

My Reflections on Leadership in State Dental Public Health

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Purpose

As I now face my final weeks as Iowa's Public Health Dental Director prior to retirement, it occurs to me that few new state dental leaders are provided useful information from their predecessors; I know that was the case for me at least. After mentoring new state dental directors for several years, I did not want to leave my position without passing some words of wisdom to whomever succeeds me in this role and as a general guide for other states facing transition in dental leadership at the state level.

I do highly recommend in preparation for assuming the role of a State Dental Director that a candidate reads, "Dare to Lead," by Brene Brown.¹ Leadership includes honesty and vulnerability to succeed. It is important to master subjective as well as objective aspects and prepare mentally for making the transition from manager to leader, so needed in this type of position.

Having served the State of Iowa for nearly seventeen years now, I reflect on my great fortune to have experienced seasons of change and challenges, both small and large. My sincere hope is that these personal reflections might provide some insights and useful tips going forward.

"To those that follow, may this small light illuminate your path..."

The Beginning

Each state is unique, and the need for dental leadership differs. Attitude and aptitude are virtues along with a strong purpose and pre-existing vision for what you desire to achieve.

I highly recommend accessing documents covered during your ASTDD orientation and selecting a peer mentor as soon as you are hired in your position. Keep in mind, your mentor and ASTDD's resources are only as good as you actively pursue them. Your mentor may not be able to address all the unique situations faced in your specific state government structure. However, your mentor will be a sounding board to talk through issues and questions and may lead you to additional resources more directly applicable to your situation.

You should also seek an internal mentor within your agency to learn the conditions and culture you'll face in your new assignment. This individual should serve in a senior leadership position, but preferably not as your direct supervisor² and should have served in more than one leadership role in the agency. The important focus is that the mentor has experienced cyclical changes and political transitions in state governance and has learned how to adapt to such changes. Scheduling targeted meetings with individuals in leadership positions will help you determine which leader might best serve and have time to be a mentor. Try to seek someone with good communication skills, availability to meet with you while not making you feel rushed and have a shared

A healthy mentor-mentee relationship can be vital to growth in your role as a state dental leader and can blossom into a lasting peer relationship.

¹ <https://brenbrown.com/hubs/dare-to-lead/>

² Having a direct supervisor as a mentor is possible, but in limited and rare situations, as the supervisor's responsibility is to evaluate your performance, so the level of open discussion and honesty may be restricted.

interest in your success in your new role. These traits are vital for a good mentor selection. Take time to make the right choice, even if you must arrange multiple one-on-one meetings to determine the best fit, both intellectually and emotionally.

Making a Good First Impression

You only have one opportunity to make a good impression. If you have experienced staff that preceded your employment, getting to know them well is among your first priorities. You will need up to 6 months just getting to know them, their work styles, what motivates them... and equally, what frustrates them or turns them off. You can expect behavioral differences that might indicate areas of conflict; the larger your initial staff, the more potential for conflict. This is more an active listening objective and opportunities for one-on-ones and group meetings. As dental director, you can actively arrange such meetings and rather than assuming a leader's role, create topics and observe team and individual dynamics. Determine the quiet

ones, the negative ones, anyone who is aggressive, and who seems most connected with the oral health program's goals. Who you can depend on, who has influence on the team, and who has the information you need? As part of your orientation, seek out guidance in managing team dynamics if that has not been part of your prior training or experience. Great resources are also available on the internet for self-study. I recommend taking advantage of training opportunities both sponsored and provided by the State or other agencies for managers.

How you start will have major implications for your success in achieving any goals or objectives.

Working with Leadership

Working with leadership is just as critical to success as managing staff; they are vital for meeting your goals. This is especially true of your direct supervisor and the level of authority you hold in the organization. This can significantly differ depending on the state you serve and history behind your position. Some directors work at the administrative leadership level, engaging in decisions across the agency's operations and serving as part of the executive leadership structure. Others are lower on the decision level and may not have an assigned staff or supervisory role. Where your position is listed in the organization's table of organization can influence the skill sets you will need to have working with leadership.

The most essential key to your survival is to have regular briefings with your immediate supervisor. Even if the supervisor doesn't create a regular meeting cycle, you as dental leader should assume the responsibility for doing so. Have a set agenda for the meeting with issues related to your program operations, achievements, barriers, and upcoming objectives. Be sure to put the agenda and subject matter in writing and send to your supervisor as far in advance as feasible, but not more than two weeks or it may be forgotten. This approach is critical throughout your time with the agency.

Over the years, my team grew, my budgets increased, and programs expanded. I found myself more engaged with the agency's executive team and representing the agency in high-level state collaboration meetings with senior leadership in decision-making roles. It wasn't enough just to have a good relationship with my direct supervisor, as I also had to make an impression with many leaders. The dynamics of a high-stakes leadership decision team is very different than the one-on-one with a supervisor. I had opportunities to learn the potential pitfalls if not handled well.

Setting the Vision

When hired, your specific state government environment and immediate supervisor may initially set your goals. You may find a well-defined set of objectives waiting for you to initiate or practically no pre-determined goals e.g., you'll need to create them yourself! You either build the vision and set goals or meet objectives given. Both situations are

possible over time, but how you start sets the tone for both you and your team. It also provides the foundation for what you are evaluated on in performance reviews. If you have a team, remember your goals are not just your individual achievement, but the achievement of the team. You are responsible for the team's performance as well, and you should credit your team's efforts.

Once you have established credibility with your team, they'll look to you to set the vision, but they must feel ownership and engagement in that vision. Once assured, you'll spend a lot of your time simply staying out of their way with unnecessary interruptions. Monitoring daily work activities while important, should not be disruptive to productivity. Establish a monitoring method that doesn't micro-manage activities; if not successful, the team may rely on you to tell them what to do, and soon you're doing all the work and facing extreme frustration. Encourage individual achievements and provide flexibility for staff considering their unique personal needs; this will help build loyalty and commitment. Likewise, it is important to address concerns and needs for discipline quickly as you become aware of issues that arise. Staff will look to you to set the example and deal with disruptive behavior swiftly. Get feedback from your Human Resource department prior to taking any direct steps in the disciplining process. This is not a process to rush.

Setting a vision is building excitement within your team for the possibilities if goals are achieved; however, a vision must be based on realistic considerations or it becomes a dream or worse, a nightmare and not a vision. Anticipate the road ahead including the obstacles you might face. The vision is set on navigating the obstacles including the tactics and partnerships both within and outside the organization. This requires data and getting to know the resources, including like-minded organizations for partnerships. The *ASTDD Competencies* can be used in building your program's resources and influence. Refer to them as you study the local, statewide, and national environment needed for achieving your program's goals. The more you and team members introduce yourselves as resources of knowledge and engagement, the stronger your program benefits in building resources, partnerships, and funding potential. Visibility means success!

The *Competencies* are not a dental director competency checklist, but one for your entire oral health team.

One of my weaknesses starting my new position was constantly seeking new opportunities and grants that would pay for new projects. I often encouraged staff to seek and apply for these opportunities when we became aware of them. It took courage for the staff to enlighten me on the implications of additional funding and programs without sufficient staffing resources to do the job. Not all grants provided stable ongoing funding for staff, and the legislature set strict limits on the number of full-time employees that could be assigned to a department unit. I needed to learn that there is a process involved in every decision in a governmental unit and implications, both good and bad, can result if not well thought out and planned.

Setting a National Presence

The benefits of a national presence can increase opportunities for federal grants or national resources and provide a state oral health program a platform to engage the national oral health debate. In my case, none of this would have been possible without the hard work of dedicated staff who maintained daily operations of our programs while I was broadening our reach. Empowering a dedicated and talented staff can't be emphasized enough. I had that foundation, which allowed me to extend my time outside the day-to-day direct management activities. Some state governments question the benefit to the state when officials travel out of state frequently. A justification statement must be made in advance for review and approval of such travel up the leadership chain. The political climate will determine how open such permissions will be. I was fortunate to have started when travel flexibility was encouraged in my role with a sufficient budget to allow coverage for the trips. As I became better known among my state and national colleagues, most of my travel was covered by the organizations inviting my participation. This reduced financial strain on my program budget and often added to the balance available.

Day-to-Day Operations

Day-to-day operations might consist of improving surveillance efforts, budgetary monitoring, creating proposals for contracts, writing contract language and terms, and the allocation of funds via local and state grants for programs operating under contract with bureau programs. As dental director, you will likely review draft documents and approve moving documents forward to higher management for approval. Be thorough in your review as what moves forward is a reflection on your competence and oversight. The better you are in understanding the purpose and legal restrictions on such contracted documents the better. Spell check can be your friend and a good editing software can help as well.

A working knowledge of the legal processes behind legislative allocations, distributions, procurements, and processes within a governmental agency is necessary. Resources are available to gain this knowledge, but it is up to you to find and actively pursue them. I can't stress enough how important having a knowledgeable and experienced staff in place is as you learn the policies and procedures behind these activities. It takes considerable time to build a functional knowledge and, as you learn, many policies change on a regular basis...and the learning process starts over. You are never a master in state government oversight, you are always a student, continuing to learn and adapt. In this cycle of continuous learning, senior staff members will likely have greater knowledge than you. Listen to their advice and give them leeway to do what they do without much interference. It's ok not to be the top expert in everything; it's better to have those you can depend on get things done. Otherwise, the workload will be overwhelming.

As the state public health dental director your primary purpose is building collaborations with coalitions, organizations, and the public on oral health matters. You will serve in a variety of educational roles in public presentations, summits, and meetings, both in and out-of-state. You will report to leadership on accomplishments and operational activities of your program, therefore it is imperative you communicate with your team regularly as they also are your eyes and ears. Failure in that informational pipeline can be quite embarrassing and ultimately a fatal career move. Relationships are of primary importance. Keep your door open to your staff. This is vital and a lifeline to your program's success.

Change such as situations caused by the COVID pandemic can be disrupting, but sometimes beneficial. Participate in ongoing updates in management and leadership training; you need to adapt to new working conditions and staff will need to feel valued and competent to want to remain in their positions.

Concluding Thoughts

Government work is an oscillating system of policy cycles and opportunities. Oscillations in governmental philosophy can be frustrating if you are seeking quick achievements and gratification. Patience and appreciation for small steps is a virtue working in any governmental structure.

The window for moving policies favorable to oral health are short with long delays in between opportunities. Have a game plan in advance and vetted before the window opens so the idea can be introduced without delay. Advanced planning is essential for success even when conditions do not favor moving a specific idea forward. The wise are at the doors making their move at the first sign of a favorable shift while others are stuck getting their game plan together and often miss the opportunity. My advice is to always be prepared and keep your ears and eyes open. Be informed and measure the pulse of your organization and governmental environment. These community partners are part of your informational pipeline and may have flexibilities to move political issues your program cannot.

The importance of partnerships cannot be overemphasized.

I mentioned the day-to-day work of a state dental director is filled with variability and periods of quiet as well. You're busily signing documents, reviewing drafts, writing grant requests, giving direction to staff, reading the endless new

policies and health literature updates, and communicating with stakeholders. Other times, you're reflecting and reviewing the large picture of goals, the future, and what you desire your program to pursue. The quiet times gives you an opportunity to review national and even international trends in oral care delivery. You'll gain your best ideas from keeping abreast of the currents in oral health including technology and applications as they advance.

ASTDD is a great resource and specific to your role as state dental director. You have colleagues serving in 50 U.S. states, D.C. and territories with a variety of experiences that may help you develop your program. These leads open doors to other organizations that bring value and opportunities for influence. Take initiative and actively seek opportunity and guidance. Nothing good comes from simply waiting and doing nothing.

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