

## Moving from Managing Technical Work to Leading People and Direction

By Ed O'Neil, Principal, O'Neil & Associates

**T**he transition from managing technical work to leading people and direction is perhaps the biggest step in a career — and there are some predictable pitfalls that can derail a promising individual. Here are nine tips to avoid those pitfalls.

**1. More V and R, less T.** The basic leadership formula that [Leadership equals Vision times Task times Relationship](#) is relevant here. You got the position because you did **T** very well. The new job calls on you to not just do more **T**; it demands a change in orientation and focus to do more **R** and **V** — and do them better.

**2. The old job probably called on you to “make sure.”** The new one asks you to live with the ambiguity of “we can’t know for sure” but still move forward. To do this requires that [you live with the uncertainty](#), develop ways to handle the larger range of risks, and embrace the new political dimension of the work.

**3. Communication in your previous position began and ended with your technical command of the issues.** The people that are important to your work now assume you know this and don’t want to hear it. At all. What they want to know is whether you can put this work into a larger framework and share this with a clear, crisp, and purposeful message. What you say always needs to exhibit your understanding of the broader common ground and be framed in that context.

**4. When you had a punch list, it ordered your work.** Now, setting and managing priorities is the name of the game. This work ranges from knowing what to do right away, to being able to deploy the leadership “dark arts,” such as the slow walk, the half measure, and the re-label.

**5. If you were lucky, your last job came with a mentor and a development plan.** You may continue to be lucky, but don’t bet on it. You will need to secure your own feedback from a variety of sources, [create your own plan](#), seek out your own mentors, and advocate for your own development.

**6. The best perspective on your work for now is: two levels up and three years out.** You don’t work there, but your work reflects your understanding of that framework in terms of issues and relationships. As always, [leading up](#) still begins with your direct supervisor but knowing and working with the bigger perspective will help them do their job and help you do yours.

**7. Increasingly you will have decision authority,** but this does not mean you make the decision. What it does mean is that you are responsible for moving a group or team forward and reaching the best possible decision while bringing most people along with that decision with as little collateral damage as possible.

**8. Your new role requires strategic agility,** which means seeing the big picture, understanding the problem before you (both technical and political), and adapting as the situation changes. Making sure you know your strengths and weaknesses as a communicator is essential here.

### Leadership Tips

*Leadership Tips* is an ongoing series produced by the Center for Health Care Strategies’ Medicaid Leadership Institute in collaboration with O’Neil & Associates.

The series is designed to provide general guidance to help leadership of state agencies and their senior managers develop and refine the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs.

To view the full series, visit [www.chcs.org/leadership-tips](http://www.chcs.org/leadership-tips).



9. Relationship capital is necessary for success as you lead. The broader your network, the better your coherent understanding of the work and the more adaptive you can be, then the more likely you are to build, not spend, that capital.

## About Ed O'Neil

Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O'Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (School of Nursing) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). At UCSF, he served as the director of the Center for the Health Professions, a research, advocacy, and training institute that he created in 1992. His work over the past three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit [www.oneil-and-associates.com](http://www.oneil-and-associates.com); contact Ed O'Neil at [herringoneil@gmail.com](mailto:herringoneil@gmail.com).

## About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. In addition, CHCS *Medicaid Academies* provide policy and leadership training for senior Medicaid staff as well as colleagues across partnering state and county agencies. Ed O'Neil has advised numerous MLI Fellows and Medicaid senior managers over the past decade. To learn more, visit [www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders](http://www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders).

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