



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

Leading Public Health Podcast: Leadership Journey Series

Episode 5: Understanding Your Leadership Strengths Part 1 with Emily Saunders, Ed.D.

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.

Today I'm thrilled to be joined by Emily Saunders. Emily is a Public Service faculty member at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development at the University of Georgia. As part of the Community Leadership Program team, she specializes in creating and delivering programs to support individual and group learning with a particular interest in women's leadership development, organization development, creativity and innovation. The Region IV Public Health Training Center and the Fanning Institute have a strong partnership, and we're very fortunate to work with Emily on numerous projects, including several Public Health Leadership Institutes. Emily is here today to talk with us about the importance of understanding your personal strengths and how that can benefit you as a leader. Thank you for joining us, Emily. We're so excited to have you here with us today. To get us started, can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you got to where you are today in your public health career?

Emily Saunders (ES): Yes. First, I want to say I'm really excited to be here too. This is my first podcast interview, so thank you for inviting me. I really enjoyed working with you and all of your public health professionals through the Region IV Public Health Training Center. I've spent 17 years at the University of Georgia. Go dawgs! Supporting professional development and different leadership initiatives. So, I began my career in career services, working with students and alumni to help them develop the skills they needed to pursue their dream jobs. And now I'm part of the university's public service faculty. So, my role is primarily outreach. I apply the knowledge of brilliant people here at the university to meet evolving economic, social, and community needs. And that's where my career intersects with public health and our collaboration with you. Equally important though are my roles within my family. So, I've been married for 19 years, and my husband and I have three children. One who just turned 13. So, my oldest daughters are 13, 9 and 6. I have a six-year-old boy as well. And I maintain that parenting has provided many intense lessons and learning and leadership development. Honestly, parenting seems much harder than some of my professional responsibilities at times, so, um, kudos to all the working parents out there.

LK: Yes, I completely agree. Um, I'm not a parent, but I also know that many parents who are listening can probably relate to what you, um, are saying about that. It being a very challenging, but

a really rewarding job; maybe the most rewarding. So, can you tell us a little bit more about your leadership journey in general?

ES: Yeh, so when I was working in student services, I worked with a student ambassador group, and I saw that they were doing so much work for us. And it was really important that they also have some leadership development as part of that experience. And so, I started kind of dipping my toes into leadership and what that means for young professionals. But in 2017, I had the good fortune of being selected for the University of Georgia's Women's Staff Leadership Institute. It was a brand-new program that was started, and it was designed specifically for staff members. And as soon as I saw the announcement, I knew that was an experience that I wanted to take part of, and it was truly transformational. I grew so much from that experience, and it changed my career trajectory in several significant ways. So, it launched me into that learning and development space, and thinking about how we learn and how that helps both our personal and professional lives. It connected me with a lot of experienced leaders here at our university. And ultimately it ended up motivating me to complete my doctorate. And I seriously wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for the amazing women that I met through that program. Since then, my study of leadership has revealed hundreds of definitions of what leadership is. And my takeaway is that it all boils down to learning. So how can we continue as individuals and teams to adapt and learn to meet the challenges that we face? Unfortunately, most of the problems that we face lack easy answers, and we have to figure it out together. So that's kind of where my leadership journey has, ah, led me today and that's the question that guides my work here at UGA's Fanning Institute for Leadership Development. How can we best create and deliver programs that help people and help teams? Not only to support leadership development, but really to just build our individual and our team's capacity so that we can create that work environment that will help us not only enjoy our work, but solve the problems that we're all trying to solve or make progress on these really big challenges.

LK: Yes, absolutely. And I know you do some really amazing and important work at the Fanning Institute. Um, we're definitely going to come back to that and talk more about specifically things that you do in your work, but I'd also first love to hear about who or what really inspires you in your work overall.

ES: I'm constantly inspired by the successes of others. The news cycle, it's a little tough right now. You know there's a lot going on in the world, and some of us might be a little cynical about whether it's possible to realize some of the lofty goals that we have. How to support the changes within our organizations and society? And the funny thing is, in my role I teach a lot about change. You know, why we fail? How to plan for change so that we can be more successful. And I can share numerous models for how leaders plan and manage these changes. But there are people out there doing absolutely extraordinary things. You know, they didn't wait for a planned change, and they're just doing the work. You know, they're feeding the hungry. They're stocking the little free libraries. Or driving their neighbors to doctor's appointments. You know, there's loads of instances where people are doing this big, incredible, amazing work. So, when I have the opportunity to help one person figure out how to be more effective or to land their dream job. Make things a little bit more equitable. I find immense joy in that work and that really continues to inspire me. I mean it really is amazing sometimes. I got a text a couple weeks ago from a previous student that I had worked with, as she, after she graduated, she was an alumna of our institution, and she was asking for a little bit of help in negotiating the job search process. And then later she followed up and asked about

negotiating the job process. And finally, I get a text from her saying that she has accepted the job and not only did she accept the job, but she got more money than she went into it.

LK: That's great.

ES: Thinking that she would get and I mean, I just, I was excited for the whole week. Like, it really.

LK: Absolutely.

ES: Made my week to hear about that success.

LK: Yes, that's amazing.

ES: So when someone finds a way to lead in their own authentic way, that's the absolute best. My graduate advisor, Dr. Nicolaidis, used to ask us "Who are you becoming?" And that's a really big question and it used to throw me. I'd kind of be paralyzed thinking about, oh, what can I say that sounds really intelligent. How can I answer this? I'd come up blank. But then this summer I came across this quote from Abraham Maslow.

LK: Oh yeah, the Hierarchy of Needs.

ES: So that triangle and it says we have to, you know, meet our basic needs before we can live into our highest potential. And so Maslow describes self-actualization as the desire to become more and more what one is. To become everything that one is capable of becoming. And I read his words, and it just sort of clicked. I'm inspired when you get a little bit closer to the leader that you're capable of becoming, and what you're capable of becoming is different than what I'm capable of becoming. And that's the beauty of inclusive leadership. You know, we need a diverse community of people who are working to be their best. You know we need you with your strengths. We need Jermaine and his strengths. We need Benita and her strengths. All of us coming together to solve problems. And I get to be part of how to do that, which is really exciting. And some of those people, I was just talking about, are some of the amazing public health professionals that I get to work with. And, you know, you all are doing absolutely incredible work. I don't know that there are many more challenging contexts to work in when you consider the broad array of disciplines that are represented and the complex challenges from COVID to maternal health, to gun violence. There's so many highly impactful things that your listeners are doing out there. So, I get really excited and inspired by the work that you all do.

LK: I definitely agree, and I'm also always very inspired to hear about different people, especially people who are doing really boots on the ground public health work, because I know it's challenging and I know it can be really difficult. But at the same time, it's so rewarding and so needed, so I am also very inspired when I hear about a lot of the work that people do. So, to our listeners, you're doing great. Keep up the great work. And, you know, I also love the quote that you shared and the idea of understanding everyone's unique strengths and what they bring to the table, because we all bring something different to the table and I think that that's important to recognize. So, on that same kind of note, you utilize personality assessments quite a bit in your work. In what way is this helpful for leadership development?

ES: I love assessments for a couple different reasons. First, they can help us grow in our self-awareness to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. So, I hope everyone knows, we

can't be great at everything. If an assessment points out a specific strength, often times there's a corresponding opportunity for improvement, and that could be a blind spot for some of us. Or some of us might be kind of aware, but it gives us a little bit of a reasoning for why this shows up in a particular way. For example, let's take assertiveness. Assertiveness can be a great strength. As an assertive person, you likely move through the world with purpose. You have goals. You might be a fierce advocate for your goals. You might be a fierce advocate for the people on your team, and advocate passionately for others and speak up for what you think is right. So that all sounds great. What's the potential blind spot? Well, you might not realize, but you could be bulldozing over others' agendas as you pursue your own ideas. Or perhaps you aren't seen as a team player, or someone who's open to other perspectives. You might have to consider your context. How does this show up for you in your role within your organization? But the odds are, this going to come into play at some point. Which kind of leads us to our next step, identifying opportunities for improvement. Or maybe some of those times where a slightly different approach could serve you better. So let's say you realize you are overstepping a bit, and you need to make space for others on your team to speak up or to take ownership for some aspects of your work. How might you do that within your context? Those are really powerful questions that an assessment could start you in that reflection process or open up some conversations with people around you. Which leads me to the other reason that assessments are really great. They can give us a common language. So when you take them with a group, it can give you the language to not only understand and describe yourself and how you show up in certain environments, but you might be able to use it to explain some of the differences or some of the tensions you feel when working with others. So, they can help you communicate better when you understand the nuances associated with people's different preferences. So, I, I love assessments for so many different reasons, but I also don't want anyone to ever think that they're being put in a box, and I think we'll talk a little bit more about that later.

LK: Yes, definitely. And thank you so much for sharing that. I can absolutely relate to a lot of things that you're saying about understanding people more, kind of, explaining differences and tensions that you might feel with different people that you work with. Our team just completed the Emergenetics Profile, um, and it was so interesting to learn more about each person on our team and this is just, was just our, our smaller central office team and just kind of learning about our thinking style and preferences. And I not only learned a lot about myself, but I learned more about others on our team. And moving forward, I think this is going to be really beneficial for us working together cause now we just kind of understand each other just that much more. So, something that came up when we were discussing this as well as some other assessments because some of us have taken some other assessments as well, it's just some potential assumptions that can be made about a person or even about yourself after getting the results of an assessment. Sometimes you get your results and you, maybe you didn't see yourself that way, and then you, you know, you're kind of thinking is this a positive or a negative? So, what do you recommend to somebody who might be feeling a little bit unsure or uncomfortable about a certain result that they got from a particular assessment?

ES: A facilitator I know likes to say, just try it on. Whatever category, whatever it says about you, just, just try that on for a few minutes and see how it feels or consider, you know, what it's telling you and what you could learn from it. So, but the other side of that is you do have to self-validate just because, you know, Emergenetics might say, oh well, you were obviously a very social person and

you like to talk to everyone, doesn't mean that that's how it shows up for you. You know, it might, it might be differently expressed, and so I chuckle a little bit as you're talking about Emergenetics, and understanding your team better because my husband and I also both took Emergenetics for different, we took it through different programs, but I have a picture of his Emergenetics profile right next to my Emergenetics profile and I frequently look at it. And I'm like this explains so much.

LK: Yes.

ES: So it does help in your professional, but also in your personal life sometimes. But yeah, none of us fit into, you know, a specific type all the time. So, what one assessment might say, oh well, you're mostly blue. Well, you have to think about what that actually means for you and how it shows up in different scenarios. So, I love the Hogan Assessment. One of the things that some of the different Hogan reports show is we show completely differently in times when we are fulfilled, we're doing work that we love, we are playing to our strengths and conditions are good. That might look different than when we're really stressed or when we're bored, or when we're working, you know, on a new task. Whatever type or whatever advice and insights you get, you also have to think about there are other contextual factors that play that can be really important. And whatever it says is also not an excuse to say, oh well, my type behaves this way. So, it's OK that, you know, I'm really direct and I hurt your feelings because that's just my personality type. Like it doesn't give you a hall pass to treat others a certain way. We still have to learn and grow. And so, the second part is that we need to be careful making assumptions of others' preferences. So, it's one thing when you take an assessment with a team. And you know, it's challenged by choice. They can decide what they want to share with you or not, but typically if you do, you know Emergenetics or DiSC, people are going to share oh this is what it said about me. But you need to know that, and people need to explain how that comes up in terms of their communication preferences, because we're not all the same. There's only four colors, but there's millions of people that you may work with one day. So, we don't want to make, you know, broad generalizations about other people without having conversations with them. And I think it's important to remember that even when we're looking at our strengths and we're considering what those blind spots are or where we might be more effective in our roles, the point isn't to change your personality. The point is to think about, well, you know, what are the situations, what are the scenarios where I might show up a little differently? Or I might experiment and try something a little bit new so that I can be more successful. So, for example, if you're, you know that really assertive person who's used to speaking your mind and taking charge, are there situations where maybe you should lead by listening first and allowing others to go first? Just that simple behavior change is not going to change your personality. And that's absolutely OK, because we need everyone to come at things from different angles.

LK: Yeah, definitely. I think that's really great advice and insight, and so interesting to think about how you might present different, differently on some of these assessments just based on where you are in your life. What's going on in your life. How fulfilled you are and things like that. And I also think that's important to remember when people take assessments just to keep that in mind. And I think you kind of made this point that these assessments, you know, the point isn't to change your personality, but just really better understand your preferences and how you typically work with others, but you can try things on as you said, and learn and grow as, you know, you go on in your life so I think that's important to remember. So, when thinking about an assessment that really shows our strengths, how can better understanding something that you're typically strong in, as well as

areas that you have for potential growth, how do you think that really helps you to become a better leader?

ES: I think understanding your strengths can help you make a better contribution. It could be in your home, in your volunteer work, in your professional life. But when people use their natural talents, they're often more successful in a lot of ways. And they might be happier, you know, when they're in positions that utilize those natural strengths. And also, when you realize that, hey, one of my colleagues is a really great public speaker, so maybe I'm gonna allow them to make this pitch, you know, even though we've worked on it together. I think it's helpful in finding opportunities where people can shine and that makes people feel great. Someone who's really detail oriented and a very logical thinker may thrive working independently on data reporting for long stretches of time, whereas others who are more socially proactive and enjoy meeting new people might get bored working on data analysis for a long stretch of time, you know, so how are you using the human resources that you have? And that is absolutely not to say that just because it's not your, not a natural strength that you can't learn to be better in some of those scenarios. But giving people the benefit of the doubt and letting them work in areas where they're going to be naturally successful is a great strategy. We can all learn new things for sure. But we really kind of want to lean into those strengths. And sometimes job fit is really important, so if you learn that you have strengths in a certain area and you sit there thinking about, well, what am I spending most of my time doing? If there's not alignment there, that could potentially lead you in a new direction. Or it could point out the fact that maybe I need to find a way to be more fulfilled in my current role or find a particular outlet or hobby or something that could really help in this situation. That self-awareness and thinking about what your strengths in that alignment can also help you think about why you feel so drained in certain situations, you know, and what can you do about it. So, I think that understanding is really important. However, understanding our strengths and trying to stay in scenarios where our greatest strengths are constantly on display might sound like a solid success strategy, but it isn't a reason to neglect our opportunities for improvement. So, there are a few critiques related to strength spaced leadership approaches, just like there are critiques on everything. But when you focus only on utilizing people's strengths, people may not be motivated to improve those areas where they're the weakest or just judge them as completely inconsequential. But if you think about the individual level, if someone has a fatal flaw that leads everyone else on their team to resign, or it leads to failure in another way, you can't ignore that. You know, you can't just say, oh, well, that's not their strength. You know, they're not necessarily emotionally intelligent. We will just excuse that. So, we've got to really kind of dig into both our strengths and our opportunities for improvement, and that's a foundational aspect of building our self-awareness, which is also important to becoming a more emotionally intelligent leader. So, it just influences so much about how we relate to and how we communicate with others. And that's at the individual level, but also at the team level, we have to think about those strengths as well. So, I know, Liz, you had talked about learning about everyone on your team and how you were similar and how you were different. So, what did, what was that like for you?

LK: Very interesting. I would want to say the most interesting thing is that our team's actually very similar in a lot of ways, but it made sense. Like, we are all similar in the way we may present. Some of us might be a little more assertive than others. But none of us, assertiveness wasn't for any of us like our strongest attribute. And it makes sense because sometimes we're in meetings and, it, we all

seem to be similar in the way of an idea is presented, and we need in a little time to think about that idea before we have insight or reaction sometimes to, to give back to that, sometimes we need to take that and kind of marinate with that idea for a little bit. So, doing this personality assessment really kind of helped us understand that and see why sometimes in meetings we sit there going what? Anyone have an idea? And we maybe don't have that right away, but we'll come back later with those ideas or come back to have that conversation later. Um, we just need that, that time to think about it.

ES: Yep, that's a great example, and it highlights the fact that often we like to work with people who are like us. And so.

LK: Mm.

ES: When we're all, when we all might have the same personality type or the same color, however it shows up on the assessment, our communication feels a little easier. Maybe not as tense.

LK: Mm.

ES: It's those differences that can cause us to get a little scratchy at times.

LK: Yeh.

ES: But that aligns kind of with a real-world example. So, I use the FourSight Mindset or the FourSight Thinking Profile a lot when I'm working with teams on creative problem solving. And so the FourSight Framework includes four steps to creative problem solving: clarify, ideate, develop and implement. And you can take an assessment, and it shows what stage of the process you typically enjoy the most. And they're all important. So, most of us have a preference for one or two parts of the creative process. And some of us love to clarify the problem. So that means we ask all the questions. We collect all the data, and we spend time thinking about are we trying to solve the correct problem. Whereas some of us like to jump in quickly to brainstorming. You know, when we think about all those ideas you said, sometimes you all kind of look at each other and where are the ideas? Hmm, let's think about it. And then you know the developer role is important too, because they take those ideas that the ideators came up with and they figure out what's the best one. Maybe it's the most cost-effective. Maybe it's the one that can actually be accomplished within a specific timeline. They take that idea and they look for all the potential weaknesses. And then there's the most action-oriented group, the implementers, and they bring the idea to life. So, let's say you have a team with no ideators who want to explore all the possible ideas. Or what if you have a team that don't have any implementers to execute the plan. You're just going to kind of stall out, right? You're like, well, we had a great plan and. So, this happens every single day. Teams are missing certain skills or certain attributes. So, you can't just say, oh well, we don't have any ideators so our plan flopped. You know, it wasn't the best one. You've got to learn some extra tricks or dedicate time to those parts of the process. So, we all have to build those muscles or follow certain processes and procedures in order to make sure that we achieve the things that we want to achieve. So even if it's not an area where you're naturally gifted, you know you still might need to dedicate some resources there. So that's just one kind of example of how that shows up for people. And going back to communication, you brought up assertiveness. Everyone is really kind to each other but learning about our strengths and maybe our communication preferences can help us tailor our approach

when we're working with others. So how we deal with someone who's like us might be a little bit different than how we communicate with someone who has a different communication style or preference than us. And that's the really difficult job sometimes of being a leader is we need to tailor our approach to get the best out of the people that we work with. And sometimes that doesn't feel natural. Like sometimes we have to go out of our way to make sure they can hear and receive that information. Some of us love those quick bullet point listed emails and some of us want all of the data. Numerous attachments and spreadsheets and tables. So just recognizing that clarifier or that person with all the questions, they're not trying to ignore you. They may not even be shooting down your brilliant idea. They just want more information. So how can we adapt? And how can we be ready for that?

LK: Yes, I can, absolutely see that, and it kind of makes me think of something that, an activity that we did when we were going through our Emergenetics Profile. It's my favorite activity and I've seen it done, we do this with our Leadership Institute, so I've seen it done many times and then I got to participate in it. And it was, kind of, plan your perfect vacation. And I am, I love lists. I love to do lists. I love checking things off lists. I like to be organized. I like to plan. And so, you know, my planning for my vacation had a list with what to do first, what to do second. You know, it was numbered. And other people, even on my, our own team, were just thinking, well, I have a loose idea. I might go to this place around this time and then I'll just figure it out. And I think it's really interesting because for someone like me, that sounds very stressful. But my idea that makes me feel less stressed than having all the plan, what might make someone else feel like that's too much? So, you know, it's just really interesting to better understand ourselves and what we need. Neither one is right or wrong. It's just different. And you know, we all have different strengths and different areas, that different preferences and things. So when we're looking at really the workplace and how we communicate with each other, how do you think, kind of, better understanding each other can help us promote a better overall culture in the workplace?

ES: So I really love the book *An Everyone Culture* by Bob Keegan and Lisa Lahey. They're constructive developmental psychologists that have also tried to intersect their work with leadership and organization development. But one of the things that they say, I think it is on page 1 of the book, is that we spend so much time hiding our weaknesses from one another and the mental energy and the things that we do to cover up our mistakes, it's costing, you know, our own happiness, but also it's costing our organizations. And so, I think understanding our strengths and our weaknesses is the first part of kind of making a better work culture. But that next part is figuring out how can we lean into our strengths, but also how can we grow and make progress at times when our weaknesses are keeping us from reaching our full potential. And part of that is creating an environment where people feel like they can speak up and they can say, oh, you know what, I'm not exactly sure how to do this? This is not something I've done before, but these are the steps I'm gonna take. Or you know I'm gonna reach out to Liz and get some of her expertise to help me through this. That's huge, but also how can we be vulnerable and have some of these conversations with one another so that they can help us as well, so that people on our team can say, oh, you know what, this might not have been the best approach. You know, how do you think that went? How can we make this better next time? So, I think really having some open and honest conversations can be really powerful. And I fully recognize that everyone cannot do that in the current work environment that they are in right now. Sometimes it's not safe to do that and so, how can you find colleagues,

people who that you trust to talk about, hey, this is a place that I'm struggling. Can you offer some insights? Or I'm going to try X, Y, and Z. What do you think of this plan? So, finding those people that you trust that can help you, um, navigate some of those situations can be really important.

LK: Yeah, yeah. Definitely, that's very important and really interesting. I never thought about that aspect of that, that we spend that time hiding our weaknesses, but I understand it. I mean, we all kind of want to be good at everything, but we're not. We can't be. There's plenty of things that we have areas where we can improve and grow. So, along those same lines, do you have some resources that you could recommend to those who are interested in learning more about their strengths and their leadership style and kind of learning more about themselves?

ES: Yeah. So, we talked about Emergenetics. We talked about Hogan and FourSight, and those are some assessments that are available to different people. But there's also some free and low-cost assessments you can take online. So, I'm not talking about which Harry Potter house are you? I think there's tests that are kind of based on 16 personalities. So, if you google that, you can find some online kind of quizzes. Mindtools has some online quizzes that you can take. And you can find some kind of equivalent to DiSC also. And then there's some relatively inexpensive. So Real Colors. StrengthsFinders. DiSC. Those are usually affordable, so if you wanted to do something with your team, you could find a facilitator to do that or order those online. And then there's some pricier options, like the Hogan, Emergenetics, Global Leadership Profile. You can find information about those online, too. Another assessment that we didn't really talk about and it could be pricey, but is really important and it's used a lot in coaching, and that's a 360. And so there are different companies that offer 360s. But with this assessment, you're actually collecting feedback from others whom you work with. And you can choose who you're reaching out to, so it could be people you work with in your job or, you know, volunteer with or that you come into contact within other contexts. But you're getting that feedback from them about your leadership practices, and it can be a little humbling at times. But if you're open to the experience, it can be extremely helpful. And research shows that receiving sometimes negative constructive feedback can be an even more powerful motivator for change than receiving positive feedback. If, if you want to go there, that can be a really great catalyst for learning and growth. I also like to read a lot and so I know reading isn't everyone's thing, but you can hear great ideas through the form of podcasts as well. So, I love Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead*. And Adam Grant has two different podcast; *Work Life* and *Rethinking*. And they touch a lot on different leadership styles. And the more you listen to leaders talk, the more you'll see they're so incredibly diverse. And so, you know, what can you take by learning about other people in other contexts and, what can you apply to your own life? And then finally, I think TED Talks are a really great option too. So, you can google TED Talk and just about any topic that you're interested in. And, usually you can trust that that's coming from a great source cause they have to vet those talks, and there's a lot of fact checking that goes on too. So, that's a really great resource.

LK: Yes, thank you so much for sharing those. I think that those are some really, really great resources. And to our listeners, we will share these resources in the show notes of this episode, so you can check them out there. And we will link to those resources.

That really brings us to the end of our episode. But, thank you so much for chatting with me and I really look forward to continuing this discussion in our next episode where we will talk about professional development and the importance of continual learning.

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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