

**APHL
Lab Director Transitions Guide
Online Toolkit**

[Headline]

Interview Questions

Recommended questions public health leaders can ask prospective lab director candidates

The interview phase is the true evaluation of your top candidates, lab leaders say. Take as much time—and as many interviews—as you need to get to know the contenders. Here’s a list of top questions to choose from depending on your needs and interview format. Remember, the candidates you pick will likely not have every single quality you want, so also check for receptivity to building further skills on the job.

Past experience and personal traits:

- How did you get into the public health laboratory field? What keeps you there?
- If you were not a public health laboratory scientist, what other profession would interest you?
- What special skills, qualities or experiences do you have that would contribute to your success and effectiveness in this position?
- Give us the abridged version of your work history including one significant challenge and one significant accomplishment.
- Tell us about a time that you were criticized and what you learned from that experience.
- Describe your ideal work environment and your ideal supervisor.
- Why do you think that you are the best person for this job?
- What are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?
- In your current position, what impact have you had on your organization?

Jumping in:

- What would you do in the first week on the job? During the first three months?
- Explain how you would be an asset to this organization.

Management style:

- Describe a challenging or stressful situation you’ve dealt with. How did you respond and what was the final outcome?
- Describe some strategies that you might employ to ensure that your workforce is adequately trained to respond to the ever-changing environment.
- In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge in implementing informatics in the public health laboratory workplace? What would your approach be to addressing that challenge?
- Successfully navigating organizational politics can be difficult. Subtle issues or potential obstacles can easily be missed. Describe a time this happened to you. What political factors caused you a problem and how did you deal with it? What was the outcome?

- Describe the steps you would take in preparing your laboratory for an inspection related to CLIA, NELAC or the CDC Select Agent Program.

The concept of leadership:

- Discuss different types of leadership. (Note: Looking for authoritarian [autocratic], participative [democratic] and delegative [free reign for employees])
- How would you characterize your leadership style? (Note: Looking for information about tendencies to be authoritarian, participative and delegative, and when and how these characteristics would be applied by the applicant.)
- How will you connect with lab staff from day one?
- What is your definition of a good leader? Give an example of someone you know who is a good leader and someone you know who's a poor one. What qualities make them that way?
- How would you ensure that your laboratory scientists are knowledgeable about all of the pertinent current state and federal regulations and guidelines?
- What personal qualities should a good leader have? (Note: Looking for traits such as honest, dedicated, committed, team builder, visionary, good communicator, decisive, flexible, magnanimous, humble, open, creative, fair, appropriately assertive, has a sense of humor, etc.)
- Provide us an example of your ability to lead effectively.
- Describe a leadership problem you have faced and explain how you obtained agreement and support from key individuals as you developed a solution.
- Share your philosophy regarding the value of teamwork and your experiences as a team leader/team builder in a past role. Please give examples of how your efforts improved the organization and the work environment.

Thinking proactively, planning strategically:

- What do you see as the future for your institution?
- What do you see as the future for public health labs in general?
- In a past leadership role, describe how a strategic goal was carried out successfully.
- Discuss your ability to address emerging and relevant state and local issues and proactively implement strategic programmatic solutions.
- Give examples of how you have been a proactive member of a senior management team.
- What are the elements included in strategic planning?
- What are the steps involved in developing goals and objectives?
- Describe the relationship between goals and planning.
- Discuss your experience in contributing to an organization's strategic direction and operational goals.

The role of public health:

- Imagine that you are speaking at a community outreach meeting. Describe the role of the public health laboratory as you would to attendees.
- What are the three biggest challenges that public health laboratories face today? What can you do to address these challenges?

- Describe your experience with public health-related research. How is public health research important?
- What do you believe are the two biggest challenges for public health laboratories?
- Describe your ability to initiate public health research.
- Should public health laboratories participate in research activities? If so, what types of research and what should be the laboratory's role?

Communicating about and promoting the lab:

- Provide an example of external bridge-building you've done in roles past.
- Describe an experience in developing and fostering collaborative working relationships with internal and external stakeholders.
- Imagine you had just received word that [insert sticky political or policy issue]. How would you communicate with staff or department leadership in that circumstance?
- How would you educate your legislators and elected officials about the importance of the work of your public health laboratory?
- Discuss your experiences in writing and/or delivering complex presentations to diverse audiences.
- Give us an example of when you had to communicate negative information to employees and the process you used.
- What was more important on your most recent job: written or oral communication?

Running an equipped, prepared and safe lab:

- How would you develop and maintain a safe work environment?
- How would you deal with a major accident in your laboratory? How do you prepare for and how would you react if something serious happened on your watch?
- How do you ensure that your laboratory is always producing accurate high quality test results?
- Tell us about a time you had to procure new instrumentation with a limited budget?
- Share an experience in which your diligence of inspecting equipment, facilities or materials helped you prevent a problem from occurring or determine the root cause of a problem that did occur.

Directing laboratory staff:

- How do you ensure that each staff person is fully trained and prepared for success on the job?
- Describe examples that demonstrate your ability to manage people effectively. What did you do, and how did the organization benefit from your actions?
- Describe a difficult HR decision you had to make and the process you used to support your decision.
- Tell us about an HR decision you would make differently if you had the chance to do over again.
- If you had adequate resources, how would you prefer to reward your employees for excellent performance? Conversely, how do you prefer to address poor performance by employees? (Note: For the second part of the question, looking for a progressive approach to most issues, whereby the supervisor attempts to facilitate improvement using a positive approach rather than a punitive, threatening approach.)

- How do you typically “stay in the loop” and monitor your staff’s performance?
- Tell us about your ability to recruit, supervise, coach and lead staff.

Working (and leading) collaboratively:

- Do you believe there are advantages of developing team goals versus individual goals? If so, what are they?
- What actions can a leader take in an organization to establish effective teamwork?
- What factors would you consider in assembling a project team?
- How do you go about establishing a good working relationship with new people?
- Tell us about a time when you obtained agreement and shared purpose from a situation in which all parties originally differed in opinion, approach and/or objectives.

Risk management and quality assurance:

- I am interested in the last time you took a work-related risk. What was it and in retrospect, do you believe it was the appropriate decision?
- What do you do if you discover an error has been made?
- What strategies would you use to ensure an environment of continuing quality improvement (CQI) in your laboratory?
- How do you manage the quality assurance process?
- Describe how important productivity and accuracy are to your organization. How would you identify and implement improvements in both of those areas?

External relationships:

- Describe your experiences in dealing with legislative issues at the state level, particularly as they related to laboratory practice issues and budgetary authority.
- Describe a time that you worked with another organization or agency to advance the mission of your own organization. What did you do and what was the outcome?
- As a leader within an organization, you must often build support for goals and projects from external people who do not report to you and over whom you have no authority. Tell me about a situation in which you demonstrated that you can build the needed support.

Overcoming obstacles:

- Often there are obstacles and barriers encountered that make it difficult to achieve departmental or organizational goals. Give an example of a time when you were successful in removing an obstacle, and when you were not.
- Describe a job-related disappointment and how you handled it.
- Describe a recent problem you solved. What was your approach and what process did you use to eliminate alternative approaches?
- Describe a time you had to work under a policy with which you disagreed.
- How do you keep your focus on your long-term objectives when daily problems and pressures can distract you?
- There may be inequities (perceived and real) that exist in a workplace (e.g., workload, compensation, expectations, etc.). Describe inequities you’ve observed and how you dealt with them, both personally and as a manager.

Crisis points and ethical dilemmas:

- During an especially virulent flu season, most of your staff is out sick. How would you ensure that the critical work of your laboratory is still addressed?
- Give us an example of your ability to make sound decisions under pressure.
- What experience have you had with contract negotiations?
- Describe your work ethic.
- Tell us about a time when you faced an ethical dilemma. How did you handle it?
- Tell us about a situation that got out of control. How did you handle it?
- Describe a difficult HR situation with which you were involved and how you managed it.

Measuring outcomes:

- Give us some examples of accountability measures that you have developed to analyze progress and evaluate outcomes.
- Describe a situation where you gave a team the authority to handle a project for which you were ultimately responsible. How did you map its outcome and track its success along the way?

Decision-making and change management:

- What decisions are easiest for you to make and which ones are the most difficult and why?
- Tell us about one of the best decisions you've made on the job? What was the worst? How did you attempt to correct it? What did you learn in each case?
- Give me an example of your ability to facilitate progressive change within your organization.
- How do you manage change relative to your direct reports? How do you personally manage change that impacts you individually?

Funding and budget issues:

- Assume that your operating budget has been decreased significantly. What approach would you use to identify your priority activities?
- Describe your experiences in managing a large grant or cooperative agreement, including proposal development, monitoring of processes and deliverables and periodic reporting required by the funding entity.

Personal style and goals:

- What aspect of your work has given you the greatest feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction?
- What are your short and long term goals?
- In the last two years, what have you done to develop professionally?
- What motivates you most on the job?
- Tell me about the most fun you have had on the job.
- What has been your biggest professional disappointment? Accomplishment?
- What do you do when you have a great deal of work to complete in a relatively short period of time?
- How does this position fit into your long-term career goals?

Content-specific processes, knowledge and regulations:

- Describe the process used by the laboratory to validate a new testing procedure that was developed commercially and which is already employed by other laboratories.
- Describe the process used by the laboratory to validate a new testing procedure that was developed completely in-house.
- Describe the role of a CLIA laboratory director in overseeing highly complex testing.
- Describe the role of a clinical consultant.
- Describe the meaning of the following terms as they relate to laboratory testing: sensitivity, specificity, precision and accuracy. Is it possible for laboratory results to have a high degree of precision without having acceptable accuracy? If so, how is this possible?
- What is the role of the Select Agent Program Responsible Official? What is the role of the Principal Investigator?
- Give an example of when PCR testing is used to screen for pathogens and an example of when PCR is used to confirm the identity of a pathogen.

CLIA regulations and specifics:

- With respect to CLIA regulations, what is the maximum allowable time that the laboratory director can be continuously absent from the laboratory? If the director must be away longer than this time, what measures must be taken to satisfy the CLIA requirement while the director is away?
- According to CLIA regulations, what is the maximum number of laboratories that an individual laboratory director may direct simultaneously?