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# Polishing the Apple: A Holistic Approach to Developing Public Health Law Educators as Leaders of Change

*Debra Gerardi*

“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 longterm solutions.<sup>1</sup>... In short, public health requires its leaders to stretch their minds and souls in almost unimaginable ways.”<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) public health law faculty fellowship program<sup>3</sup> provided an opportunity for legal and public health scholars to come together to develop innovative approaches for teaching public health law in schools of law, public health, medicine, and social work nationally. The primary goals of the fellowship program were to provide the ten fellows with dedicated resources to help them design and implement exemplary educational initiatives that would increase the availability of professionals with expertise in public health law and create sustainable organizational change in their academic institutions, all as a means of furthering a “culture of health” across the United States.

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The fellowship program emphasized the importance of integrating individual change (personal and professional development) with organizational change as twin pillars of the core competencies necessary for advancing public health law education. To further support the sustainability of the projects and ongoing scholarship, a community of practice model<sup>4</sup> was utilized to create a network of like-minded colleagues who co-created resources and shared expertise in teaching, leadership, and academic change management.

By design, the program provided the fellows with the opportunity to develop the skills and competencies needed by public health leaders who seek to manage the complexities and interdependencies inherent in the field. This article describes the curriculum and learning formats used throughout the fellowship to guide the fellows’ development in the areas of leading change, managing conflict, building collaborative partnerships, and maintaining personal resilience.

## Learning Designed to Build Adaptive Capacity

The challenges faced by public health professionals are exemplified by complex, interdependent problems that have the potential to affect large numbers of people and that require expertise and input from a variety of diverse stakeholders. These problems are rarely solved by technical solutions alone, such as legislation or use of authority. Instead, complex public health problems require solutions that involve learning and unlearning over time and are better framed as adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are described by Heifetz and colleagues as problems that “can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties.”<sup>5</sup> They require that people

develop the capacity to learn together in the presence of uncertainty, and often discomfort and loss, in order to adapt to changing circumstances.

Public health leaders require adaptive capacity in order to “function in an ambiguous arena without clear boundaries or hierarchies, using a chaotic context as a starting point for change.”<sup>6</sup> As such, leaders working in public health require competencies that go beyond substantive knowledge of the law and legal procedures. They require the capacity to shift and

### **A Relational Approach to Learning and Leading**

The fellows initiated their yearlong program with a ten-day summer institute intensive.<sup>9</sup> As part of the institute, the fellows participated in a seven-day immersive learning program that was designed to exemplify a relational model for enhancing teaching and leading change. This relational framework incorporated a holistic approach that integrated intra- and interpersonal approaches to professional develop-

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adapt as a way of life in order to respond to unpredictable and sometimes volatile circumstances.

Leadership development for public health professionals is in its infancy.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the availability of funding for leadership training for nonprofit leaders is scarce.<sup>8</sup> The RWJF public health law fellowship program provided a unique opportunity for the fellows to develop essential skills using an applied leadership model. Paralleling the competencies required of public health law practitioners, the faculty fellowship program was designed to enhance the fellows’ technical, behavioral, and professional proficiencies as a way of developing their capacity to address adaptive challenges faced in the design and implementation of their individual innovation projects.

Using a variety of learning formats, program faculty and mentors provided the fellows with the opportunity to further develop proficiency in leadership and conflict management, inter-professional collaboration, building community partnerships, and organizational change management. The program emphasized an “inside-out” approach by integrating self-knowledge and reflective practice (intra-personal skills) with team and community building (interpersonal skills) as the foundation for influencing change in organizations and their broader communities. The various learning formats were distributed throughout the fellowship year, beginning with the ten-day summer institute.

ment along with expansion of technical expertise.

The seven-day immersive curriculum began with a focus on developing “knowledge of self” and expanded to include knowing oneself in the context of professional roles as educators, change agents, and community members. Described below are the learning formats and content used during the summer institute to facilitate the personal and professional development of the fellows and to set the stage for the initiation of their innovation projects.

#### **Summer Intensive: Learning to Lead**

##### *Knowing “Self”*

“Teaching and learning leadership development skills and aptitudes requires self-examination, introspection, getting to know oneself better, and becoming clearer regarding one’s own goals and values.”<sup>10</sup>

Borrowing from the field of organization development, the curriculum was designed to incorporate the concept of “self-as-instrument” of change.<sup>11</sup> Generally, this concept adopts the construct that leading others involves a relationship between the leader (teacher) and those who are part of the change process. In addition, to be effective, the leader (teacher) must do the intra-personal work needed for effectively engaging with others including obtaining self-knowledge regarding strengths, habits, patterns, triggers, conflict

styles, and other aspects of human interaction that are requisite for working interdependently.

To facilitate self-knowledge and reflective practice, prior to the institute the fellows were asked to complete the StrengthsFinder<sup>12</sup> assessment and bring their results to the institute. In addition, the fellows were asked to begin an individual professional development journal identifying: their learning goals (personal and professional) for the program; their method for meeting those goals; their greatest challenges in implementing their project; how they would integrate the other fellows as support; other supports available; and updated learning goals following the institute. The journals were shared with the program team and mentors prior to the start of the institute to help guide the focus for mentoring and coaching.

The first day of the immersive learning program focused on learning about one's self in the context of working together within a team. The fellows participated in team-building exercises (ropes course, team games, and equine-facilitated learning) and a service-learning project (building trails). A group dialogue that integrated their observations from the team-building exercises with their StrengthsFinder results followed these activities. The facilitated discussion focused on each fellow's signature strengths and how the under- and over-use of strengths can impact team-effectiveness. The group discussed how to identify strengths in others, and the session set the stage for the ongoing application of self-insight and reflective practice as a part of professional growth and leadership effectiveness.

Building on the concept of self-as-instrument, the institute continued with application of self-knowledge in the context of the professional roles of teacher, organizational change agent, and community member.

#### *Self-Knowledge and the Role of Teacher*

“Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”<sup>13</sup>

To further the professional growth of the fellows, focus was placed on developing an understanding of how to bring their “whole self” into their work, particularly into their role as educators. Incorporating the interplay of self-awareness in the context of the dynamic system of teacher/student, the fellows had the opportunity to deepen their effectiveness as educators and reflect on their strengths and areas for growth as applied to use of pedagogical best practices.

The fellows spent two days learning innovative approaches to legal education that incorporated adult

learning principles, particularly experiential learning. Working with master teachers, the fellows identified areas where they could enhance their effectiveness and creativity in their approach to educating adult learners, including incorporation of learners as co-designers of their courses. The fellows had the opportunity to apply the techniques to new courses they were creating as well as existing courses and clinics.

They also had the opportunity to reflect on which techniques felt “risky” or took them outside of their comfort zone and identify what they would need in order to use more innovative methods in their courses. A number of the fellows participated in a session using applied improvisation techniques as a learning methodology to help learners expand beyond analytic thinking and develop adaptive capacity.<sup>14</sup> In keeping with the premise that the “medium is the message,” the program faculty continued to use various learning modalities with the fellows throughout the institute to model a range of approaches for actively engaging learners.

#### *Self-Knowledge and Leading Organizational Change*

“Research has documented an overemphasis on a narrow conception of technical mastery, and an underemphasis on the imperative to connect education with professional leadership for challenging times.”<sup>15</sup>

Leadership development has been underrepresented in legal training. As stated by Rhode, “Several decades of research have found that attorneys’ distinctive personality traits can pose a challenge for them as leaders, particularly when they are leading other lawyers. For example, lawyers tend to be above average in skepticism, competitiveness, ‘urgency,’ autonomy, and achievement orientation.”<sup>16</sup> Rhode lists the following qualities of effective leaders that are rated as important across various leadership situations:

- “values (such as integrity, honesty, trust and an ethic of service);
- personal skills (such as self-awareness, self-control, self-direction)
- interpersonal skills (such as social awareness, empathy, persuasion and conflict management);
- vision (such as forward looking and inspirational); and
- technical competence (such as knowledge, preparation, and judgment).”<sup>17</sup>

Given the complexity of implementing change within academic institutions, the immersive curriculum

included a day exploring aspects of organizational dynamics that are essential to effective change management. Content provided to the fellows covered the areas of conflict management and negotiation styles; emotional intelligence as a component of leading others; resistance to change; and inter-professional partnering.

The fellows completed the Thomas Kilmann<sup>18</sup> conflict modes assessment to identify their dominant conflict styles, and they discussed the ramifications of these styles in addressing conflict within their work environments. In addition, they learned strategies for addressing resistance to change among colleagues and others and how conflict styles can impact personal response to resistance when it arises. The fellows were introduced to the concepts of emotional and social intelligence as essential for effective leadership, including how self-awareness and reflective practice are foundational to these qualities.

An additional method for supporting organizational change management skills was the use of a project plan to guide the progress of developing and implementing the fellows' innovation projects. Prior to the institute, the fellows were asked to initiate a project plan using a template provided by the program team. The project plan prompted the fellows to think about the practical steps in implementing change within their organizations including the identification of stakeholders and their interests, and what might be needed to support the changes they proposed. The project plans also helped the fellows to identify resources and set time frames for achieving milestones throughout the fellowship year in order to track their progress. The plans were updated and submitted to the lead faculty mentors at various points throughout the program to monitor progress and provide the team with any indicators that help was needed by any of the fellows in moving their plans forward.

#### *Self-Knowledge and Role as Community Member*

“Attention to issues of teaching and learning often results in improvements and even experiments in teaching. And when innovation is the focus of a group of colleagues in and across institutions, the practice of teaching can become the basis of community, where the substantive knowledge about teaching and learning can be built upon and shared publicly over time, in the fashion of traditional academic scholarship, rather than being gained and lost anew with each individual teacher.”<sup>19</sup>

The final days of the institute included presentations by the fellows of their initial project plans and an opportunity to receive feedback from their peers using peer coaching. The presentation format included the opportunity to ask questions of peers to gain clarity and identify areas to consider in moving forward with the plans. At the end of the institute, the fellows participated in a facilitated dialogue to integrate their insights and lessons learned from the previous ten days and to surface concerns and fears about re-entry and returning to their work environments. The dialogue and peer-coaching formats were used to deepen connections within the emerging community of practice and solidify their roles as members of this community. The fellows practiced supporting one another and created strategies for staying in touch, including conference calls and site visits throughout the fellowship year.

#### **Coaching Support**

To further support personal and professional development, the fellowship program provided the fellows and mentors with the opportunity to meet one on one with a professional coach both during the summer institute and throughout the fellowship year.<sup>20</sup> Participation in coaching was voluntary and provided the participants with a confidential space for addressing challenges and deepening their capacity to lead change, manage competing priorities, and maintain their personal resilience.

During the summer institute, fellows and mentors sought out in-person, one-on-one spot coaching sessions. The sessions were typically an hour and provided the participants with an opportunity to think through their projects, identify potential barriers and concerns, and reflect on how their own personal habits and patterns could support or derail their efforts going forward. The sessions were confidential and provided the fellows with exposure to coaching as a learning modality as well as an opportunity to work through their own coachable issues.

Following the institute, the fellows were given the option of scheduling one-on-one coaching calls with the program coach to further support their professional growth and to trouble shoot issues that arose within the context of their projects. Seven of the ten fellows requested and received follow-up coaching by phone. A total of 25 coaching hours were provided throughout the fellowship year.

#### *Areas of Coaching*

The coaching sessions were rich and varied, and the topics addressed during the coaching sessions tended to fall into four categories:

1. *Managing Organizational Change*: resistance by faculty/others; structural challenges within the organization; negotiating resources; political landscape within the workplace; strategic thinking; aligning interests; working within hierarchical structures; dealing with power dynamics.
2. *Leadership Skills*: engaging in conflicts with co-workers; negotiating workload; prioritizing competing obligations; negotiating support from administration; creating a support network; building relationships and partnerships; addressing tenure obligations; developing effective teaching skills.
3. *Transition Planning*: rethinking career paths; optimizing current positions and future career/life goals; boundary setting; proactive management of career objectives and activities; connecting to personal purpose and goals for life contribution.
4. *Personal Growth and Resilience*: dealing with overwhelm and exhaustion; emotional intelligence; embedded habits and patterns in response to conflict and stress; health issues; dealing with the inner critic and self-doubt; impostor syndrome; blind spots; restoring energy and creativity; coping with the stress of service-oriented work and developing resilience techniques.

### *Impact of Coaching*

In addition to the overall program evaluations, the fellows were provided an opportunity to evaluate the coaching component of the fellowship program. Feedback from the fellows regarding the use of coaching was very positive, and the fellows recommended including coaching and leadership development in future programs. In their coaching evaluations in response to the question, “How did the coaching component of the program help you with your overall change initiative/ project?”, the fellows’ responses included the following:<sup>21</sup>

- “It was key. I think that law schools know how to teach substantive law in a specific (old fashioned) way. I think most schools do not offer the affective and holistic professional skills essential to a fulfilling and productive career. The orientation of the fellowship, coupled with your [coach’s] influence, made me see the value in teaching/introducing students to these essential skills.”
- “It allowed me to identify and take a step back from negative (and unhelpful) relationships

with two of my colleagues, both in terms of my research and the fellowship. As a result, I spent much less time and energy trying to process their comments and justify my work and, instead, was able to redirect that energy to getting more important stuff done.”

- “While I’ve had a bunch of training in different types of conflict management/engagement/ resolution skills, I very much appreciated the opportunity to have help working through the immediate conflicts facing me. I would expect many future fellows to feel similarly.”
- “Generally speaking, you helped me to be more flexible, open, and creative when confronting change or resistance.”
- “I also used the year to soul search and can now articulate with clarity what feeds me professionally, and what does not. The freedom of being a... professor is that I have tremendous choice over what I do, and don’t do. I am much better positioned now to harness that incredible power.”
- “Learning how to take time for self-reflection (and walking) before/after potentially conflict-laden activities (and specifically scheduling in ‘me’ time).”

### **Considerations for Future Programs**

Several lessons were culled from the experiences of the fellows, mentors, and program team during the course of the fellowship year.<sup>22</sup> Several of these pertain to the inclusion of leadership development and organizational change as essential components of the program design. The fellows consistently acknowledged the challenges they faced in design and implementation of their projects due to unanticipated changes in resources or support; naturally occurring resistance to change; and the competing priorities that make taking on additional projects a challenge for busy academic professionals, particularly those who are working to break down barriers and/or seek tenure. Providing road maps and models to help them navigate change, manage conflict, and cope with organizational dynamics gave the fellows an opportunity to further develop their leadership skills in real time with the support of mentoring and coaching.

Support for the personal and professional growth of the fellows also stood out as a beneficial aspect of the program. The opportunity to self-reflect, understand strengths, work on effective coping patterns, better manage work/life tensions, negotiate competing commitments, and expand personal resilience were all added benefits valued by the fellows. Additionally, inclusion of a holistic methodology modeled for the fellows the importance of including more humanistic

approaches and content in their individual courses and their work with students and colleagues. Working with a professional coach gave the fellows the opportunity to experience how to come from a coaching stance as an effective strategy for developing adult learners, and several fellows indicated they would use a coaching approach more often with their students.

## Conclusion

The leadership development and change management aspects of the fellowship program were integral to the personal and professional growth of the fellows and the successful implementation of their projects. The fellows frequently cited the need for remaining adaptive and flexible throughout their change initiatives as they stepped up to address unanticipated circumstances and navigate resistance to change and conflict. They also highlighted as essential the development of positive relationships within their community of practice as key to their ability to remain resilient and inspired throughout the fellowship year. Incorporating a holistic approach to learning for future fellowship programs would further enhance the development of academic leaders and support the sustainability of innovations designed to advance education in public health law.

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