



ASSOCIATION OF MATERNAL & CHILD HEALTH PROGRAMS

Supporting Resilient Maternal & Child Health Leaders

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These are challenging and exciting times for state MCH programs. State budget cuts have meant furloughs and layoffs resulting in service reductions and fewer staff to do more work. While MCH budgets have been stagnant or shrinking the needs and demands for MCH services have increased. All of this is happening amidst a shifting national MCH environment. We see potentially exciting changes for public health and opportunities to improve the health care system through proposed reforms butting up against the challenging, stark reality of a massive Federal deficit which may limit increased investment in the MCH Block Grant. What's an MCH leader to do?

Dealing with adversity requires **resilience**. In this presentation, resilience is defined as:

An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.

The changes and challenges happening around us require **resilient MCH leaders**. Research has found that there are three common characteristics of resilient individuals (Coutu, 2002). They are:

- An uncanny ability to deal with reality
- A deeply held belief that their work is meaningful
- Ritualized ingenuity

I'll talk about these a bit and how they can apply to your organizations. Here's our definition of an MCH leader:

An MCH leader inspires and brings people together to achieve sustainable results to improve the lives of the MCH population.

In my journey visiting many health departments (local, state, and Federal) I have encountered several different responses to the current fiscal challenges facing public health programs. Here are the five most common:

The **General**: This otherwise collaborative leader "hunkers down" for battle. The enemy can be other programs, other agencies, etc. Partnerships devolve as survival tactics take over.

The **Gumby**: The flexible leader bends and adapts and that can be a good thing. But in this context Gumby hopes everything will be just fine if we bend here, bend there, and dodge a few of the incoming challenges. The problem here is that all this bending may dissolve the core mission of the program – leading to gaps or lack of a "core." Related to this type is the "Stretch Armstrong" leader who stretches to "do more with less" and gets stretched so tightly they snap – and never snap back.

The **Chicken Little**: Chicken Little is so busy proclaiming that the sky is falling that he forgets why he is here in the first place. The doom and gloom of the potential doom obscures actual reality and in the meantime he has gotten everyone all riled up and very little work gets done.

The **Pollyanna**: Pollyanna's optimism is often a good thing – looking on the bright side of life is a great strategy on lots of occasions. But optimism is not resilience, and overpowering optimism can lead to denial of the existing reality. Resilient leaders are grounded in the reality of what they are dealing with.

The **Retired on the Job**: The retired on the job leader is playing a waiting game. Rather than getting worked up about potential changes they are just treading water until it is all “over.” No one is well served by this strategy which abhors ingenuity in favor of the status quo.

These responses challenge us to become resilient MCH leaders. Bennis and Thomas (2002) state:

Extraordinary leaders find meaning in—and learn from—the most negative events. Like phoenixes rising from the ashes, they emerge from adversity stronger, more confident in themselves and their purpose, and more committed to their work. Such transformative events are called crucibles—a severe test or trial. Crucibles are intense, often traumatic—and always unplanned.

Bennis and Thomas posit that there are four essential skills that help leaders learn from adversity. They are: 1. Engage others in shared meaning, 2. Develop a distinctive, compelling voice, 3. Integrity, 4. Adaptive capacity. I'll elaborate on these.

In these challenging times it is essential to build resilience and reframe the crises we face as opportunities. One way to leverage this crisis is to “get back to the core” of who we are and what our organizations do. This speaks to Bennis and Thomas' points #1 and #4.

I will share one tool that can help us get “back to the core.”

We can learn a lot about resilience from our family partners and professionals. Many of their compelling stories are about resilience – responding to change and adapting to and recovering from adversity. Family leaders are experts in resilience. We can leverage this resource and learn together going forward.

Our work is too important to leave to chance. We should be intentional in developing resilient MCH leaders and responding to the challenges and changes we face today and in the future.

References

Bennis & Thomas, 2002. “Crucibles of Leadership.” *Harvard Business Review On Point*, Harvard Business School Publishing. Cambridge, MA.

Coutu, 2002. “How Resilience Works.” *Harvard Business Review On Point*, Harvard Business School Publishing. Cambridge, MA.

MCH Leadership Competencies 3.0 available on-line (<http://leadership.mchtraining.net/>) last accessed October 19, 2009.

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