



Region IV Public Health Training Center
A MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH TRAINING CENTER NETWORK

Leading Public Health Podcast: Leadership Journey Series

Episode 4: Mentorship with Nina Johnson LMSW, APTD

Liz Kidwell (LK): Welcome to Leading Public Health, a podcast from the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University. Through this podcast, we explore current leadership challenges, strategies, and ideas to help build the capacity of the current and future public health workforce. In this series, we will be meeting with public health professionals to discuss the journey of leadership. My name is Liz Kidwell, and I'll be your host as we explore topics relevant to public health leaders at any stage of their career.

LK: Today I'm thrilled to be joined by Nina Johnson. She is here today to talk with us about developing your team as a leader. Thank you for joining us, Nina. We're so excited to have you here with us today. To get us started, could you just tell us about yourself and your current roles?

Nina Johnson (NJ): Absolutely. So again, Liz, thank you for this opportunity and thank you for your leadership in developing this podcast for folks to hear so many real and diverse perspectives on leadership. I am Nina Johnson. I am a native of Decatur, GA. I am the youngest of two children from my parents. Therefore, I am a sister. I am an auntie. I'm a first-generation college student. I'm an ambivert. All of these identities and experiences, among others, have brought about the identity and have made my life's work, which is, I'm a helper. I am deeply connected to ensuring people are valued, seeing and operating in their fullest potential; which in turn contributes to the success of not only that individual but to the system to which they belong. And I do that in a role of which I call a leadership facilitator. I'm a consultant. There's so many things that tie into the work that I do, and hopefully we'll get into that here soon.

LK: Thank you so much for that introduction. And kind of building on that, can you tell us a little bit about your leadership journey and how you got where you are today in your career?

NJ: I'm going to share a story and hopefully you'll come along on the journey with me. As a child, I often stayed after school assisting my teachers by grading papers which then transferred into my play time, where I pretended that in my room, because I have a sister we had twin beds. So those twin beds turned into the seats of students who were eager to learn from me. So this was as a child. So my footsteps up and down that narrow aisle between the two twin beds were the beginnings of my leadership journey. I didn't know it at the time, but as I reflect back, and that's a practice of leaders just reflecting back, that's where it actually started. So fast forward about 30 years. Substitute that play time in between those two twin beds to a community or an organization, and the eager students in the seat are adults eager to tackle their leadership journey and transform the world. I have the privilege of supporting their journey, as I mentioned, as a leadership facilitator.

And this role has taken on several forms for me over the past 20 years. I've been a clinical therapist. I've been a program manager, a senior trainer, training manager, learning and development officer, public service faculty member, consulting. Quite a few roles that I have taken on to do this work, and I've served in various communities within Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, DC, as well as internationally. And what I've experienced and observed over the past 20 or so years in those various settings and communities that I've served, is that diversity and complexity and lifelong learning are experiences of leadership. Each one of us has a story that has shaped our leadership journey and philosophy. And it's in these stories that we're able to tackle leadership journey from an intrinsic place, and that makes it powerful. And we have a powerful impact. That's a long answer to your, your question, but hopefully that gives you a good piece of who I am, my journey, and my philosophy around leadership.

LK: Yeah, it really does, and I, I really appreciate you sharing that story. I love, kind of, what you're saying about everyone has their own leadership journey because that's, you know, in this series that we're doing with this podcast, that's really what we're trying to get at is different leadership journeys and how people experience them and hearing different stories from people. So, from this career that you've had, it's been centered around leadership a lot, what does leadership really mean to you when you think about that term?

NJ: Yeah, sure. So Maya Angelou has this quote of "I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." And the intentionality around that quote, to me, is leadership. It's a quote that I live by. It's a quote that actually a colleague gifted to me for a Christmas item. It's it's in my room, in my office for me. And again, it's that intentionality. It's the self-awareness to know how you're showing up and doing something about it. Um, It's really around what folks can receive in your presence. It's having care for others. To treat them with respect and dignity, as well as creating experiences that align with who your folks are, aligned with who you are, and the folks that you serve, the folks that you work with. It aligns with what they need so that they can live out their potential and hopefully continue that cycle. So for me, that's what leadership means. It's really thinking about, your creating experiences each time that you engage with someone. And what is that experience? So having that self-awareness to think about, how am I showing up? How is this going to impact others? Because they're the contagion that's a part of that, and that's what leadership is for me.

LK: That's great. Thank you so much for that. And I really love how you kind of define leadership to yourself. I think that that's really important. Through this work that you've done, what strategies have you found to be really helpful in your leadership journey?

NJ: There are quite a few of them. I will try to narrow them down. The first one is that of putting people first. And, so again, as you've kind of heard in quite a few of the things that I've already mentioned to you is putting people first. Outside of our positions. Outside of our title. But who are the people with whom they're working and who we're working for? Also putting that back on ourselves, like we are people first as leaders. So taking that whole inventory and assessment of who we are and how we show up. Another strategy is that around co-creation. So, in acknowledging that we work with people, how can we bring them in on the journey? How is it that we can incorporate the needs that they have, the beliefs that we have, so that they can be a part of the work that we're doing? Because that's how we're also going to have sustainable change. That's how we're going to

have folks that are part of the journey and really want to see how that journey goes and really invested in that journey. So I would say putting people first as a strategy, yourself and others. Co-creating that journey, whatever that end goal, doing that together with the folks who are going to be the end users or the recipients. And then also thinking about, making sure that we're contributing to the growth and development and learning of the folks with who we are working with. So I think about that as a leader that we have these moments, these opportunities to where we've learned things along the way. We have power and position that we could use that as an advantage to help the folks that we work with to help them grow and develop. So thinking about it that way. And then the last strategy I would say is just as a person, I always want to continue to grow and learn myself. So just committing to our own lifelong journey as leaders, that lifelong education that we have. So people first, co-creation, making sure that we're developing others and at the same time am I continuing to grow and develop? Am I staying stagnant? Do I have this thing which I sometimes type to coin, like to coin as frozen success. Like, it's worked and so I'm staying here in this piece, but times change. People evolve. And so, am I a part of that change? Am I continuing to upskill so that I can show up my best based on what's in front of me? So those are a few strategies.

LK: Absolutely. That's really, really fantastic, um, for you to share that. So, I would love to hear kind of more about these strategies and you know, maybe expanding on some of them, how you implement them or how you recommend people kind of implement them in their work.

NJ: Yeah. So with the people first, I would definitely say it is taking the time to get to know folks. Um, I absolutely spent some time in DC. And I'm not a native of DC, I've shared that with you in that I am a native of Decatur. And so, coming into this new space, I thought to recognize I am an outsider. And so before I did any of the work, I knew what the directives were that I have for the role that I was in as the Learning and Development Officer for that agency, but before I dived into the work, before I started implementing all of these great ideas, I actually took time to have coffee chats with folks. And it went across the levels. It was folks that were entry level. It was the high school students that we had. It was the executives. It was the directors. And so I held conversations with them just to get to know who I am, and for me to get to know who they are. So that when I do the work, that it is reflective of what they're saying. And reflective of the needs that they have. So, I would definitely say carve out time to actually get to know the folks with whom you're working with and for. Now with the co-creation piece, I would definitely say it is constantly doing an inventory of how you experience change, like how do you respond to change? How do you show up in change. And having those conversations, maybe even doing some assessments with the folks that you're working with. And how do they respond to change? Are they ready for change? Are there things that need to be done to help them get to that place where we can get to our end goal? So, I would say those are some of the pieces around co-creation. And then with the pieces around continuing to develop the folks is again, I can't say it enough, get to know the people with whom you're working. What is development for them? We can kind of put it in the box and say that it's promotion, but it could simply be that I am given a role in a meeting for this day. I want to know how do I actually build an agenda? How is it that we do the budget? May I observe you? Can I shadow you to see how those things go? And so, we need to know your folks and knowing what development is for them. In what area they want to develop? Not making assumptions based on I'm in this role now and that I want to continue to rise the ranks here, but there may be some other avenues that the person is interested in. And so, getting to know those pieces. And for yourself, as far as your own continual

development, things that I do is, we'll take a pulse of what's energizing me? What strengthens me? And leaning into those pieces, being curious around, do I know everything here? Am I out of date? Do I need to refresh the information that I have? And so, I am on LinkedIn often. There are a lot of good content that's there. Um, having subscriptions to Harvard Business Review. Just being connected to various professional services and organizations, big and small. You know a peer group that you can kind of have some coaching sessions around so that you can get that feedback around thought processing and how I'm actually doing the work with some trusted folks. So those are a couple of ways that that shows up, um, in the work that I do and what I offer to folks who are listening here to this podcast.

LK: Thank you so much for sharing that. I think, I think something you, you know, said that was so it's so important, it's just knowing the people you work with. I think that that's such an important thing that I think sometimes it's a basic, you know, simple thing that I think sometimes people don't always think of. But kind of also building on knowing yourself and understanding yourself, is something you've spoken about before, is emotional intelligence and its importance in the workplace. Can you kind of expand on this and touch on that, you know, why that's so important?

NJ: Yeah, and Liz, I definitely want to, something that you said, it's getting to know our folks. We don't often do that, or we neglect to do that as often as we should. And I think it's with good intention, right? I think that we want to do the work, and we have the tasks that are in front of us, but it's really again being intentional about that. Knowing that we need people, you know, if we're a leader out there by ourselves and no one's behind us or with us alongside us, then we are just out here taking a walk. Thinking about, I need people along to do the work to make the load easier, to bringing those diverse perspectives. And that's where that emotional intelligence ties in. It's knowing how am I showing up? What are the emotions that I am bringing? That I have this heavy load and I'm showing up potentially anxious. I am showing up frustrated. And knowing that that's contagious, so I don't want to show up that way for my folks. I'm can feel all of my feelings, but I don't want to show up and give that off to my team members, and to the state holders, and the folks that I am working with and for. And so I've got to do the work to manage that. I've got to do the work so that I can show up my best self. And so that's that self-awareness and self-management that's a part of emotional intelligence. Because in turn it helps us with the social aspect of it. It helps us because we understand how situations can feel for us. We can empathize with other folks when they are then frustrated because of the deadline that we have. The lack of resources that we have. The multitude of changes that continue to happen. And so we can empathize and connect in that way, which then in turns builds relationships amongst us. It builds that trust. It builds that camaraderie, and that we can experience the highs together and we can experience some of those valleys and lows together. And yet we're still doing it in a way that it is productive, that we're seeing each other as the people were showing up. We're still able to get to that finish line. We're able to sit here and possibly just have real talk about this is hard because that's gonna help us get over that finish line. And so that's where that emotional intelligence comes into play. And we often talk about it as a soft skill or that it's a skill and quality and an intelligence that's only for a certain type of field or a certain type of leader. When I see it as an essential and foundational skill that we all have. When we kind of look at the research around it, I believe that there's some stats around when you pair up just facing off of intellectual, like intelligence around that piece and emotional intelligence that those folks who exhibited emotional intelligence, 70% excelled more because they had that

whole package. Now, that's not to say that, you know, just intellect in itself IQ, is not important, but having that total package really helps us out as leaders and it helps us keep our team members. Folks feel valued. They feel seen, and they want to show up for the work that's being done.

LK: Definitely. And that's so important. It's just it's so important for people on your team to feel valued and feel like you understand them and you, you know, we can all learn from each other. So, I think that that's so important. Do you have any tips for our listeners on really how they can enhance their own emotional intelligence? Where they can go to, kind of, build that skill?

NJ: So the first thing that I would say and it is free, you don't have to do anything for it. Just do a simple search on the World Wide Web, as I like to call it. And look for a feeling wheel. There are several of them out there by various different companies and organizations who put them together. But what I challenge listeners to do is to get very granular and specific around how we are feeling and doing the reflection, taking the time to reflect in those moments around "How am I feeling?" We seem to stay in the six kind of emotions of, you know, the typical happy, sad, angry, you know, those different types of emotions. But there are so many emotions that spring out of those four emotions, and so a feeling wheel will really help us to be specific around the emotions that we're feeling. When we get that new job, when we lose a job, when we lose team members, when we are getting a new task that's in front of us and we don't know quite where to start. What am I feeling right now? And then once we've named it, what is my body experiencing? Right? Because that starts to train us to cue into how we're feeling in various moments. We're starting to use our emotions as data to tell us what do we need to do. We do it all the time with numbers and all of the work that we do, why not do that same thing for ourselves using our emotions as data? So that first thing is identify an emotions wheel that really connects with you. I would also say building up, kind of, this trusted circle and have it represent various different stakeholders and levels. So it could be a peer that's a part of that support group or that confidant group. It could be folks who report to you. Essentially getting feedback and building in this feedback loop of how, this is how I'm showing up as a leader. This is where I am. What is it that you can give me? Am I holding true to my leadership philosophy? Again, do we have our own personal leadership philosophy? Then that's how we want our behaviors to show up based on this philosophy. So having the feeling wheel, getting a trusted circle that can give us feedback, even developing your own leadership philosophy that governs the work that you do, those would be a few key pieces that I would actually share as how we can show up as you know leaders who are really committed to doing the work and as an emotionally intelligent leader as well.

LJ: What I would love to, kind of, pivot to is talking about, you know, early career professionals, people that are starting out in their career or maybe people who are starting in a new leadership role, have the opportunity to lead and kind of building their confidence, do you have advice for these people? These early career professionals? On, really, how to mentor others and how to build their confidence as a leader?

NJ: The first thing that I would do is, and what's coming to mind as you're asking that question Liz, is authenticity. And that's a big question. It's a buzz. I mean, a big statement, and it's a buzzword that we have, but really I can't say reflect enough. Really thinking about who you are and what type of leader you want to be and having that show up in your behaviors. Not being afraid to admit mistakes, not being afraid to admit that it's hard. Not being afraid to even connect with early

professionals in the journey and where they are. Because again, that's going back to that putting people first. It's going back to building that trust, building that relationship. And I think it is shedding a lot of what we think leadership is. What we've traditionally been told and that we have to sit, you know, on high and we dictate down or we have to have it all buttoned up in together and we know that we're in a space to where belonging is a thing and that people want to show up as who they are, just as they are and not wear the mask because that gets so daunting, it impacts our well-being. And so I think it's really connecting to the journey that our young professionals are on and mentoring, mentoring them from that space. And I know that that can be a dual role as an early professional and you're kind of starting out and then at the same time you're mentoring folks. But again, I really think it goes back to that "people first," connecting with them on that personal level and, and not being afraid to admit those mistakes. Again. Connecting to what is it that they're interested in? How best do they need to be served? Um, how best will they show up on your teams? What process do you have in place to assess where they want to go and not just right here, but folks want to know that you're investing in their long term. And so, do we have a plan together of how I want to develop you as a person and a leader? I remember specifically a role that I took, and in the interview, the director said to me, I am actually looking for someone to take my job. And it wasn't from she had an exit plan, but in that moment, what I heard from her is I am not just hiring you for this role. I am hiring you for the opportunity, for growth that can happen for you. And tell me what that is. Let me hear what that is. And if it's my job, I am OK with that, in that, you know that I won't be here forever. It's actually a good thing that you've trained folks up that can actually go up the ranks. And so I think it's shifting this scarcity mentality. It's getting to know folks, and really pouring in and developing folks. And so that's what I think about when it comes to how can we mentor others and, and build confidence. And doing that same thing for ourselves. Just what we're giving out to folks, making sure that we try that on and put that on for ourselves as well. Wanting to actually walk that talk that we're giving out.

LK: Absolutely. I think that that's so important to, kind of, get people ready and build that growth, have those opportunities for growth on your team. I think that that's such an important thing as a leader to give those opportunities to others on your team as well. So, something that we are always talking about, and really think is, is an important thing is just the idea of continual learning and how you can, kind of, always grow and always try to better yourself in your career. So, could you, kind of, touch on some types of continual learning that you've participated in, you know, throughout your leadership journey and really how they've benefited you?

NJ: Yeah. The main one that I would say is learning in the flow of life. And so, what that is is how can I take the opportunities and the experiences in the moments that I have had, what can I learn from it? And again, it to be from those high moments I've experienced, you know, celebration because we won that proposal. Taking the moment to pause and say, well, what allowed us to win that work? What allowed us to win that proposal? What allowed us to really meet the needs of that community, right? So, what did we do well? And again, it's a "we" because I had a part in it, but I didn't do it alone. So, what did we do well? So, I would say from the celebration, but also in those moments of when things did not go as planned. What came about as to why they did not go as planned, you know? It's not the time to point fingers and to blame. But let's really have conversations around next time, what are we going to do differently? Let's be proactive around it. So, I would say learning in the flow of life. Taking those moments to reflect, to pause, celebrate, and what did I learn from it? We

didn't get it, what did we learn from that? So, I said learning in the flow of life and then so that's something that I do. I also just recently completed a specialist in adult education. And so that is the third time that I decided to go back for formal education. Having my bachelor's from Spellman and then my master's in social work from the University of Georgia and now adding this on with a specialist in education also from the University of Georgia, I enjoy learning. I actually started out in this work as a practitioner, so doing the work again, learning in the flow of life, learning on the job. And I had that curiosity, and I wanted to get some of that scholarly information that supports the work that I actually do. And so really thinking about what will help you feel confident. Kind of going back to your previous question, what are the things that I need to have in place that allow me to feel confident in the role? And that was for me, it was nothing around the actual degree, but I wanted to feel confident in knowing who are thought leaders in this area that I can pull from what I need to and have them right there, readily accessible for me. So, I'm saying learning in the flow of life, formal education, things like this podcast. Listening to those from folks who really connect and align with our leadership philosophy, or who are in similar fields as us. That's an opportunity that I've also taken on to help me with my continual growth. And the other thing you all offer are the learnings from the training center. Participating in some of those as well has have been helpful. I also engage in coaching. So, I am a coach as well, but I also need my own coaching. And so, engaging in those coaching conversations to really think about what's been juicy that I am experiencing right now in my career that I need to talk through, that I need to process. So those are a few of the things that they do, and I offer those up for, for your listeners as well.

LK: Thank you so much. I, I really love that term “learning in the flow of life.” I think that, that's so important because we do, we can learn throughout our lives. I think it's, it's such a great concept to just, can think about learning as you go through life and different things that you can learn along the way. As we, kind of, get towards the, you know, to the end of our episode here, I just wanted to give you the opportunity if you have any final thoughts that you wanted to kind of share with our listeners sort of as we wrap up today.

NJ: The final thought I have Liz, is let us really release that traditional thought of leadership. Um, really think about who you are and how can you bring your unique spin to leadership. If folks were ever asked who's an exceptional leader and who is in who a poor leader? What is it that you want to do? What are the behaviors that you want to come to mind? What experience, what feelings do you want to come to mind so that you show up on that exceptional leader list? And it does not have to be these grand gestures. It really just has to be the thought that goes into I'm not putting people first. How am I working with my folks? How am I pouring to their development and how am I continually developing so that I can do all of those various different things? And so, it really ties back to that quote that I shared. People probably won't remember every single thing that you said, won't remember every single thing that you did. But they will remember how you made them feel. And, it's doing that work. Knowing who you are and how can you uniquely put your stamp on leadership so that folks feel who you are. That's what lasts. And feel what you provide for them. They feel that value. They feel that they're seen. They feel that they're heard.

LK: Thank you so much for sharing that and thanks so much for taking the time to be on the podcast. I so appreciated this conversation. It's been so, so important and so many great tips and insight to share with our listeners. So, I really appreciate you being on the podcast today, and thanks so much.

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Leading Public Health, a podcast from the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University. We value your feedback, so please take a minute to complete the evaluation located in the show notes. Thank you for joining us.

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