

# **Leadership for Today**

**Daniel Martin, Ph.D.**

## **CROSS RIVER CONNECTIONS**

P.O. Box 194, Cross River, NY 10518

Tel./Fax 914 977 3097

Email: [danielmartin@optonline.net](mailto:danielmartin@optonline.net)

## **Introduction**

There is a hunger for good leadership; at least that is the perception of many at a time of increasing complexity in the workplace, and in society in general. But perhaps the hunger is more accurately for the capacity to live creatively in the face of the challenges that increasing complexity brings. There is a sense that this capacity is innate, that it is already there, waiting to be tapped: the role of good leadership, then, would be to help people and their systems access this already present capacity to live with life in a creative and productive way.

Living systems are self-organizing – self healing, self-regulating, self-educating: they know how to live in the world. Plants and animals do this instinctively; humans have the added dimension of self-consciousness, which ideally should enrich this process, but, unfortunately, has often hindered it. Self awareness/consciousness has been an ambivalent gift, and certainly one that we have not yet learned to use completely. Leadership is essentially about assisting people and their systems in the process of self-organizing. We imply this when we speak of empowerment.

Leadership, ultimately, is about creating the conditions for people to access their own, natural ability to live creatively. It means helping them use their self-consciousness for self-organizing. It involves convening, engaging, facilitating understanding, helping to articulate emerging insights, and gathering and directing agreements for implementation and evaluation. These are the essential elements of collaboration: leadership, therefore, is about fostering collaboration.

## **Collaboration and Empowerment**

Collaboration means working together in order to be more efficient and creative. Collaboration, in fact, is the way we access our capacity to self-organize. When we come together in the right way – with clear intention, appropriate attitudes, and a measure of skill – we are able to discover creative resolutions to our challenges. Through collaboration we find our own power for living rightly.

While it is true that today's culture does not foster collaboration, the main barriers are actually within ourselves. They consist of assumptions, beliefs, and values – the lens through which we experience the world – that are reinforced by training, structures, policies and roles. This lens leads to the development of norms and habits, which, in turn, shape interactions and impact relationships. For example, public health is generally defined in terms of data, science, and delivery systems – its lens of assumptions, beliefs and values. This lens is reinforced by training, mandates, and defined roles, which in turn shape how public health departments approach community health problems. While assumptions and beliefs like these are both valid and critical to human understanding and action, they can also become a prison of perception, refusing any information that does not comply with already existing knowledge.

This need not be the case: different assumptions, beliefs and values do not have to be barriers to collaboration; instead, they can become the very means of creative interaction. For this to happen, however, we need to develop the capacity to understand assumptions and work *with* differences.

## **Different Perspectives**

In the context in which public health people find themselves today – change, new allies (business, crisis responders, etc.) – and the challenges that these different perspectives bring, the ability to build mutual understanding and shared agreements is fundamental. It is this capacity that allows new possibilities to emerge out of differences in the form of shared insights and collective incentive.

Some of the new people coming into public health today look at the work differently from the more traditional ‘community’ approach: they see it more in terms of efficiency or delivering results. In other words, while they may share a common purpose, they appear to have different values. How do we address this?

It may be simply a question of different understandings of success, as:

- Results (simply)?
- Relationship building
- Good process that enhances results and relationships

More importantly, however, it is a question of bringing these differences together in a way that applies good process (decision making, information sharing, etc.) in order to get good results and also build relationships of trust and confidence. Dialogue is about fostering this more comprehensive kind of success.

## **Dialogue**

Dialogue is the work of creative interaction; it can be simply defined as the art of thinking together. We think together when we understand each other’s different perspectives (without necessarily agreeing) and are able to hold these differences in a way that *allows* shared understanding to emerge in the form of larger resolutions that are more comprehensive and inclusive, and are owned by all the participants. Dialogue, in other words, helps us create ‘**we**’ results, and, thereby, develop an expanded identity that is better able to address the increasingly complex problems faced (by public health) today.

When a group – team, organization, community – is able to do this, outcomes also include: functioning relationships, creativity, collaboration, team work, etc.: a healthy system in other words. In the case of a health department, the introduction of Dialogue into the system would improve relationships – internal and external – and increase creative collaboration, by fostering mutual understanding and appreciation of roles and responsibilities between the different parts (State and Local levels of the system, for example). In a more immediate way, the introduction of Dialogue would enhance the leadership development process as a step in this more general direction.

## **Leadership and Dialogue**

Good leadership is about having and convening authentic conversations: Dialogues where wisdom is accessed in the form of mutual understanding, collective insights, and shared agreements. The leaders of an organization, like public health, need to be able to convene authentic conversations: first among themselves, and then throughout the system. Thus, for example, a leadership team must first model this method of accessing wisdom and then disseminate it to all levels of the organization. The team members need to be ‘champions’ of Dialogue, models of collaboration, and catalysts for wisdom. This is the kind of ‘generative’ leadership that people hunger for.

People want to belong – to connect – because they know, instinctively, that this is where they find both their security and their happiness (in the form of creative, productive interaction with life). Good leadership gives them the opportunity by creating the conditions that empower them.

### **Cross River Connections**

Since 1995, Cross River Connections (CRC) has worked with both CDC and state and local health systems to bring Dialogue into the public health process. Its experience of public health puts it in a unique position to assist health departments to develop the capacity to address the increasing complexities caused by radical shifts in direction (for example, from programs for prevention, etc. to preparedness in more immediate ways), by offering an approach to this new kind of leadership.

### **Another Training or...**

What we are anticipating in this session(s) is less another training and more a 'taste' of a new way of doing (or being in) public health. The process will include skill building certainly, but also the opportunity to explore the implications of spreading the art of Dialogue among peers/staff, organizations/agencies, and communities.

Perhaps even more importantly, it will be one of those all too rare opportunities within professional life to recharge your batteries, with your colleagues: to rediscover your original passion for public health, and to learn new ways to creatively bring this passion into the changing landscape we work in: to see that differences are not only ok, but essential and learn to work WITH differences in a way that produces better outcomes.

The essence of the approach is 'authentic conversation:' conversations that we as leaders should be having, and conversations that should happen throughout the system with our encouragement and guidance. This might be described as a 'generative leadership' model.

### **In Summary**

In summary, we are exploring what could be called a therapeutic approach to leadership development that involves: integrating the personal and the professional, rediscovering the passion that impelled us initially, and helping others access their own innate self-organizing capacity. We also want to explore how to transfer this capacity to others in the system through: modeling, supervising, coaching, training, and directing/guiding decisions and policies.

This would be a more 'generative' kind of leadership that creates the space where creativity can happen and issues can be resolved in new ways.

***Daniel Martin  
Cross River, NY  
December, 2005***