Lessons Learned for Future Leaders

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Leadership will define our success and the success of our profession.

EHA published two outstanding articles in 2006 and 2007 titled, “Profiles in Leadership, Part I: JEH Goes on a Quest,” and “Profiles in Leadership, Part II: The 15 Faces of Environmental Health Leadership.” (Journal of Environmental Health, 69[5], December 2006; Journal of Environmental Health, 69[6], January/February 2007). Author Rebecca Berg, PhD, did a fabulous job in a “quest” to find out what leadership means to environmental health practitioners and then put a face to the “profile.”

At the time Dr. Berg interviewed me for the article, I tried to rationalize why those of us in environmental health struggle to become leaders. I was quoted as saying, “Many people who go into science, candidly, are not exactly well versed in people skills. They chose science because it’s finite. There’s an adventure and discovery and an outcome. And they haven’t necessarily had to depend on others in those relationships to make things happen.” My focus at the time was that leaders in our profession needed people skills in addition to a strong technical background.

Even before that interview and certainly since, I have been a student of leadership. Attempting a degree of modesty, I have been enabled to “practice” leadership in various environments. Armed with education and experience, I can now attest that there are certain qualities or attributes that facilitate leadership thought and practice. Here are some lessons learned for aspiring and future leaders.

A number of years ago I read an article by Carl Neu, an executive vice president and general manager of a company that provides resources and services for local governments. The article was entitled, “Leadership: Awakening the Best in People” (Texas Town and City, February 2003). Many of its vignettes stayed with me.

In his article, Neu stated that leaders engage people by touching the imagination and consciousness of others. He described this as reaching out to people to bring them into a community. I believe he was describing the active use of vision: communication of a clear, succinct picture that provides not only the goal or endgame, but also a path as to how to attain the vision. He was describing a leadership tool. Establishing a vision requires incorporating it into the very fabric of the community, organization, or team. It requires buy in and commitment from the top down and bottom up.

Leaders must inspire themselves and others to achieve the vision—to make things happen—to change. Leaders must have passion! You generally cannot inspire others if you are not bought in and almost evangelical in your communication and actions. Those whom you lead must know you are taking them to a better place, personally and professionally.

In the September 2012 issue of the JEH, I wrote of ethics and integrity. It bears repeating that leaders require a higher standard of honesty and integrity than that expected of others. I expect honesty, integrity, and ethical behavior from those whom I choose to follow and in turn, team members expect it of me and I expect it of myself!

Leaders are facilitators that empower and support teamwork. Most people cannot achieve what they want or need by themselves. Leaders need the contributions of others and leaders need teams to get things done. Well-composed teams are generally comprised of those who have similar drive, attitudes, and skills. They are bought in and committed to the vision. They are also generally competitive—everyone wants to be on the best team!

Leadership and leading means one must embrace change. In fact, leadership is all about change! There is no need for leadership if no change is needed. (I think that’s called a paraprosdokian—a figure of speech in which the latter part of a sentence or phrase is surprising or humorous. Winston Churchill was a master of paraprosdokians!) Embracing change in this day and time also means embracing technology. It is not necessary to be a technical or technology expert. It is important to understand that technology and the evolution of technology will get and keep you in the game!
Finally, I believe emotional intelligence (EI) is critical to leadership. Daniel Goldman of Rutgers University wrote about EI in *Harvard Business Review* in his 1998 article, “What Makes a Leader.” Goldman proposed that “IQ and technical skills are important, but emotional intelligence is the *sine qua non* (indispensable or essential characteristic) of leadership.” He described five components of EI: (1) self-awareness—an ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, and their impact on others; (2) self-regulation—the ability to control or redirect behaviors and actions that are not constructive and the ability to think before acting; (3) motivation—passion and energy that goes beyond money and status; (4) empathy—listen to and understand others and treat them appropriately; and (5) social skills—managing relationships, building networks, and finding common ground.

I believe if we incorporate these attributes, and let experience serve as lessons for thought and practice, the type of leadership we provide as environmental health professionals, no matter the venue in which we practice, will define our success and the success of our profession.

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A large focus for the NEHA 2013 AEC will be Policy Involvement. NEHA is looking to build an AEC that will be a place for environmental health leaders; federal, state, and local governments; and policy makers to come together in Washington, DC, to collaborate on policies that provide greater support for the work you do, greater opportunities for environmental health professionals, and more power for the cause of environmental health!

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**Walter S. Mangold Award**

The Walter S. Mangold Award recognizes an individual for extraordinary achievement in environmental health. Since 1956, this award acknowledges the brightest and the best in the profession. NEHA is currently accepting nominations for this award by an affiliate or by any five NEHA members, regardless of their affiliation.

The Mangold is NEHA’s most prestigious award and while it recognizes an individual, it also honors an entire profession for its skill, knowledge, and commitment to public health.

Nominations are due in the NEHA office by Friday, March 15, 2013.

For information, please visit www.neha.org/about/awardinfo.html. Members can obtain nomination forms by calling 303.756.9090, ext. 302, or by sending an e-mail to tosner@neha.org.