

The Management Moment

Column Editor: Edward L. Baker, MD, MPH

The First 6 Months: Transitioning Into a New Position

Roberto Ruiz, MPA; Edward L. Baker, MD, MSc, MPH

In a recent Management Moment column, we focused on issues related to job transitions. Whether engaging in succession planning,¹ handling the process of successfully transitioning out of a job (a subject for a future column), or settling into a new position, transitions are increasingly common among public health care professionals. Each phase presents its unique challenges and opportunities. In this column, we focus on 3 strategies related to transitioning into a new position, particularly the crucial first 6 months in a new job. In addition to reading this article, we recommend an in-depth treatment of the subject in a classic publication—*The First 90 Days in Government*—by Peter Daly and Michael Watkins.²

● Background

More than 250 000 public sector managers take on new positions each year.² Within the public health system, approximately 50% of the workforce is eligible for retirement in the next 5 years, creating job vacancies that need new talent. As result, many public health managers are transitioning into new positions. We suggest that they focus on the following 3 key strategies:

1. Understanding resource availability
2. Understanding people
3. Understanding the organization and its mission

● Understanding Resource Availability

Resources are tools that enable a manager to accomplish goals. Without a clear understanding of these

tools, he or she is limited in carrying out priorities. A first step in understanding resource availability is to develop an understanding of available financial resources.

In a new position, a manager needs to clearly understand the degree to which funds will be available to address key needs, one of the most important of which is support for training and development of staff. Without financial resources, the manager will be limited in building the leadership team and developing and deploying talent.

A new manager must determine what is in the financial resource pool and separate mandatory from discretionary resources; discretionary funds will be needed for staff development. Once a discretionary resource pool is set aside, the manager must then identify critical positions and accompanying skill sets. Skills and competencies can then be evaluated for those in mission critical positions.

● Understanding People

We strongly concur with the maxim that “relationships are primary, all else is derivative” and that “you don’t get a second chance to make a first impression.” Therefore, initial interactions with new staff are crucial in setting the tone and developing new relationships. Managers, in the first 6 months, should learn about

Author Affiliations: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta (Mr Ruiz) and Department of Health Policy and Management (Dr Baker), UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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Correspondence: Edward L. Baker, MD, MSc, MPH, Department of Health Policy and Management, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, Campus Box 7411, Chapel Hill, NC 27599 (elbaker@email.unc.edu).

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the motivations, interests, and values of their new colleagues. As a result, it is then possible to assess whether the right people are on the bus³ or whether they are “in the right seats.”

Some staff may need training to enhance fit with a new position. Others may be on the “wrong bus,” requiring a creative management strategy to make that change occur. In our experience, these actions must be taken early and decisively to minimize longer-term frustrations and ineffective activities.

One of the most critical “people strategies” is the assessment of staff skill sets in relationship to the requirements of the work being performed. Among the first things to assess are staff beliefs, attitudes, and commitment. The manager can then move to assess staff skills by asking for samples of work or by walking around and asking what staff are doing and how.⁴

New managers should use a formal strategy for assessing staff members. Managers should identify required skills that staff lack and those that merely need reinforcement. Where analysis reveal the absence of skills that are not easily obtainable through near-term training, then realignment may be necessary. Every attempt should be made to maximize the use of each asset in the workplace. If done correctly, rarely will assets need to be replaced.

In assessing people, we suggest the use of a tested framework² to evaluate staff:

1. *Competence*: Can they do the job?
2. *Judgment*: Can they think on their feet and make rational decisions?
3. *Energy*: Do they have the energy needed?—“Attitude is altitude.”
4. *Focus*: Can they complete tasks?
5. *Relationships*: Can they work as a team member?
6. *Trust*: Can you trust the person to follow through on commitments?

Finally, the new manager must commit to establishing trust. Creating a culture of trust through authenticity is instrumental in keeping skilled staff and building cadres of new ones. Just as the new manager is assessing staff, staff members are assessing the new manager. Build trusting relationships in the first 6 months is essential to long-term success.

● Understanding the Organization and Its Mission

When stepping into a new position, the manager should focus on the mission of the new organization and determine how staff and financial resources can be mobilized to achieve the mission of the organization. The leader/manager must be able to articulate

succinctly his or her 3 to 4 key priorities for the organization’s mission and overcommunicate these priorities if they are to impact behavior.⁵

The first 6 months is a crucial time to just ask questions and resist trying to find easy answers to difficult problems. We advocate that new managers spend as much time as possible asking questions—particularly those that relate to the alignment of individual values and interests with the organization’s mission. In this way, the new manager can refine and better communicate his or her sense of the mission of the organization as well as his or her contribution to the mission. Some new managers may react to complaints about things not working well and focus much of their initial time and energy trying to find quick fixes for those problems. This reactive mode can take up much time and prevent the new manager from truly analyzing root causes behind the issues. We suggest that new managers avoid the trap of focusing on the “squeaky wheel” before understanding underlying forces and root causes.

New managers should take the time to “Diagnose their portfolio,” using the STaRS framework.² By assessing what services are missing in support of the mission, one can determine what to place in the “Startup” category. By determining which services are not working at all, one can categorize those as needing “Turnaround” effort. In addition a newly manager can assess which resources are misaligned and place them in the “Realignment” category and finally determine what in the organization is working well and place those in the “Sustain” category. This exercise will provide a framework from which to develop a strategic approach to resolving initial obstacles or barriers to success. By executing a succinct and focused action plan, resource management, process improvement, customer service, morale, and employee engagement will improve over time.

● Summary

Mission accomplishment is the lifeblood of our passion and commitment in public health; to accomplish the mission, public health care practitioners must understand the resources that allow them to accomplish the mission. The first 6 months in a new position are crucial in understanding these resources, developing new relationships, and setting priorities. By focusing on understanding resource availability, understanding people, and focusing on mission and understanding the organization, the new manager will establish a pattern for success in a new position that will serve for years to come.

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Erratum**Designing the Framework for Competency-Based Master of Public Health Programs in India: Erratum**

In the article that appeared on page 30 of the January/February 2013 issue, the authors were listed incorrectly. They should have been listed in the following order:

Kavya Sharma, PGHHM; Sanjay Zodpey, PhD; Alison Morgan, MBBS, DTM&H; Abhay Gaidhane, MD; Zahiruddin Quazi Syed, MD

The authors regret the error.

Reference:

Sharma K, Zodpey S, Morgan A, Gaidhane A, Syed ZQ. Designing the framework for competency-based master of public health programs in India. *J Public Health Management Practice.* 2013;19(1):30-39.