vision.

If the people who are most affected by the change aren’t involved, it can fail.

Here’s a quick list of change problems: if the change is happening too fast, if the change is happening too slow, if the change is too big, if the change is too complicated, if the change is too short-sighted, if politics get in the way, if bureaucracy gets in the way, or if the change is seen as too grassroots (from the bottom up), or even too directed as in from the top down.

And finally, change efforts can fail if people feel the change is too uncomfortable, and if the status quo, or the way things are before the change, feels too comfortable.

Could you see any of those reasons in why your example of a change effort failed?

Now there is no magic formula for leading change effectively. But I’m about to share with you a formula for doing just that! It’s a formula that helps you see what might be missing based on the way the change is making people feel. Now this is a change effort that people have bought-into, not one that people are actively resisting. We’ll get to that in a minute.

So, the magic formula for change? Get ready to write this down:

Start with a clear vision, add the skills necessary to carry out the change, add to that incentives for people who are part of the change (this helps with the buy-in), include resources to get the job done, and the final ingredient, a well thought-out action plan to carry out the change. Put all of that together, and you should get an effective change.

Now, I just listed 5 ingredients: vision, skills, incentive, resources, and an action plan. According to this magic formula for change, if any one of those ingredients is missing or lacking, you will have a different outcome.

For example, if you have the skills, incentives, resources, and a great action plan, but you do not have a vision, the change effort will result in confusion. Why? Because no one will know where you’re headed with the change.

If you have the vision, incentives, resources, and an action plan, but you are missing the skills to carry out the change, the results will be anxiety, because no one in the change team will feel confident to accomplish the tasks.

If you have the vision, skills, resources and action plan, but you are missing the incentives, well, that's when you'll feel the resistance creeping up on you. There has to be a "what's in it for me" for everyone, and that's what the incentives provide you with.

If you have a great vision, the appropriate skills, good incentives and a solid action plan, but you're lacking resources to carry it out, you'll experience frustration.

And finally, if you have a clear vision, great skills, good incentives, and all the resources you need, but no action plan, then, my friends, you will have chaos. Because no one will know what to do with all of your great ingredients!

So, in your next change effort, be sure to catalog your ingredients, and be sure you have all of the ingredients to move forward.

Now, for our final topic, I'm going to share with you some strategies for leading change that are based on what may seem at first to be an unlikely model. It's the 5-stages of grief model, which was originally developed in the late 1960s by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. These 5-stages have been referred to as the 5-stages of grief or loss or just the 5-stages. These stages were identified as defense mechanisms or coping mechanisms to face change, loss, or even shock.

I'll share with you specific strategies for dealing with people in different stages of loss as they address a looming change. This is only really relevant for a change that is definitely happening, not one that is something you can successfully resist. Adaptive leaders want to develop strategies for helping people along the way to change, rather than barreling through a change effort with no regard for the casualties along the way.

Here are the stages to look for when diagnosing where someone is in their response to a change effort: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. And, just as with grief or other loss experiences, people do not necessarily go through these stages in a linear way—they can skip stages, repeat stages, regress to earlier stages, all depending on a variety of variables. So, the key for what I'm about to share with you is for you to try and recognize where someone is in these stages to decide on your strategy for responding. Understanding where people are in the process of "grief" for their loss helps leaders navigate the move from the death of the old to the acceptance of the new.

At the beginning of an unexpected or unwanted announcement of change, people can feel surprised and unsure about the future. This stage is called the **shock stage**. At this point, you as a leader of change can acknowledge and restate what people are feeling and show empathy for

those feelings. You can also help people feel some certainty by reinforcing policies that they feel safe with and beloved procedures that will remain. This is a time to respect how things were done, even as you are moving forward with a change. Statements that are disrespectful of past methods can undercut your change process.

The next stage is denial. You know that river in Egypt? Seriously, when people are in denial, they don't believe that the change will actually happen. At this stage, it's critical that you communicate to the "head" with logic and reason. As a leader, you should clearly explain the goal and purpose of the change. Don't overload people with too much information. Be honest, but strategic so the information you are sharing is applicable to the individual or groups you're talking to. Appeal to logic during the denial stage. Show why the change is happening and connect it to specific positive impact.

The 3rd stage is anger. This is when people openly resist. As a leader, you can help defuse anger by paraphrasing what is being said to show you are listening. It's at this point that you want to support a relationship-building environment. Anger is often the result of feeling vulnerable, so foster the "relatedness" social need in the SCARF model to help with this. It's important to build two-way communication channels for people in the anger stage, so you can minimize their feeling of not being heard or understood.

The 4th stage is bargaining. In this stage, people avoid the change procedures in more of a passive resistance. You can see people moving back and forth from this stage with the open anger stage. In the bargaining stage, help people see the relevance of the change to their specific goals. Facilitate creative idea generation about how they can take the next steps in the change to move toward success. It helps to address the "A" of SCARF, which is the social need for autonomy. Ask people how they can take the next steps in the change effort. This is a time to positively reinforce the SCARF social and relational needs.

Now, as an aside, if you're wondering why I keep talking about a SCARF, listen to episode #4 in this podcast on managing conflict, and you'll get the inside scoop on this insightful concept.

Back to our stages of loss. And we're on the 5th stage, which is depression, also called grief. It is here that people really *feel* the loss. It becomes real because it's really happening. At this time leaders can address the R in SCARF, or the relational need by encouraging networking and support for one another. Leaders can also celebrate early adopters and encourage the heart of others to follow. Another strategy in this stage is to provide resources and support to enable others to act, which means you are not dictating the change but allowing people, despite their grief, to express autonomy in how they go about accepting the change.

Now, that was stage 5, but there is a stage outside of the grief and loss, which is final acceptance. Remember that people are all moving through these stages at different times, so

even if you still have some people in early shock and denial phases, you may have people who are embracing the change early on. Be sure to recognize the effort and risk taken by everyone who has embraced the change and adopted it. And don't forget to celebrate! To sustain the energy of acceptance, build systems that reinforce the change. And provide quick and positive feedback to those who are navigating the change process.

So, in summary, leading change is a dangerous business, but the payoffs for leading successful change are what adaptive leadership is all about! When you find yourself in a change effort or leading a change effort, think through what barriers might be in place to create resistance to that change. Be sure to communicate to the head, the hands, and the heart when talking when introducing others to the change and leading them through it. Reflect on the formula for change to make sure you have the vision, skills, incentives, resources, and a strong action plan in place to set yourself up for success. And as you encounter people grieving the loss of the old as you usher them into the new of the change, recognize the stages they are going through, and use strategies specific to their needs in each stage.

As we close, I encourage you to think about the concepts we've discussed in this podcast on adaptive leadership for public health. If you missed any episodes, or if you just need a refresher, go back to the other 5 topics that we've previously explored. Those titles are: "what is adaptive leadership?", leadership principles and practices, Cultural Competence, managing conflict, and collaborative leadership.

On behalf of the Region IV Public Health Training Center, I want to thank you for listening. We hope this podcast will help you build your confidence and capacity to address complex challenges in your public health organization by growing and thriving as an adaptive leader.