

Parting Thoughts



by Larry J. Gordon, Secretary
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Upon his retirement in July, Larry Gordon, the nation's leading environmental health practitioner and past president of the American Public Health Association, drew upon his 38 years of experience in public service to draft the following "Parting Thoughts" to his confreres in public health:

Recruit and retain the best. Certain types of professional schools and graduate programs supply personnel especially educated for specific technical, scientific, and professional roles. These graduates should be affirmatively recruited.

Most people are dedicated to doing a good job and need support, encouragement and trust. Provide general direction, not detailed instruction and supervision.

Your colleagues and staff are people; treat them with respect and keep in mind everyone has some days which are better - or worse - than others.

Recognize that there are usually several good approaches and answers to solving the same problem. (What works best for you may not be the best approach for the people assigned the task of solving the problem.)

Visit with your personnel informally and frequently. (Make rounds and be a walk-around manager.)

Encourage and promote career development for the agency *and* the individual.

Remember that you cannot afford not to train. Encourage new ideas, approaches, and program design, but realize there may be mistakes and false starts among the best.

Believe that each of your subordinates should know more about his/her specialized role than you do or you have an organizational and programmatic failure.

Conduct weekly staff meetings at every level throughout the organization. Hold periodic "retreats."

Encourage participation in appropriate meetings of related professional, trade and business groups to insure open communication.

Give orders as a last resort. Group discussion of problems and alternative solutions usually leads to consensus.

Be open to, and accountable to, your stockholders -the citizens of New Mexico.

Keep your supervisor informed. No surprises!

Delegate authority and commensurate responsibility to field personnel and institutions to minimize red tape and delays. Remember that brains do not flow up hill to Santa Fe.

Encourage staff involvement in program planning, policy development and decision making.

Reward outstanding performance by word and deed-frequently. Commend and say "Thank you."

Attempt to salvage and improve problem personnel before taking disciplinary action.

Realize that you do not have to make a decision immediately on every issue brought to your attention. Be considerate, involve others, look for consensus, investigate alternatives, etc.

As professionals, determine and promote health priorities based on the tools of epidemiology and risk assessment, rather than what may be politically or emotionally expedient at the moment.

Risk communication to the public is in its infancy and remains a priority public health challenge.

Above all, maintain your sense of humor!

Thanks for your support and effective efforts to stabilize, professionalize, and serve our citizens.

--Larry

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