Leadership in Public Health Practice

Public health problems pose special challenges. They are generally enormous in scale, stem from numerous and highly complex causes, play out in the public eye, impact a vast array of stakeholders, and require unusually long-term solutions. The massive scope and complexity of such problems, including conditions such as uncontrolled childhood mortality, suboptimal maternal health, HIV/AIDS, cardiovascular disease, and cancer, among others, affect millions worldwide. Furthermore, the health issues quickly trigger a host of other families, economic and social problems that ruin lives, erode communities, and weaken countries. Moreover, public health is always, by definition, “public,” often requiring its leaders to practice their craft “on stage” in full view of admirers and critics alike. Multiple stakeholders demand and deserve transparency. “In the field of public health (leadership) relates to the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of their community and/or the organization in which they work. It involves inspiring people to craft and achieve a vision and goals. Leaders provide mentoring, coaching, and recognition. They encourage empowerment, allowing other leaders to emerge.”

Following are the characteristics of leaders:
• Ability to build and communicate a vision
• Ability to collaborate and lead interprofessional teams
• Strategic flexibility and ability to maneuver political and legal contexts of public health and health-care systems
• Ability to self-renew, learn, and face challenges with spirituality and humor.

Along with these characteristics, a leader is influenced by these factors that enable for leadership like
• Relationships and championship
• Leadership is valued and supported
• Mentorship and succession planning
• Policy commitment
• Full scope of practice.

Public health leadership is not without barriers, following are the barriers faced by the leadership
• Work situations that lead to fatigue and burnout
• Multiple challenges in the workplace
• Tensions from multiple sources
• Organizational structures and culture
• Organizational change efforts
• Personnel issues.

In short, public health requires its leaders to stretch their minds and souls in almost unimaginable ways. Public health has only recently begun to explore the potential of formal leadership education and training.

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