

Contagious Leadership, Part 2

Through twelve years of collaboration with the North Carolina Institute for Public Health, Discovery Learning, Inc. has helped the Institute create and deliver industry-specific leadership development for its several programs. Two articles share this experience.

Leadership Displayed

"You may only have one chance to get out ahead of it," said Dr. Richard Besser, the acting chief of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "It's important for people to understand that all of these decisions will need to be made with incomplete science."

- Associated Press, May 10, 2009

In the spring of 2009, public health leaders around the world were challenged by the emerging threat of a global pandemic. Decisions were required and made at all levels by professionals confronted with uncertainty.

As Chris Musselwhite comments here from his December interview, "We believe the biggest challenge today is managing complexity and ambiguity—how to move ahead in uncertain circumstances."

Effective leadership by public health officials continues to be a critical capacity in our society to act decisively and effectively in the face of health threats and to help produce calm and to thus offset calamity. ●

In the previous issue of Excursions, "Contagious Leadership, Part I" explored the experience of the North Carolina Institute for Public Health in developing leaders for the public health care sector during this decade. Part 2 of this exploration looks more closely at the experience of the Institute in collaborating with Discovery Learning over a 12 year period to develop a continuing partnership to help serve the leadership development needs of public health professionals.

Donna Dinkin, former director of the Southeast Public Health Leadership Institute, and Dr. Chris Musselwhite, president of Discovery Learning, Inc., provide their insight and perspective on the shared experience.

Working Together

Dinkin: The North Carolina Institute for Public Health (NCIPH) is an education unit of the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Before the institute came into existence, the School was already operating a leadership development program with a similar name, called the Southeast Public Health Leadership Institute (SEPHLI). I joined the grant-funded effort in its first year to help plan this initial program, and then I served as the Director of SEPHLI for its first nine years. In the beginning, the program served North Carolina, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

From the start, we knew that we wanted to serve practicing professionals in the public health arena. This sector of health care is so diverse in the range of professions that are involved. We have medical doctors, sociologists, community educators, statisticians, epidemiologists, nurses—a whole range of professionals. And the types of skills that people need to lead effectively in this field cover a broad range as well. So, creating a leadership program to serve all those needs was a good challenge.

One member of the planning team had recently attended the National Public Health Leadership Institute at Stanford University. When we started talking about leadership awareness, she told us about her experience in that program and heartily suggested that we contact Dr. Chris Musselwhite, because of the work he had done with the national leadership institute. I have always shared that story with some amusement because he and I are both in North Carolina, I

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had already met him through the Center for Creative Leadership. It was interesting to me that he was being recommended by someone in West Virginia for his work in California when he was just down the road in North Carolina. It turned out to be a fortunate find for us. Discovery Learning has helped us in so many ways to sharpen and improve the program during the past 11 years. It has been a great collaboration.

Musselwhite: Our work with NCIPH has been an interesting experience of working together and feeding off each other's ideas, a true collaboration, I think. We started with the original SEPHLI program over a decade ago. The program has had three directors in that time and some of the other people in NCIPH have moved on in their careers. Today, Discovery Learning is the only one with a relationship to the program for its full history; we have the continuity. We have helped them with many of the other new programs they have started, too. NCIPH now has an Emerging Leaders Program for minority public health leaders. They have a Management Academy, and they operate some leadership programs for private-sector health care firms as well. Over the years, each of these programs has begun using simulation and assessment tools created by Discovery Learning.

Leadership Profile

Dinkin: We determined in our planning for SEPHLI that providing feedback to public health professionals was essential to improving their leadership. For the first few years, we used assessment

tools that were designed and intended for leaders in general business. Most of those skills apply to the public health sector, of course, but we wanted something that spoke about leadership issues in the same language we used and recognized the unique challenges faced in our work. Discovery Learning told me they were interested in creating a leadership assessment tool specific to the public health industry, so I put Chris in touch with the National Public Health Leadership Development Network. (We called this the NLN or sometimes just the Network.) It was, and still is, a network of professionals like me who are directors of public health leadership programs around the country.

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*- Donna Dinkin, former Director,
Southeast Public Health Leadership Institute*

Musselwhite: We used three different leadership assessment tools in the first three years of doing this and none was really right for the need. Discovery Learning decided we could build a better instrument. Donna Dinkin connected me with the Network (NLN). We teamed up with ten people in that group and pursued a Delphi process to arrive by consensus on the leadership competencies appropriate for the public health arena. Discovery

Learning researched the issues and created the initial list of competencies. We passed this list through three iterations of successive evaluations by the Delphi participants. Together, we pared the list down to 15 competencies critical to leadership in the public health sector. Those are the competencies measured by 62 performance items through the Discovery Leadership Profile for Public Health assessment tool.

Dinkin: Creating the new assessment tool was no small feat, of course, but the effort paid off handsomely for SEPHLI. With the new *Discovery Leadership Profile for Public Health[®]* we were offering our participants feedback specific to the challenges they faced and using the vocabulary and terminology that everyone could interpret consistently.

Database

Dinkin: The new *Discovery Leadership Profile for Public Health[®]* was a positive development the first year we used it, and Discovery Learning soon made it even more valuable. They created a database and added to it each year the responses from all the professionals completing the assessment. Not only were our participants getting feedback on their personal performance, they could see how they compared to a larger group of professionals.

I will add too that because we have a host of people in our profession who come from the hard sciences, establishing the validity and credibility of any assessment instrument was important. The database Discovery Learning created



really helped confirm for our users that this was reliable feedback they were getting. Discovery Learning has added to that database each year.

Musselwhite: We have data on the leadership assessments of public health professionals dating back about five years; and, we have data for public health participants for some of our other instruments, including *Change Style Indicator*® and *Paper Planes, Inc.*® (a simulation exercise) dating back 11 years. Our database gives participants an idea of how their performance matches up among their peer professionals working in the public health arena. Participants are getting raw data scores, but what they want to know is what is high and what is low for people who do what they do. Seeing this normative data helps them understand what those raw scores mean. With some of our assessment instruments, including *Change Style Indicator*® and *Decision Style Profile*®, participants can compare their performance not only with other public health professionals but also with managers and executives in other sectors. For example, we have discovered in our work that with regard to Change Styles and the Conserver-Pragmatist-Originator continuum, public health professionals tend to be represented by a significantly larger percentage of Pragmatists than other professions. Our experience suggests this is probably because they work in a politically charged sector. Certainly at the county level, priorities can change quickly and that means these professionals have to be flexible. People who are flexible work well in the public health environment.

One-on-one Coaching

Dinkin: Completing the new

leadership assessment instrument led us to our next challenge. Previously,

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when we gave that feedback, we did it as a group. We did not talk specifics with any individual about what his or her feedback meant. I felt this was a real shortcoming in our program, but funding was always the roadblock. However, believing in the benefits to be gained, we pursued sources for funding it and Discovery Learning provided SEPHLI with a team of professional coaches. Through that collaboration, we were able to provide one-on-one coaching and interpretation about the feedback these public health professionals had received. Year after year, this one-on-one coaching continues to be mentioned by participants at the end of the program as one of the most valuable parts of SEPHLI. This one-on-one coaching, they believe, helps them the most.

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Musselwhite: We were able to bring in a coach for each participant so that we could provide one-on-one coaching. They would get their feedback in the group first and then have an hour-and-a-half session with a coach who had seen their data ahead

of time and could provide additional interpretation. First, and foremost, we brought in experienced coaches, people who knew how to help others integrate and interpret feedback. We also selected coaches who were intimately familiar with the assessment tools we were using. This one-on-one coaching has proven to be one of the most helpful and powerful aspects of the leadership programs with whom we consult.

Peer Coaching

Dinkin: After my time as director of SEPHLI, I understand Discovery Learning has since developed a peer-coaching program that instructs participants on how to assist others with interpreting their feedback and establishing next-step approaches to using that feedback to improve their leadership performance. I think that is a good alternative if getting the one-on-one coaching is not possible. And I understand it has other advantages for participants as well.

Musselwhite: The introduction of the peer-coaching model is evidence of our continued collaboration with NCIPH. First, we created a leadership assessment tool specific to public health and collected a database specific to leadership performance in this profession. A year or two later we provided one-on-one coaching to augment the program. Then to supplement that offering, we created a training tool for developing peer-coaching skills, something the participants can take back to their

workplaces and use effectively with their own teams. The peer coaching model actually teaches and develops a leadership skill that is becoming critically important to every effective leader regardless of the profession.

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We created the Peer Coaching module to provide more time in small groups for these professionals to look at their data. Our intent was also to teach them about the value and process of asking good questions. Time and again, we hear public health managers recount how they are continually faced with subordinates coming to them with questions on how to do their jobs. For the most part, managers in public health have a tendency to be helpful people, so they get down in the trenches and get involved with the problems. This is a time robber, of course, because they are dealing with problems their subordinates should be solving on their own. The Peer Coaching module helps these managers develop the skills for asking better questions and thus helping these subordinates to learn how to solve problems on their own. We also see that participants in the programs are eager to take this new skill back into their workplaces and to start asking more questions in their regular interactions. Knowing how to ask questions and knowing how to be still and listen are important leadership skills. It sounds simple but it takes some training and practice to do it well. Through this experience, participants in the public health leadership development programs are developing more of a coaching leadership style—less telling and more asking. This enables subordinates to learn how to discover the answer within themselves instead of the manager just telling them what to do.

A Collaborative Partnership

Dinkin: Discovery Learning has been involved in other aspects of the leadership development at the NC Institute for Public Health as well. The various programs continue to use two of their simulations, *Paper Planes, Inc.*® and *PaperScrapers*®.

These are excellent experiential learning activities that help participants learn about themselves as individuals and as members of a group. We relied on two other Discovery Learning assessment instruments, too: *Decision Style Profile*® and *Change Style Indicator*®. Our participants came out of those sessions with some practical learning and some skills they could apply immediately to their real-world problems. All the assessments and simulations we used from Discovery Learning were practical and that was

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most important to our participants. They wanted knowledge and training they could use tomorrow.

One of the things I prized the most about SEPHLI’s relationship with Discovery Learning was their willingness to try something new and to go the extra bit to make things work for us. I know the program directors who followed after me found that same willingness and creativity to be a great benefit to their efforts to develop leadership effectively.

Musselwhite: The programs at NC Institute for Public Health have been a pocket for innovation. We’ve tried new things, found what works, tweaked the process, and continually improved on what we were doing as part of the training. Some of these ideas then spread into other programs. We continue to work with them and look forward to helping them with new challenges.

Looking Forward

Musselwhite: In our current economic, political, and social environment, the need to effectively anticipate, create, and manage change is one of the premiere challenges facing leaders. Helping organizations successfully maneuver through transitions is a critical leadership capability. Leaders will have to think more creatively and be more innovative, learning to do more with less. We also continue to see issues emerging around ethics and sustainability. We are looking at developing programs to help professionals develop their skills in dealing with those issues.

We believe, however, the biggest challenge today is managing complexity and ambiguity—how to move ahead in uncertain circumstances. In the

public health sector, this complexity relates to its involvement with so many different disciplines and the need to deal in such diverse vocabularies, not to mention the variety of constituencies and agencies. Moreover, public health works in a politically-charged environment in local geographies. Local decisions have to be made by leaders with their eyes focused on their communities and their ears attuned to the regulatory and enabling edicts of remote organizations and agencies. This is a challenging situation for any profession to succeed in; it demands competent leaders. Fortunately, North Carolina Institute for Public Health is providing the programs that develop the leaders who will guide the public health sector into its demanding future. Discovery Learning is pleased to be collaborating with them in meeting that challenge. ●