

Working at the Right Level

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

One of the most dispiriting bits of feedback to receive in a new leadership role is that you are not “working at the right level.” The typical reaction is, “I’ve worked my entire professional life to get here and now I’m not ready!” But before discussing what can be done to fix it, it’s helpful to examine the factors that contributed to this leadership issue.

One common contributor is focus. My basic leadership model $L = V * T * R$, where V is vision, T is task, and R is Relationship, is a useful framework here. Most of us move into a leadership role because we were very good at doing tasks or the technical part of the work. This achievement got us noticed and valued, and soon we found ourselves responsible for a part of the bigger picture and leading others. In other words, we now must be masters of V and R in order to be successful. And that’s the rub. We may not be very good at seeing the big picture, developing and using relationships, aligning competing interests, inspiring others to act, and the host of higher order skills now needed. In fact, we may not even like this type of work when compared to the technical things we were first drawn to. Additionally, we were good at doing those technical things, but now they need to be done by others. And instead of asking questions or for help in the new role — not something that you are likely to do when in a new job — we default to that old, trusty work that we know we are good at, failing to realize that the people that need to be impressed will not be. They are expecting us to grow into being a master of vision and relationships, not do the old work from our past.

Psychologically, this move makes perfect sense. Living with tasks we know how to do is easy, rewarding, and safe. But if you stay in that place you will fail. Here are some things to do to move out of that place and into your new leadership role.

1. Get a grip – Before you can move out of the hold of doing tasks, you have to recognize the value of vision and relationship work. Otherwise, you will not fully commit to the work of learning the new needed skills and will keep defaulting to the “real work” of doing the tasks. The tasks are important, and those that are doing them will need your guidance, development, passion, and understanding, but they will also need you to get out of the way and let them work while you do your job of framing the work of others, leading up, securing resources, handling conflicts, and the like. Until you get the grip that this is your new job, you will always be two steps behind.

2. Ask – This may sound simple but is so rarely done that it needs a special call out. We don’t ask for many of the reasons briefly discussed above. Basically, we do not want the person who just hired us to think we don’t know how to do the job. But here is an important corrective: that person cares more about us doing a good job, regardless of what it takes, not whether or not we already know how to do the job. In fact, if you think about it, very few of us believe a person in a new role will know how to go about doing the job. You need to help your boss help you, and this is done by asking. Start with your boss because you want them to know what you know and what you need to learn. The first thing to develop is a clear understanding of the job and the expectations they have for you. This is not the job description. It is what they need you to do. Other things you will want to ask your boss are:

- What will I be able to do if I am on track in six months?
- Who should I know?
- What has a priority?
- Who does a good job of working at this position at other places in the organization?

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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.

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- Where am I likely to slip up?

3. Plan to develop – Once you have a sense of the above questions, you need to convert them into a development plan. I realize that you might think of this as something that your boss should be asking you to do, but if they haven't then it is up to you. It should be based on the things that they have shared with you about what success will look like, and they need to be involved from the very beginning. There are a lot of things to say about the skills of development planning for yourself and others. To work at the right level, you need understanding and new skills. Demonstrating that you understand this and are actively working on informing yourself and developing the skills will accrue enormously to your benefit.

4. Expand your universe – Beyond your boss, you can get valuable insights into working at the right level from two sources. First, identify from your boss's suggestions or your own observations of who does a good job at your level and above. What seems to be in their skill set that makes them successful? How do they communicate to peers? How do they react to conflict? What seems to characterize their relationship with direct reports? Beyond your observations, there is nothing like a conversation with your colleagues to help you understand this skill set and how they use it. Very few of us can resist when someone says, "I admire how you communicate the bigger picture of your area, could we have lunch and discuss this?" Additionally, it is hard to find extra time to read, but short articles on specific techniques that you want to develop can also give you valuable insights.

5. Note what works – As you start to work on your development plan, be aware of what is working and keep a record of it somewhere. You want to turn your leadership work into a series of working practices. Do you get more out of direct reports by giving them more freedom or carefully managing them? Does it vary from individual to individual? What do you do to discover these differences? You might also use this part of your notebook to record what others do that seems effective. Additionally, note what you have learned and what you want to take on next.

6. Get feedback – One thing you will want is to get ongoing feedback from others about successful shifts you are making. Enlisting your boss in this will be helpful in several ways — valuable feedback, refined understanding of what they mean, and recognition that you are actively engaged in the work. Trusted colleagues, particularly those that are good at what you want to develop can also be a good source of feedback. When asking for this input, be specific, appreciative, and thoughtful in your response on how to enact their insight.

Not working at the right level is a career limiting or even derailing event. Use this introduction to think about where you are holding yourself back and make a plan to move forward.

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; contact Ed O'Neil at herringtoneil@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.

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