

Developing Personal Effectiveness: Practical Tips to Hone Your Skills

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by Suzanne Schoenfelt

What is personal effectiveness, and how can qualities of leadership be developed? Six AHIMA members (Leslie Fox, Barbara Fuller, Maida Herbst, Sandra Nunn, Brenda Olson, and Gerri Smothers) were asked to comment. Here's advice from the experts on how to perform effectively.

What Makes an Effective Leader?

"Leaders go first. You must have self-esteem as well as self-confidence to take risks," says Brenda Olson, RRA, vice president for HIM, Great Plains Health Alliance, KS. Risk taking is crucial, for leadership involves leaps of faith in varying arenas with multidimensional implications and consequences.

Sandra Nunn, MA, RRA, director of health information services at Parkview Medical Center in Pueblo, CO, had a similar, but slightly more radical, view: "You shouldn't be in a leadership position unless you're willing to lose your job at any time. Otherwise, you're making decisions to stay safe." She continued, "Leaders go out on a limb for what they think and believe. A leader must be willing to make mistakes." And, she added, "What may superficially seem like failure today may look entirely different in five years. Perspective changes."

On Leadership

"A manager can manage the budget, cut costs, and reengineer a work force, but only a leader can manifest his or her internal vision so much as to make others see it. A leader can make people follow that vision." -- Sandra Nunn

"The ability to think is the most important skill a leader can develop. Acting without thinking leads to lost money, opportunities, and resources." -- Gerri Smothers

Leslie Fox, MA, RRA, president of Care Communications in Chicago, IL, views leadership as the process of maturing. "Developing leadership abilities is actually the continuing process of learning who you are, of defining yourself, of mining (through reflection) the sum of your experiences. A leader should have the ability to see many options and choices," she said. "Those who can look objectively at the big picture are able to base decisions and behavior on facts."

When Barbara Fuller, JD, RRA, senior policy analyst for the National Human Genome Research Institute, was asked about effective leaders, she answered, "I admire people who educate themselves regarding HIM concerns, who progress with the times. For instance, currently HIM professionals have responsibility in the marketplace to ensure that patients' privacy is protected, that right to privacy is not lost with computerization.

Computer technology now makes information very accessible. Just because information can be accessed does not mean it should be. HIM professionals have an ethical say in this arena. That is the responsibility of leaders.

"Some qualities of effective leadership are not obvious," she added. "An individual can be incredibly smart, but without interpersonal skills, that person will never be a leader."

Maida Herbst, RRA, client resource specialist for CodeMaster in Los Altos, CA, and co-owner of Sunburst Information Management Limited, believes one of the key factors of effective leadership is attitude. The habit of staying in the positive cycle of reinforcement became ingrained early in her life, and she recommends this strategy for success. When Herbst has compared herself with certain peers, she has noticed that some people get caught in a vicious circle of negative thinking. "That thinking is downward. I practice searching out the best." Some tactical strategies for leaders:

- Listen more than you speak
- Consider all points of view
- Respond rather than react
- Stay current with your profession
- Know your environment
- Understand the players in that environment
- Be informed about your marketplace
- Coach, don't direct

Hallmarks of leadership:

- risk taking
- confidence
- self-esteem
- direction
- discipline
- awareness
- courage
- commitment
- motivation
- thoughtful reflection
- sincerity
- responsibility
- determination
- drive
- decisiveness
- attitude
- perseverance
- dedication
- vision
- adventure
- ethics
- integrity

Interpersonal skills:

- listening
- empathy
- compassion
- courtesy
- respect
- consideration
- sound judgment
- awareness of others
- recognition and respect for authority

Tools for Professional Development

1. Make a to-do list. Reprioritize the list often.
2. Keep up with professional development.
3. Access information (e.g., professional journals, a legal database, the newspaper).
4. Talk shop with the sharpest people you know.
5. Read. Read comprehensively: in healthcare, in business journals. Look for trends. Use the library.
6. Extend your knowledge beyond your field. Stay abreast of world news.
7. Develop the ability to step back and grasp a topic as a whole rather than thinking linearly.
8. Become savvy with computers. Use the World Wide Web.

Negotiation

Fuller says negotiation is the art of compromise. To accomplish something, compromise is always necessary. Another important tactic is to listen to all sides. Fuller developed strong negotiation skills by observing other skilled negotiators. While not marrying herself to certain positions, she enters negotiations knowing the bottom line-when she shouldn't compromise.

Fuller, a lawyer, assists in the development of policy and monitors state legislative initiatives for the National Human Genome Research Institute. "When writing legislation, the tough decisions are whether to pass bills or let them fail because they don't contain everything desired," she says. When asked how tough decisions are made, she responds, "One can't operate in a

vacuum. The best decisions are made in concert with other informed people. Good decision making involves gathering information, then making decisions."

Reaching compromise means walking a fine line between being too rigid and too accommodating. Negotiation means diplomacy. According to Nunn, affirming self-esteem and allowing people to save face are of utmost importance. "No matter what your work, we all face the same human situations," she says. People who feel they are losing face will hold their ground, right or wrong. Establishing win-win situations is essential to negotiating successfully.

Elements of negotiation:

- listening
- communicating
- empathy
- understanding
- diplomacy
- information gathering
- consulting with others
- self esteem
- decision making
- compromising

Steps to Good Negotiation

1. Know the desired outcomes. Understand the situation being negotiated thoroughly.
2. Be flexible, neither too rigid nor too accommodating.
3. Listen. Understand the other side's point of view.
4. Communicate your side's point of view.
5. Know your bottom line. What can you concede? What is non-negotiable?
6. See the big picture. Don't sweat the small stuff.
7. Bring both sides together to hack out middle ground.

Networking

Fox views organizations as natural systems. She says she has found that learning about chimpanzees is one useful way to study organizational behavior. Chimpanzees are gregarious animals who exhibit human-like behavior as well as high intelligence. These animals, whose DNA is only .2 percent different than humans, live and function throughout their lives in relationship systems, exhibiting observable patterns of behavior quite similar to those of humans.

On Networking

"Networking involves the willingness to invest in people. Big achievements always involve more than one person." -- *Sandra Nunn*

"I network almost everywhere. If I see someone in a grocery store line who makes a strong impression on me I might say, 'my company looks for highly skilled people. If you know anyone, share my card.' Networking with people saves both time and money. Networking should involve exchange. What do you have to barter? I want to be a person who not only receives but also gives." -- *Gerri Smothers*

Fox says that human leadership also occurs within relationship systems. She observes that the more highly a leader functions, the more highly an organization functions. Successful leaders are connected in an open, equal way with everyone in their system. They are present and accounted for in every relationship, and they develop the ability to relate to many people calmly and thoughtfully.

Fox attributes her success as a leader to the people she chooses for allies, partners, and employees and to working hard at nurturing those relationships. She finds marrying knowledge and skills productive and thus teams up with people of different strengths and abilities. This kind of collaboration, she says, makes an organization strong.

Herbst believes in choosing positive friends, professionally and personally. "If someone values and builds you in whatever regard, cultivate that relationship," she says. "The positive cycle of reinforcement is good and enriching. The busier a person gets, the more important these choices become. Finding positive people is akin to finding wildflowers on a walk. They're there, but one must look for them."

Tools for Networking

1. Recognize networking as a value. Learn appropriate methods regarding how, with whom, and when to network.
2. Be willing to meet people. Listen to them. Share ideas. Stay in touch with the people you do meet. Use e-mail to network.
3. Listen to people asking questions at meetings. Exchange business cards with those who interest you.

4. Take classes and seminars.
5. Optimize the opportunities you encounter, both within and outside the professional environment. Be aware of your surroundings. Networking is possible anywhere.
6. Identify key people to cultivate as associates. Engage them in conversation. At a social event, you needn't meet 50 people; meet two or three.
7. Get past the fear of rejection. Part of networking is being rejected. We never gain 100 percent of anything we go after.
8. Networking may be more critical for women than for men. Where boys are brought up playing team games and sports, women are not taught to be team players. As a teamwork skill-building exercise, develop an idea within your organization with the help of others. Obtain endorsement for your plan.
9. Use your professional organization. Meet other leaders. Venture into the greater healthcare arena.
10. Volunteer. Start at the state level. Many times this leads to work at the national level and national contacts. Networking will be a natural consequence of your efforts.
11. Keep an organized contact list on your computer. Note specialty, location, phone, fax, last conversation.
12. Form, value, and nurture alliances.

Presentation Skills

Presentation skills are communication skills that are essential to effective leadership. According to Fox, "Standing up in front of a group involves courage and confidence. Good communication encompasses other skills: organizing your thoughts, planning ahead, formulating positions and expressing them. How information is presented to others is critical to how that information is received."

People learn in different ways. Interactive presentation is more effective than one-way presentation: a speaker can be sure the audience is receiving the message being sent. Audience members remember more when they can create during the process of interaction. Visual presentation gives the audience something to see and remember.

"Taking speech classes to be an effective presenter is worth the effort," offered Nunn. "I have a colleague who learned public speaking by attending Toastmasters."

Tips for Developing Presentation Skills

1. Start out with a friendly audience, such as your own staff in a departmental staff meeting. A hostile audience potentially threatens self-confidence. (One of the most difficult groups is probably peers.)
2. Speak loudly enough so that your audience can hear and understand you.
3. Be prepared and well organized. Make sure you have enough (but not too much) material. Speak about a topic you know and understand well.
4. Watch the response of the audience. Be flexible enough to modify presentations according to audience response.
5. When using technology, make sure you are proficient before attempting use at an important presentation. Test equipment. Have a back-up plan should the technology fail.
6. Watch others give presentations. Learn from their strengths and weaknesses.
7. Gain support from colleagues. A first-time presenter may team up with a more experienced speaker.
8. Be willing to review evaluations to improve future presentations. Take criticism constructively.
9. Be able to relate to an audience. Make the audience comfortable. If the presentation is interactive, manage the audience so that dominant people don't overwhelm the session.
10. Take calculated risks. Learn from your mistakes and your successes.
11. Participate in local, state, and national professional organizations -- these may present avenues that lead to speaking engagements.

Lifelong Learning

Gerri Smothers started work right out of high school in a medical records department as a file clerk. She remembers the 3-11 shift at Chicago's Rush-Presbyterian/St. Luke's Hospital and her first supervisor, who she says helped shape her life. In addition to coming from a family with strong values (including stewardship, which Smothers defines as serving others in proper relationship), she was surrounded by strong influences on her first job. "Those people taught me how to work and how to optimize productivity, gave me strategies to achieve outcomes, built my self-confidence, and demonstrated strong work ethics," said Smothers.

Smothers got her education as an adult. She earned her associate's degree in 1980, her bachelor's in 1982, and her master's degree in 1989. As the oldest of 15 children, she thought it was important to be a role model in her family. "It was a long course, but I walked a road that went somewhere," Smothers, now president and CEO of Professional Dynamic Network in Olympia Fields, IL, says. "If you work hard and keep at it, the results will happen."

To continue walking that road, Smothers does plenty of reading within and outside the professional arena. She believes in paying attention to people in the know, to trends, and to key issues that impact professional life. She emphasized advancing skills in technology, finance, critical thinking, and relationships.

Herbst also returned to school as an adult. "My psychological makeup is to continue learning," she says. She is currently enrolled at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN, in the HIM master's program.

Nunn returned to school during evenings and weekends to get her master's degree while she was also a department director. "In our changing society, no one can expect any degree to last for 30-40 years. Even medicine and law degrees are no longer adequate in and of themselves," she says.

Fox developed some of her most useful lifelong learning skills while enrolled in a nontraditional master's degree program that required self-directed learning. She acquired the critical thinking and applied research skills that have been useful in her career. What's more, Fox reads at least two hours per day. "Reading is one of the best habits a leader can form to contribute to lifelong learning," she says. "Reading facilitates scanning the environment and anticipating the changes that can have a profound impact on the leader's organization. Leaders are future oriented."

Self-marketing

Like other business skills, the art of marketing must be cultivated. Marketing yourself, your skills, and your services is essential to professional effectiveness. Marketing involves making use of available opportunities, having the right product or service, listening to what customers and the company need, and making yourself and your services accessible. Self-marketers walk the thin line of perception. Perception must be trained gracefully, gradually, and skillfully -- like gentling a deer. That line of perception turns on a dime. Once slanted negatively, perception can be difficult to change. Aggressive marketing can make those you seek to attract move in the opposite direction. Don't lose heart, however: reshaping perception is possible.

On Hard Knocks: Everyone Has Them, It's How You Take Them That Counts

"Self-assessment is an important skill. Early on in my career, I had an associate's degree. I was successful at what I was doing, but I wanted more. When I started sending out resumes, I realized that I was competing with people with bachelor's

Tips for Lifelong Learning

1. The single most important objective is always to think of yourself in a learning mode.
2. Make a commitment (demonstrated with time and money) to continue to learn. This may mean reading an article, attending classes and workshops, sitting in a group with peers, or pursuing an advanced degree.
3. Stay current with your profession.
4. Fuel the desire, motivation, and ambition to learn.
5. Use your skills. What you don't use, you lose.
6. Use the World Wide Web. This technology brings information, resources, and knowledge right to your desk.
7. Stay organized.

On Self-marketing

"Confidence as well as positive feedback is contagious. To make others believe in you, believe in yourself." -- *Maida Herbst*

"I back up my sales pitch with facts." -- *Brenda Olson*

degrees. I could have continued fearing rejection and never attempted to find another job. But I didn't want to stay in my job for the rest of my life. That bachelor's degree was a stumbling block. So I quit work and went back to school." -- *Barbara Fuller*

"One negative experience egged me on to improve my skills. Looking back, the whole unfortunate experience came down to a misperception by the other party. I saw how lines of communication needed to be developed better. This experience forced me to examine how to better send my message. We are not all leaders all of the time. Sometimes there are things you need to learn, not from being a leader, but from being a follower. If I am always leading, I've found I can go down the wrong road." -- *Brenda Olson*

Biographical Information

Leslie Ann Fox, MA, RRA, is president and co-founder of Care Communications, Inc., an HIM staffing and consulting company, providing onsite services to healthcare organizations throughout the US. Fox has studied extensively in the field of Bowen Family Systems Theory, applying to organizations the principles of this natural systems theory of human behavior to describe emotional process and the patterns of emotional functioning that can be observed in the workplace.

Barbara P. Fuller, JD, RRA, is a senior policy analyst for the National Human Genome Research Institute. She is currently working on policy development and legislative initiatives regarding the ethical, legal, and social issues of genetic information.

Maida Herbst, RRA, has worked in HIM for 18 years. She is employed as a client resource specialist by CodeMaster, an HIM encoding, abstracting, optimizing, and reporting software company, and is a co-owner of an HIM consulting company, Sunburst Information Management, Ltd. She is currently chair of the California Health Information Association Legislative Committee and a member of the Data Resource Administrator Task Force for AHIMA.

Sandra Nunn, MA, RRA, is the director of Health Information Services at Parkview Medical Center in Pueblo, CO. She is also a member of the Data Resource Administrator Task Force for AHIMA. Nunn has served as a data administrator and as project manager for an enterprise-wide master patient index and has developed the coding center of expertise for training for inpatient and outpatient coding for prospective payment. In 1997, Nunn spoke at the 3M National Users Conference on developing coding expertise.

Brenda Olson, RRA, has worked in the HIM profession since 1984 with jobs in the Veterans Administration, the Kansas Peer Review Organization, and currently with Great Plains Health Alliance. She has been active in AHIMA on a volunteer basis on both state and national levels.

Gerri Smothers, MPA, RRA, CSL, CPHQ, is president and founder of Professional Dynamic Network, Inc., a management consulting, seminar, and personnel recruitment business in Chicago. Smothers is an entrepreneur, management consultant, educator, public speaker, and mentor. She holds adjunct faculty positions at the University of Chicago Hospitals Academy and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Recommended Reading

Books

Bennis, Warren. *On Becoming a Leader*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1994.

Bennis, Warren. *Learning to Lead: A Workbook on Becoming a Leader*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1997.

Deming, W. Edwards. *Out of the Crisis: Quality, Productivity, and Competitive Position*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, Center for Advanced Engineering Study; Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Deming, W. Edwards. *The New Economics: For Industry, Government, Education*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1993.

Fisher, Roger, and William Ury (with Bruce Patton, ed.). *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 2nd ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Hoover, Gary, ed. *Hoover's Handbook of American Business*. Austin, TX: The Reference Press, Inc. Published annually (1993-1997).

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Inmon, William. *Building the Data Warehouse*. New York: Wiley Computer Publishing, 1996.

Levine, Michael. *The Address Book: How to Reach Anyone who is Anyone*, 8th ed. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1997.

Mackay, Harvey. *Dig Your Well Before You're Thirsty: The Only Networking Book You'll Ever Need*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Waal, Frans. *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes*, 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

Waal, Frans. *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Waal, Frans. *Peacemaking Among Primates*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Alsop, Ronald J., ed. *The Wall Street Journal Almanac*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1998. Published annually.

Articles

Bennis, Warren. "Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge." *Harper Business*, February 1997.

Magazines

Data Management Review, Powell Publishing Incorporated, 617 S. 94th St., Milwaukee, WI 53214-1222.

Web Sites

AHIMA's Web site: <http://www.ahima.org>

American Hospital Association Resource: <http://www.aha.org/resource>

Opus Communications: <http://www.opuscomm.com> (links to other useful sites)

Health Information and Management Systems Society: <http://www.himss.org>

Other Resources

The US Government Bookstore

One Congress Center, 401 S. State St., Suite 124, Chicago, IL 60605, (312) 353-5133, fax (312) 353-1590; or Reuss Federal Plaza, Suite 150, 310 W. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53203, (414) 297-1304, fax (414) 297-1300

The Data Warehousing Institute

849-J Quince Orchard Blvd., Gaithersburg, MD 20879, (301) 947-3730, fax (301) 947-3733;

<http://www.dw-institute.com>

The Makings of a Leader

Generally, we do not give much thought to what qualities make up a leader until we are faced with a job interview or a promotion. While it may be easy to conjecture an image -- whether tangible or larger than life -- of someone who embodies our own definition of a leader, identifying how that person stands out requires some effort. The qualities of a leader may seem elusive because they are naturally integrated elements of the personalities we associate with leadership.

We asked three healthcare executives what they look for in potential leaders and how they have polished their own leadership skills over the years. Each leader agrees that continuing education played a key role in the kind of leaders they are today. As Richard Henault, FACHE, executive vice president of Methodist Health System, New Orleans, LA, puts it, a person without intrinsic leadership skills cannot be taught how to lead. However, he stresses that a little education in essential areas can go a long way. He credits much of his on-the-job education to good mentors who spent time teaching him skills that cannot be learned in the classroom.

When he investigates a potential leader for his healthcare system, Henault seeks certain basic values, including:

- integrity
- common value systems
- initiative vision

That's not to say he doesn't think specific skills are necessary to become a leader. He lists good analytical skills, intellectual strength, and the ability to motivate others as other important qualities.

A Lifetime Commitment

Lynn Nicholas, FACHE, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the New Jersey Hospital Association in Princeton, agrees with Henault, saying formal education is a "baseline hurdle" for entry into a leadership role. "It's more about character, style, and drive than it is about academic preparation." She adds that continuing education is necessary to maintain one's leadership position.

But making your way into a high-ranking position isn't just a matter of luck. Getting there demands a lifetime commitment to learning and self-evaluation-and a willingness to change.

For Nicholas, "Letting go of the things that I do well (or think I do well) and entrusting them to others" was a major hurdle in her career ascent. However, as she learned to delegate, Nicholas opened herself up to a whole new world. Over the years she has found this management technique often leads to more resourceful and effective approaches to issues and projects.

But she did not stop at just letting go. Nicholas first identified and defined a process to ensure that others were equally (if not more so) effective in handling tasks. Then, through trial and error, she learned how to set her expectations clearly-for a project as a whole, not for exact processes-when assigning tasks.

During her career, Nicholas has taken the time to identify a list of criteria to create her own definition of a leader. She has narrowed it down to four main elements. They are:

- strong communication skills
- the ability to develop and manage relationships
- the ability to develop and manage processes
- adaptability

Challenge Yourself

Peter Fine, FACHE, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Aurora Health Care, Milwaukee, WI, is another proponent of lifelong learning. According to Fine, "If you aren't in a position where you are constantly learning, you become stagnant. The only way to break out of this is to do something different."

One important change that Fine made in his career was learning to pace himself. "I'm always moving at a fast pace," he says. "But the ability to be patient as you are attempting to bring people along is a critical factor. The pace that you are moving forward at is not as critical as the fact that you are moving forward." He adds that years of experience taught him the value of patience.

His experience also has shown him the qualities that any leader in the healthcare industry needs in order to be effective. Fine's requisite list includes the following capacities:

- a passion for complexity
- a high tolerance for ambiguity-a leader must be able to make decisions without all the information at hand
- inviting and detecting dissenting opinions, which leads to better decision making
- simplifying complicated facts and articulating them to others
- encouraging risk
- trusting subordinates
- communicating vision, which requires good planning skills
- identifying the significant role others play in creating a vision
- leading by example

Becoming a leader involves many elements-not the least being the initiative to recognize and improve on weak points. Whatever your vision of a leader, becoming one requires defining exactly what these qualities are-and striving to attain them. -- *J.B.*

Suzanne Schoenfelt is owner of *The WordSmith*, a medical, scientific, and pharmaceutical communications service in the Chicago area.

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