

**Implementation Science at Work Podcast**  
**Episode 7: Good Leadership**

Our guests today are Kathy Henderson and James Wright, both leaders at the Mecklenburg County Health Department in Charlotte, North Carolina. Welcome.

Speaker 1 ([00:42](#)):

Hi. Thank you for having us.

Speaker 2 ([00:45](#)):

Kathy, would you like to start and just tell us a little bit about yourself?

Speaker 1 ([00:50](#)):

Sure. so I am an organizational professional. I am a mental health mental wellness enthusiast, and I am currently working in public health as a manager for a maternal and child health program that serves our community. I have been in leadership for over 15 years, and I have been in public health for the last 10 years.

Speaker 4 ([01:25](#)):

Good morning. Hello. I'm James Wright. I am currently a program supervisor at Mecklenburg County Public Health. I've been in leadership with public health for the past two years, but I've always been in leadership in other capacities in my life.

What, when you, when you think about good leadership, what does it mean to you? What does it look like to you?

Speaker 4 ([02:58](#)):

Good leadership looks like an individual who's passionate, who's passionate about the goal at hand, who understands people who understands the difference between managing people and leading people. Managing can sometimes look like just herding, you know cows, Kyles just making sure that people are doing what they're supposed to do, leading if leading people in such a way that they want to follow you that they grow because of following you, that they themselves are able to to achieve their goals, their personal goals, their work goals, because their spiritual goals, because they follow you as, as a leader. And that's what a good leader encompasses. And there, there's a old cliché. Good leaders are always good followers. They know because they understand the mind or thoughts of people who are following. They have people at, at the heart of what they're doing, and they understand that as a resource ultimately.

Speaker 1 ([04:41](#)):

I love that. I love what James just said, and, and I agree. The fact that people desire to follow is a, is a clear indicator of leadership and good leadership. I also believe that it's the ability to influence others to achieve to establish and to achieve shared goals while being transparent, being self-aware, being flexible. People like to use the word agile. It just means, you know, being flexible and willing to adapt being collaborative and having good communication as de as work is delegated and shared amongst a group of individuals.

Speaker 2 ([05:31](#)):

Do you think leadership's a learnable skill or do you think it's something we're born with, or is it something in between?

Speaker 1 ([05:47](#)):

I love this question. I, I believe that it is both and <laugh> agree both and agree. I believe that that you, that there are definitely learnable skills that can help people develop into leaders and even into good leaders. I also believe that there are individuals that are born with an innate ability to leadership to lead and, and leadership qualities come natural to them, whereas others may have to focus and on building certain skills. So it is a blend. I think that natural leaders also have to build their skills or hone their skills. It just it just comes easier.

Speaker 4 ([07:18](#)):

I'll heartedly agree. And I think you said it so eloquently, Kathy. Same, same. And, you know, always finding myself in leadership positions kind of rising to the top of this, that natural ability and, and want to lead. And then I think it, it can be dangerous if you, if you have that and you don't partner it with, you know, polishing those skills and making sure that you are becoming a good leader. Because leadership can, can also be a dangerous thing, right? Because some people just follow people blindly.

Speaker 1 ([08:03](#)):

And, and James, that's so important because, you know, in leadership, there's always the opportunity for abuses and that being aware of that, that there is, there can be danger involved in leadership. And to involve into a good leader. A great leader is being aware of the power that you hold, and also knowing how to harness that power and to share that power and to empower others, and to give people permission to be a part of, of the process, of growing a particular area, or even leading in a particular area, helping others to be or allowing others to be a part of that, that space in a safe way.

Speaker 2 ([08:57](#)):

Absolutely. And you know, Kathy, I really love how you're bringing out this idea of sharing power and empowering others. You know, it's such an important part of leadership to have people who rise and and to have voices at the table, and to be able to share their own experiences in their professional journeys and in the work that you're doing.

Speaker 4 ([09:28](#)):

Certainly.

Speaker 2 ([09:29](#)):

How do you think you got to where you are as leaders now, Kathy and James?-You've been in recognized as leaders either formally or informally for most of your lives. Tell me a little bit more about that-

Speaker 4 ([10:07](#)):

I think this is a really important question about shaping leadership and what it looks like in, in the lives of people, right? Being a young person and being identified as a leader, it's really important that that we have adults, mentors and individuals around us that understand what leadership looks like in children.

Speaker 4 ([11:14](#)):

Because as a leader for me, I can talk about me personally. Yeah, I'm a very vocal person, so I'm always gonna be the one with my hands and say, Hey, this is not right. I want, this doesn't feel good. You know? So just having those kind of unspoken heroes in my life. Certainly.

My, my dad who is a pastor, he's a former city councilman in, in my hometown of Fayetteville, he, he modeled leadership even beyond that for his profession. He was a, a drill sergeant <laugh> at, at, in the military. He was a, you know, a pastor at church. So just, I, I think that that was one of my biggest influence of leadership because day in, day out, I, I witnessed this man in kind of every aspect of his life, you know, be a leader and and a good leader at that.

Speaker 4 ([12:03](#)):

So I think that that was good. I think being able to see the good, bad, ugly and different of that has helped to, to see when, when, when he didn't get it right and when he got it right, how he handled when he didn't get it right, and, and, and made the corrections to, to bring it back center that was great. Leadership runs deep. When I bring myself throughout my professional career, I've had my share of, of good leaders certainly had my share of leaders who I was able to learn what not to do from, if I can frame it in that way.

Speaker 4 ([12:56](#)):

And then I have to give praise to being in a space for the last five plus years of having a phenomenal leader in our current role that's able to groom shape. And so and the person of Kathy Henderson, so she's here with me because she's shaping and grooming leadership, and she says often that she leads leaders, that all of us are leaders. And it takes a great leader to, to recognize leadership in an individual, to not be intimidated by the leadership that they see in that person to, to develop relationships with people, which is really important in leadership to know how to, to bring correction when correction is needed in a, in a way that that's loving, that has a soft land when needed in a way that, like for me, when I'm I, I'm, I'm, I'm a leader, so I'm, I'm really, I hog headed, right? I'm really, you know, like, James stop, you know, when I need that hard stop even knowing how to bring that correctly in love. And then of course, the biggest part of leadership is modeling leadership, right? So just, you know, being the example before you.

Speaker 1 ([14:36](#)):

Yeah. Similarly you know, I would share, my dad was a huge influencer for me or and model of leadership. I always loved seeing him as he led and as he navigated through situations. And he has always been just a big, my big hero be because I've always just been so impressed with how he's moved. And one of the things that was most impressive to me is he never spoke negatively about the people he was leading. He, he talked about challenges, but again, it was more focused on working the way through the challenge, but it never was a negative reflection on the people. And that's what spoke most loudly to me. Then there are a few teachers that I have to call out to James's point about early ear teachers within early on recognizing that what they see in a child like for me, it was chattiness, you know?

Speaker 1 ([15:49](#)):

Ms. Height told, she would say and she would say, you know, why you're al why you're always talking, because you have a lot to say, and there's so much you're gonna say over your life. I just want you to make sure you're saying it at the right time. So I learned from her about how to hold my words and to release them at the right time. Then in fifth grade, there was Ms. Ryan. Ms. Ryan further developed

leadership skill by teaching me about integrity and honesty, because there were sometimes in my chattiness that I could really, I call it now elaboration, but it, it was a whole lot of embellishment, <laugh> sometimes it was just making up stuff and lying, okay, let's just be real.

Speaker 1 ([17:03](#)):

And then coming into my career one of the, the third job that I was on, I, there was a leader named Chris Tet. And Chris Tet. She recognized my ability to, my ability to sit in a room and to listen and to speak at the right moment. And she also encouraged me to challenge that skill that I had learned in that way, and to not, not focus on sitting quiet as long. And she began to share things with me about what she saw in me and my ability to lead, and encouraged me not to be a sleeper, not to be not to be a quiet, not, not to just focus on being a quiet force, because that's how she saw me, and she knew that there was so much more.

Speaker 2 ([18:46](#)):

Yeah. And and it's, it's really interesting. I heard both of you talk about maybe some challenges in leadership. James, you talked about your dad and the, the good, the bad, the ugly, the different Kathy, you talked about navigating situations, how to navigate tough situations.

Speaker 1 ([19:35](#)):

One of the first things that I've learned is not to avoid them. <Laugh> avoidance does not accomplish much when there's a challenge that is before us. So being brave and being brave enough to confront the situation to, and, and when I say confront the challenge, it, it isn't the first step to con confronting it is to be able to be self-aware and to consider what the challenge is and the response that is needed to that challenge. And then honesty and transparency for me are really king. And being able to communicate that and share that even within a challenge. And then when it, obviously, when it involves others being open to hear and being curious about the challenge, and not resting in my own assessment of what it is or what it isn't, so I can have my assessment and I can say, here's what I see or what I have understood, you know, how can you help me better understand, or how do you see it? Or how would you share about that? So being curious about the challenge and that curiosity about the challenge for me most often has led to solutions coming in a, in a, in a way that's shared. And it also kind of takes the wind out of the emotional heightened emotions in a challenge. So those have been some of the, the skills that have worked for me or some of the movements that have been powerful for me.

Speaker 4 ([21:36](#)):

Thank you. You, you said it so, so gracefully, Kathy. I think when you, you're faced with challenges, for me, I always want to check myself first, right So I, I always take a self-assessment to see my, my perspective. Am I, am I seeing this correctly? I lean into into wisdom, of, of, of wise's counsel. So not just going to anybody. I think Kathy brought this example across nicely when she talked about her father, not not being disparaging of, of his, the people that he led, but but talking about the situation and saying, Hey, look, let's look at this and, and tell me, am I looking at this the right way? Or am I just in, in my own feelings, right? I think one thing, is just put putting yourself in, in the seat of someone else, emotional intelligence, understanding what others might have going on and, and, and being great offering grace to certain situations. Everybody's living, everybody has life happening. Everybody has things going on, yourself included. So knowing when, when grace should be offered, but cer certainly, like Kathy said, addressing it head on.

Speaker 2 ([23:13](#)):

How do you, how do you create those visions or set that path for yourself and for the people you work with?

Speaker 4 ([24:33](#)):

I think that I think that setting a path for vision is such an important part of being a leader. Right? We have to make the vision plain so that people that are coming behind us can see the vision and, and walk it out, right? And so I think when we talk about making a path for leadership, for leaders to see how they can make good impact, it, it's all about being a, you know, visionary. It's all about being able to see, so leaders see differently, right? Because you might see a, a huge picture, but it's a very different thing when you have this this great image in front of you. It's different when you're trying to explain the image to someone. Say, no, no, no, you do, you see this detail because you can't have this layer without that layer. And so I think, I think conveying the vision in a way that people that that follow can pick that vision up, what whatever lane they're in and run with that vision is, is a, an important part of leadership.

Speaker 1 ([25:50](#)):

Yeah, I definitely, I definitely agree with that. And to end working with, you know, various organizations that have varying capacities around how they do their work and how they shape their vision. I think starting with purpose the purpose of that organization, and then connecting their overall purpose with any particular new aim or program or service that they're engaging in, and being clear around connecting purpose to what it is that they want to see, what area they want to make an impact in. And then working with that, those agencies to become clear in the way that they communicate that, the way that they share that, the way that they connected with their current work, because alignment is so key when it comes to vision, is being able to create alignment. And that path of, of towards vision also includes the path towards making that vision achievable.

Speaker 1 ([27:06](#)):

And so looking for alignment in all aspects. So alignment in purpose, alignment in connection, alignment in communication alignment in the individuals who are in a, who will be engaged in the particular work. And then, you know, the big question of how do you know that you're walking towards the vision that you've stated? So there has to be some form of assessment or way that you measure progress towards the, the vision or towards the goal that will help you achieve your overall vision. And I think, not assuming that people, not assuming that that individuals that we work with in agencies already know this, and also working with them when you know that they know it, but say, but encouraging them, okay, so here is your current vision. How does that fit? How are you expanding that current vision? And not skipping the steps? That's real key, is not skipping the steps, whether it is assumed that they know it or or perhaps they may not know it. The steps are important.

Speaker 2 ([28:30](#)):

Is there anything that, that we haven't covered that you'd like to share about leadership?

Speaker 1 ([29:12](#)):

James mentioned it, but I'll just say it again by way of, you know, areas that we can always focus on within leadership and pursuing good and great leadership is the area of emotional intelligence and resilience. We do a lot of work around resilience the ability to bounce back and to encourage resilience in others. And so those are areas as leaders there are words that kind of float around like agile, and I say

that because, you know these words kind of become the it word and they all relate, and they all how important skills. So that whole agility, adaptability, resilience and connecting that with emotional intelligence, I believe is extremely important. And for leaders to understand that not only for themselves, but for the people that they lead, and to help the individuals that they lead to make those connections as well.

Speaker 1 ([30:23](#)):

We didn't talk about team dynamics and how leaders navigate team dynamics, but that is also another area that I would encourage anyone pursuing good and great leadership to delve into how to, how to maximize team dynamics and how to effectively manage conflict and to create environments that are that are inclusive of individual's skills and thoughts and experiences, and to identify ways to utilize those within the team dynamics that you are working with. And then of course, leaders are readers, so anyone pursuing good and great leadership should be reading leadership material on some level or listening to audio books or listening to podcasts. Shout out to all of you listening to this podcast to, to to, to always be pursuing learning because in order to, to continue in good and great leadership, we're continually learning new skills, our learning new depths of skills. We are learning about new fields and innovation. So we are continual learners as leaders. Those would be my final thoughts on good and great leadership.

Speaker 4 ([31:59](#)):

What, what else can I say? I mean, <laugh>, she said it all. I think that, I just wanna reiterate again there, that we've lived through a, a really challenging time as, as, as humans period, right? So everybody is challenged on some level. I think it's really important as leaders to raise the thought of trauma informed leadership and understanding how how trauma, even shared trauma, you know, impacts individuals on different levels and how how people may show up. So that's the only thing I'll, and touched on, reiterate the point, the importance of if, if you're gonna be a leader, just understanding humans and people and their lived experiences and honoring that in a way that is that's meaningful in your leadership of others,

Speaker 2 ([32:57](#)):

<Affirmative>. Yeah. And I, I can say that just listening to you this morning, it's been inspirational to me to hear your approach to leadership and you know, your passion for it. And do you have a, a favorite quote, inspirational quote that you wanna share with our listeners today to end our, to end our time together?

Speaker 1 ([34:00](#)):

Yes. And so this quote is by John Quincy Adams, and it is that if your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader, John Quincy Adams. If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.