

# Lessons in Leadership: The Value of Mentorship in Medicaid

By Emily Eelman, Juniper Peak Consulting

**Sally Kozak, Pennsylvania Medicaid director, shares how she has prioritized mentorship in her career to ensure sustainability beyond any one person — herself included.**

**I**n the world of public service, particularly in complex, demanding fields like Medicaid, mentorship is not just a bonus — it's a necessity. Mentorship is important for both supporting individuals' professional growth and building organizational capacity. Sally Kozak, Pennsylvania's Medicaid Director, personifies this ethos, with an approach to mentoring that is equal parts strategic, personal, and visionary.

Through decades of service, Kozak has made it her mission to ensure the next generation of leaders is not only capable but empowered, much like her own mentors empowered her in her early days of public service. She offers three lenses through which to view a mentorship-focused approach to leadership:

- “You”: Understanding and focusing on mentees' needs, individually and collectively.
- “Me”: Engaging in self-reflection and self-management to continue to grow.
- “We”: Building a sustained culture of mentorship that outlasts any one leader.

Her story offers a blueprint for how intentional, adaptive mentoring can create lasting change for individuals and the institutions they serve.

## Leader At-A-Glance



**Name:** Sally Kozak, MHA, RN

**Role:** Medicaid Director and Deputy Secretary, Office of Medical Assistance Programs, Department of Human Services

**State:** Pennsylvania

**Public Sector Tenure:** 15 years, Medicaid Director since 2018

**CHCS connection:** [Medicaid Leadership Institute](#)



## ABOUT THE LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP SERIES

*Lessons in Leadership* shares stories from public sector leaders across the country as they manage the day-to-day, big picture, and unexpected twists and turns along the way. The lessons they share can help support others in similar roles — and remind us all of the importance of giving oneself grace in times of challenge. *Lessons in Leadership* is developed through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

## The “You”: Adapting Across Generations

Today, Kozak mentors a diverse group of professionals — many Gen Xers and Millennials — and she’s acutely aware of the generational differences at play. “I’m a Boomer,” she notes. “They want different things. They want instant feedback. They want recognition now, not later.”

Rather than resist, Kozak has leaned in. From learning TikTok and Instagram to embracing real-time communication on chat platforms, she’s embraced the tools and rhythms of her mentees’ worlds. This agility — meeting mentees where they are — is a key theme in her mentoring philosophy.

One of Kozak’s most impactful strategies is being what she calls an “invisible safety net.” She sets up her mentees to lead meetings, presentations, and strategy sessions, while ensuring they know she’s quietly backing them up — whether via chat, subtle cues across the table, or post-meeting debriefs. “They need to feel supported in the moment,” she said. “It’s about letting them shine, but making sure they know they’re not alone,” she explained.

This approach also enables Kozak to support another priority of her mentees: career mobility. She notes that opportunities for vertical mobility aren’t always as plentiful in government as emerging leaders might wish, but that horizontal mobility — moving across different roles and departments — can offer an alternative path to develop, learn, and elevate their career paths.

But mentoring the next generation isn’t always smooth. Kozak recounted mentoring a bureau director who initially wanted to step down. “She didn’t think she could do it,” Kozak said. But through steady encouragement and consistent check-ins, that mentee not only found her footing but transformed her team into one of the department’s strongest.

“It’s about making them feel safe, while also pushing them,” she said. This approach builds not only skill but also trust. Over time, it shifts the dynamic from dependence to independence.

## The “Me”: Pride without Possession

Perhaps most striking is how deeply Kozak connects her mentoring work to her own growth. “Mentoring requires you to be extremely honest with yourself,” she said. “If you can’t do that, you can’t be honest with others.”

This self-awareness has transformed how she leads. She’s learned patience, adapted her communication style, and opened up to relationships that are more personal than she would have previously allowed. “These young folks probably know me better than I know myself some days,” she admitted with a chuckle.

Kozak is also unequivocal about giving credit where it’s due. “You have to be prepared for them to outshine you — and be proud when they do,” she said. She encourages giving people space to build their own reputation for excellence.




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**You can’t help other folks if you’re not constantly evaluating your own actions and advice as well.**

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Publicly acknowledging the contributions of her mentees, especially at senior levels, has been a critical tactic. “The Secretary sees me giving them credit and knows I have confidence in them. As a result, “The Secretary will reach out directly to them. And I have no issue with that,” she explained. “I know my value to the organization. I know why I’m in this position, and I’m secure in that knowledge.”

In an era of rapid career mobility and high ambitions, this transparency creates momentum and visibility for emerging leaders, exactly what many younger professionals seek.

## The “We”: Creating Lasting Culture Change

Kozak is quick to note that mentorship isn’t something that happens in isolation. It requires organizational support — from leadership buy-in to HR involvement to development programs that provide structure and encouragement. She notes that there is broad concern about turnover, shortages, and the future of the workforce, so finding partners and allies comes relatively easily. But she also believes culture can begin with one person. “Somebody just has to take that first step,” she said. “You don’t need all the tools or a specific role or leadership level. You start by having conversations.”

One of her most powerful insights is the importance of looking beyond the obvious candidates for mentorship. “Some people aren’t performing because no one’s ever paid attention to them,” she said.

She shared the story of a now-rising leader who was once underestimated. “People asked why I started working with her. I saw something no one else did.” Mentorship, she believes, must be inclusive and intentional. Leaders need to look for talent in unexpected places — and be willing to invest in people others have overlooked.

As Kozak prepares for the next phase of her life — possibly teaching kids to read, she muses — she sees mentorship as both legacy and liberation. “This is the last stop in my career. I want to make sure what we’ve built keeps going.”

Her mentees are already paying it forward. “They’ve all picked someone to mentor themselves,” she shares proudly. “You can see them doing it.” In the end, Sally is proud of the impact she’s had as an individual leader — including the programs she’s run and the policies she’s helped to shape — but she’s especially proud of the people she’s empowered and their collective impact.

## Final Words

“To be an effective leader, you have a responsibility,” Kozak said, her voice clear with conviction. “Whether it’s one person or many, we owe it to those who follow us to prepare them. A lot of us — Medicaid directors and people in executive positions — were baptized by fire. They shouldn’t have to be.”

In a field where systems are complicated and burnout is common, Kozak offers a different vision — one where leadership is shared, wisdom is passed down, and the next generation rises not by accident, but by design.

## Key Takeaways:

- 1. “You”: Understanding and focusing on mentees' needs, individually and collectively**
  - Embrace new tools and styles; younger generations increasingly value quick feedback and communication via instant mobile channels
  - Provide an “invisible safety net” so that they can take on new challenges feeling supported
  - Look for opportunities to provide professional growth, novel experiences, and horizontal mobility
- 2. “Me”: Engaging in self-reflection and self-management to continue to grow**
  - Reflect on how you may want to grow and change to meet people where they are
  - Be secure in your value so you can showcase others’ value
  - Their successes are your successes; take pride in them
- 3. “We”: Building a sustained culture of mentorship that outlasts any one leader.**
  - Build organizational support across leaders, peers, and human resources
  - Look for talent in unexpected places; don’t discount people that others have overlooked
  - When in doubt, just start the conversation

### For more resources on mentoring, check out:

- [Exploring the Pathways to Medicaid Leadership](#)
- [Building Medicaid Leadership for the Future: A Conversation with Arizona’s Medicaid Director](#)



### ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HEALTH CARE STRATEGIES

The Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS) is a policy design and implementation partner devoted to improving outcomes for people enrolled in Medicaid. We support partners across sectors and disciplines to make more effective, efficient, and equitable care possible for millions of people across the nation. The *Lessons in Leadership* series is developed in partnership with CHCS and Emily Eelman. Emily is an experienced government executive and owner of Juniper Peak Consulting.