

Developing a Firm Foundation for Your Leadership Journey

Guest: Ken Zakariasen, PHD, DDS, MS, MS(ODA), Chair, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, College of Public Health, Kent State University

Guest: Seth Neeley, MEd, Senior Research Associate, Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

Seth Neeley (SN): Welcome, I'm Seth Neeley from the Region V Public Health Training Center. Our center seeks to strengthen the skills of the current and future public health workforce in order to improve population health outcomes. I'm here today with Dr. Ken Zakariasen, Chair of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences and a Professor in the College of Public Health at Kent State University. This podcast is a precursor to our change management module and it will introduce you to some basic leadership skills which will help prepare you for more in-depth change management topics. Ken, what do you think is the foundation to successful leadership in organizations?

Ken Zakariasen (KZ): Creating sustainable positive leadership and change is really all about developing strong relationships within your organization, particularly between those who lead and those who choose to follow. It is important to know the difference between leadership and management. Managers primarily deal with the everyday complexity of organizations, that is, the everyday running of the organization. Leaders, on the other hand, primarily deal with change. In other words, managers pay most attention to the here and now, and leaders are primarily focused on the future. There are five key practices of particularly effective leaders. They model the way, that is, they set the example for others, they inspire a shared vision within an organization, they challenge the status quo, i.e., they are always looking for a better ways to do things, they enable others to be successful in their work, and they encourage people by celebrating individual and organizational successes.

SN: Could you give more detail on the key practices of particularly effective leaders?

KZ: Modeling the way is about knowing and living your own values, it's about sharing these values with others, identifying and affirming shared values in the organization, and setting the example by living the shared values in your work and teaching others to do the same. Inspiring a shared vision is about seen dynamic possibilities for the future, finding "common purpose" among the organizations people, sharing and appealing to common ideals, and bringing in life to the vision. Challenging the process is about looking outside the organization's traditional ways of doing things, challenging the status quo--always looking for better ways of doing things, being willing to take risks in experimenting with these new ways as well as generating small wins and learning as we go. Enabling others to act is about creating a culture that is built on trust and where relationships flourish and are valued, and creating a culture where people can grow and become the best they can be, that is, becoming competent and confident people who work together collaboratively to build the organization. Encouraging the heart is about expecting the best from people and giving individual personal recognition when it happens, encouraging and building a culture where people want to contribute and are recognized for their contributions both individually and collectively, and creating a "Spirit of community" within the organization, a

culture that celebrates both its values and achievements. A leader must be credible to successfully practice these five practices. A credible leader is honest, forward-thinking, competent and inspiring.

[Emotional Intelligence]

SN: I have heard you talk about the importance of emotional intelligence. How does that relate to leadership and what outcomes can one expect from developing this skill?

KZ: Emotional intelligence is the capacity for recognizing our own emotions and those of others, for motivating ourselves and others, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships. High emotional intelligence is critical for building strong relationships, for engaging in successful leadership practices, and for leading in the creation of positive sustainable change in organizations. There are four key areas that are critical for developing high levels of emotional intelligence. These are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. Self-awareness is specifically about emotional self-awareness, i.e., knowing our emotions and how they affect others. Self-management is defined as having an achievement orientation, as being adaptable, as having emotional self-control, and as having a positive outlook. Social awareness is about having empathy for others and having organizational awareness, that is, understanding how your organization works such as knowing how the politics works within the organization. Relationship management is about managing conflict, coaching and mentoring your people, positively using your influence, providing inspirational leadership and facilitating teamwork.

SN: Can you break down these four key areas of emotional intelligence further?

KZ: Within these four key areas, there are a total of the 12 components above that bring specificity to the full meaning of these four categories. If you demonstrate an achievement orientation you will anticipate obstacles to a goal, take calculated risks, set measurable goals, act rather than wait, seek information in novel and unusual ways, and you would cut-through red tape and bend the rules when necessary. These six behaviors bring very detailed understanding to what it means to have and demonstrate an achievement orientation. These six behaviors can be learned and you can therefore develop and/or strengthen an achievement orientation. If you demonstrate a positive outlook you will see opportunities rather than threats, you will have mainly positive expectations about others, you will have positive expectations for the future, you will believe the future will be better than the past, and you will see the positive side of difficult situations, for example, can a difficult situation be turned into an opportunity? Again, these are very specific behaviors that define having a positive outlook and these are all learnable. As it turns out, all 12 of the component parts of emotional intelligence can be defined in behavioral terms and are all

learnable. What this means is that those are willing to learn can increase their levels of emotional intelligence which in turn will improve the strength of relationships that they build with others and their leadership effectiveness. The bottom line is that leadership can be learned and can be continuously improved for those who are willing to continuously learn. Examples of best practices among effective leaders include: leaders involve team members in decision-making, they have excellent communication, they are responsive, they listen, they're flexible, they have clear expectations, they give feedback, they have trust, integrity, they're ethical, they have vision, they are motivating and passionate. Examples of the practices ineffective leaders need to develop or improve include: they need to develop better communication-listening, more respect, stop micromanaging, learn to deal with change, be more available, and be a good role model. The bottom line is that emotional intelligence is likely the best predictor of leadership success.

[Leading Change]

SN: You've walked us through the key practices of particularly effective leaders and four key areas that are critical for developing high levels of emotional intelligence. Using these skills, how does one go about leading actual change?

KZ: Leaders primarily deal with the future, and that means you will be dealing with change for much of your time. Creating positive sustainable change in organizations is difficult because people are afraid of what they might lose during the change, and it is disruptive to the "usual" way most organizations have done things. Most change in organizations in the past has been "top-down" rather than engaging people across the organization in the process and not seeking innovative ideas from most of the people in the organization. Organizational leaders who can engage their people widely and lead positive sustainable change become very highly valued in most organizations. Kotter's 8-step change process may appear to be a "top-down" process and in a lot of ways it is. However, all eight steps involve many more people across an organization in the change process than the typical "top-down" change or strategic planning process. There is much more communication about the change process throughout the organization, rather than just a few at the top communicating with each other. It is not a true "whole-systems" approach to change, but it does move the change process toward a more "whole-systems"-oriented approach. Kotter's change process was a big step forward at the time, and in my opinion laid the groundwork for the move toward whole systems thinking, something that was unlikely to be accepted in the era of primarily top-down thinking.

SN: What exactly do you mean by whole systems approaches to change?

KZ: Today's highly effective leaders create sustainable positive change primarily through whole systems approaches to change, that is, they involve as many people as possible

throughout the organization and externally as well when appropriate. For example, if I was looking to improve customer service in my organization, I would want to interview our customers to find out what we do really well right now in customer service, and also I would ask them what we could do differently or in addition to make our customer service even better. Effective leaders in creating positive change will always want to know what we are doing well now when we are at our best, and what we could do to be even better. These types of questions are very positive in nature, and they tend to generate solutions rather than just lists of problems which by nature create negativity.

[Adaptive Leadership and Organizations]

SN: Adaptive leadership is a common term in change management these days. What can you tell us about this approach?

KZ: Adaptive leaders and organizations are those leaders and organizations that are able to successfully deal with adaptive challenges. Technical challenges can be very simple or very complex, but they are any challenges that have known solutions that are straightforward to implement to solve problems so that the organization can continue on with its work. An example could be a graphic arts business where the graphic artists are spending too much time on each project for the business to be profitable. In analyzing this problem, it is discovered that the graphic arts software they are using for their computer design is older and much slower to utilize than current programs. The solution is to upgrade the software to the state-of-the-art and thus increase productivity. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are usually more difficult to solve because they are a varied mix of “changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties”, new learning and behaviors and/or generally doing things in entirely different ways. These kinds of changes are much more complex than, for example, upgrading software and are the kinds of things people do not easily change. As we consider leading change in organizations, we must be aware of something called “the illusion of the broken system”. It is sometimes easy to see that an existing system is working very poorly; in fact, we might call it a broken system. It may look like it should be an easy problem to solve, but it may in fact be very difficult to solve. The reason is that the system may be working just fine for some people in the organization, particularly for those in authority, that is, those with the power to keep things as they are. Another important area to consider is distinguishing leadership from authority. Authority is the power you have been given to do the job that you were hired to do, for example, authority given by the board that has hired you. However, this is not leadership. Leadership is when you go beyond the borders of your traditional authority to deal with adaptive challenges so that the organization can move forward in ways that it hasn’t done previously.

SN: It must be jarring to the organization to work outside the organization's norms. What roadblocks or difficulties might an adaptive leader face in implementing change in an organization?

KZ: Successful leaders take risks, but they lay the groundwork for this with those who have given them authority and with those who work in the organization. You will be dealing with some very conservative naysayers as a leader, and effective frequent communication is essential. Dealing with adaptive challenges can clearly be disruptive in many different ways. These all require some significant forms of change which can be very disruptive. People don't know exactly where the change is going, they don't know what they may lose in the process and they probably even wonder if they will fit in. During the change necessitated by an adaptive challenge, they will be living in a state of disequilibrium. It is the leader's responsibility to deal with the concerns and questions of people within the organization, and to create an empathetic culture that helps to reduce fears and stress created by the change. It is imperative to communicate well and frequently. Diagnosing an adaptive challenge is not easy. First, you must determine what part of a challenge is a technical element and which part is an adaptive element. If you know what the technical part of the challenge is, you can apply a known solution to it. The adaptive part of a challenge is more difficult. You will talk with many people, and you will hear many different perspectives which are filtered through each person's role and biases regarding the problem. You must take into account the human dimensions of the challenge, that is, a variety of human values, experiences and perspectives. One of the biggest mistakes is to try to apply a technical solution to an adaptive problem or challenge. Unlike a purely technical problem, the adaptive challenge demands three tasks: figuring out what to conserve from past practices, figuring out what to discard from past practices, and inventing new ways to build from the best of the past.

[Qualities of an Adaptive Organization]

SN: You've told us about adaptive leadership already; what can you tell us about adaptive organizations?

KZ: The five distinct qualities of adaptive organizations. The first is that "elephants in the room are named". I think most of you are familiar with this phrase but let me quickly recap its meaning. This refers to a major issue in the organization that everyone knows is there, but everyone is afraid or reluctant to bring up and discuss. Let me give you a simple example. The boss' son works for the organization but is both incompetent and lazy. He is a major distraction and nuisance in an otherwise smooth-running operation. No one is willing to bring this up to the boss. The longer this continues the more it affects morale in the organization. The second quality is that responsibility for the organization's future is shared by all. The third quality is that independent judgment is expected. The fourth quality

is that leadership capacity is developed within the organization, for example, by effective leaders in the organization mentoring younger employees and/or by the organization developing and maintaining a formal leadership training program within the organization. And, the fifth quality is that the adaptive organization has institutionalized the concept of reflection and continuous learning. While these five characteristics seem so logical and so much just plain common sense, one has to wonder why they are so frequently ignored. Perhaps they are seen by too many "leaders" as antithetical to the still favored "top-down" leadership embraced by too many "leaders" in today's world, perhaps as a loss or giving away of their power. So, what does this mean for today's progressive leaders? In my view, it represents an incredible opportunity for progressive leaders to develop clear, decisive competitive advantage over their competitors.

[Leading with Questions]

SN: What is a good way to begin adaptive leadership and the change process in my organization?

KZ: Those individuals who have worked under command-and-control top-down leaders are very accustomed to being told what to do by these leaders. On the other hand, those individuals who have worked under leaders who believe in and practice whole systems organizational principles are much more used to being asked questions rather than being issued decrees. This practice of "leading with questions" is one of the best things that has happened to organizations, both for the leaders at all levels in your organization, but also for their subordinates. It is safe to say that effective leaders today don't just issue orders, instead they focus on asking the right questions. Why has this "leading with questions" phenomenon come about in the best organizations today? There are number of reasons for this. When a leader just issues orders, he or she is learning very little about their organization or their subordinates. Organizations today are very complex. Unless a leader is continually asking questions, they won't stay up on what it is actually happening in their own organization. As a leader, if you ask the right questions you will develop valuable insights about your organization and about people that work under you. Furthermore, when you ask the right questions, you are developing and managing your people. When you ask the right questions, you can facilitate the building of teams, and solve problems. And finally, when you ask the right questions you can shape strategy and enable change. It seems pretty evident that "leading with questions" instead of issuing decrees has tremendous advantages over the old practices of just "telling people what to do".

SN: How can I begin the process of leading with questions?

KZ: If we are going to lead with questions, we must make sure we are asking the right questions! Questions that disempower focus on the reasons why the person did not or

cannot succeed. Such questions result in a defensive or reactive mode, immediately casting the blame on the other person. Empowering questions, on the other hand, get people to think and allow them to discover their own answers, thus developing self-responsibility and transference of ownership for the results. Such questions can help them realize how they are contributing to the whole. Empowering questions build positive attitudes and self-esteem; they remove blocks and open people up to unexpected possibilities while inviting discovery, creativity, and innovation. To take full advantage of the benefits of leading with questions, we need to create a culture where asking questions is the norm, the everyday way of doing business in our organization. We know that change can be difficult, especially in an organization where the various leaders are used to just telling people what to do. To successfully change the culture to one of the asking questions, leaders at the top level of the organization must “model the way” by setting the example of the behavior they wish to see. Starting with these leaders at the top, leaders at all levels in the organization must learn to “lead with questions”. If the top leaders are serious about wanting to develop a questioning culture, they will have to commit time and resources to this endeavor and to stress to their subordinate leaders that this is not an option, but rather something the organization needs to do to maximize its effectiveness. We can’t stress enough the need for the top leaders to set the example in leading with questions. We also know that exemplary leaders continually challenge the process, i.e., they challenge the status quo by always looking for better and often more innovative ways to do things. This allows individuals to take risks and ask more questions. These are things that are unlikely to occur in an organization where people just do as they’re told. We also know that by asking the right questions, you can effectively develop and manage your people, facilitate the building of teams and solve problems. And, when you ask the right questions, you can shape strategy and facilitate change.

SN: Great talk today Ken. If participants would like to learn more, we have an additional self-paced module which Ken takes a deeper dive into several whole systems change methods. Thank you for listening.

+++