

REGION 3 PPHR CENTER

Leadership Capacity Approach: Adaptive Leadership



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OVERVIEW

The Region 3 Public Health Preparedness and Response (PHPR) Center seeks to advance the uptake of evidence-based strategies and interventions to enhance communities' ability to prepare for and respond to public health threats. The Adaptive Leadership intervention within the PPHR Region 3 Workforce Pillar is designed to strengthen leadership capacity among state and local public health preparedness and response (PHPR) leaders. This initiative builds on the broader project's aim to enhance regional resilience through three pillars (Communication, Coordination, and Workforce).

Leadership Capacity Approach: Adaptive Leadership

The Adaptive Leadership component specifically addresses the Workforce Pillar by equipping leaders with tools to navigate uncertainty, turnover, and evolving emergency needs. Through an interactive didactic session and a simulation-based exercise, the intervention fosters practical leadership skills such as distinguishing technical from adaptive challenges and engaging stakeholders to support sustained organizational adaptability across all three pillars.

INTERVENTION

Increasing Leadership Capacity: Adaptive Leadership

In public health, Adaptive Leadership gives leaders a framework for navigating complex challenges such as misinformation, workforce burnout, and shifting community trust. By applying adaptive tools like "Getting on the Balcony," "Regulating Distress," and "Giving the Work Back," leaders can foster environments that promote innovation, psychological safety, and shared responsibility during crises. Ultimately, it builds the workforce's ability to lead adaptively in dynamic public health systems where change is constant.

- Utilize "Getting on the Balcony" to diagnose a core problem in a jurisdiction
- Utilize "Regulate Distress" to normalize discomfort and create worker psychological safety
- Utilize "Give the Work Back" to clarify roles and invite shared responsibility

Situational Example – Vaccine Hesitancy: A local health department in Region 3 faces growing vaccine hesitancy in several communities, fueled by misinformation and mistrust of government institutions. Using adaptive leadership, health officials could begin by using the tool Getting on the Balcony to step back and observe the underlying values, fears, and social dynamics contributing to resistance. Instead of relying only on technical fixes like more data or messaging, leaders would Give the Work Back by engaging trusted community figures such as clergy, local organizers, and public health ambassadors to create communication strategies. Through Protecting Voices from Below and Regulating Distress, they could help frontline staff and community partners navigate conflict while fostering trust and shared responsibility for improving vaccination uptake.

Increasing Leadership Capacity: Adaptive Leadership (cont.)

Situational Example – Worker Burnout: A state health department notices widespread burnout among emergency preparedness staff after months of sustained response activity. Rather than addressing this solely as a staffing or scheduling issue, adaptive leaders could Diagnose the System to uncover deeper drivers such as unclear role expectations, insufficient psychological safety, or value conflicts between mission and capacity. Leaders might use Regulating Distress to create space for staff to voice concerns safely and Getting on the Balcony to see how organizational culture contributes to fatigue. By Giving the Work Back, they could involve teams in designing realistic workload adjustments, peer support mechanisms, and shared wellness priorities, fostering long-term engagement and resilience

IMPLICATIONS

Utilizing adaptive leadership principles has been shown to improve workforce capacity by regulating worker distress, diagnosing organizational challenges, create shared values, and encourage shared responsibility. These leadership tools and interventions may prove useful especially during times of rapid organizational change and shifting funding priorities.

REFERENCES

1. Leadership: Theory and Practice by Northouse, Peter Guy (2016)
2. Heifetz RA, Grashow A, Linsky M. (2009). The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world. Harvard Business Press