National Center For Public Health Laboratory Leadership
Succession Planning

- **Assure that job descriptions are up-to-date and include required qualifications, as well as additional preferred qualifications meant to facilitate leadership.**
- **Develop and implement an ongoing recruitment process that includes a needs-gap analysis, identification of individuals with leadership potential and formal and informal professional development opportunities.**
- **Identify external factors, such as civil service regulations, that may constrain the recruitment and hiring process.**
- **To the extent possible, find ways, such as the redefinition of job classifications, to turn constraints into opportunities.**

An ongoing shortage of laboratory scientists—particularly acute in public sector laboratories—has complicated and often stalled the recruitment and hiring of public health laboratory staff. Yet, as difficult as it may be to find qualified chemists and molecular biologists, it is likely to be even more challenging to find applicants with both science *and* managerial skills to fill supervisory positions, including that of the laboratory director herself.

Hence the importance of a two-pronged approach, including innovative recruitment/retention strategies, as well as a program to identify and "grow" talented and interested staff in-house. This chapter subsumes all of these goals under the rubric "succession planning."

The best practices presented here are based on the real-world experiences of a group of laboratory leaders, convened at a 2007 National Center for Public Health Laboratory Leadership forum in St. Paul, Minnesota. While these strategies focus on the position of public health laboratory director, they are generally applicable to succession planning for any leadership position within the laboratory. Note also that given the range of bureaucratic and political environments in public health laboratories across the country, the information presented here is intended only as a guideline; current laboratory leaders will need to adapt it to their own circumstances.

We begin with an overview of the basic infrastructure—partly inherited, partly created—that lays the groundwork for succession planning. (See also the chapter entitled "Human Resource Management.")

Basic Infrastructure

Position Descriptions: The basic elements of every laboratory position should be clearly identified in a job description that includes *required minimal qualifications* and *preferred qualifications*. *Required* qualifications will probably include credentials mandated by local, state, or federal regulations, as well as base levels of specific training, experience or skills needed to succeed in the position. Optional, *preferred* elements will include additional training, experience or skills that may facilitate successful leadership.

Ongoing Recruitment Process: Recruitment should not be approached as a sporadic activity, occurring only when vacancies arise. Rather, a continuous process should be in place to find, train and mentor individuals—from within the agency or elsewhere—who have characteristics that predispose them to succeed in positions where succession is pending.

External factors: At an early stage of tenure, laboratory leaders should identify any overriding factors that may impact the hiring process within their unique government or university bureaucracy; for example, civil service regulations or union contract requirements. These will need to be accommodated in any succession plan.

The Position Description

What are the ideal qualifications for a public health laboratory director today? Below is the collective response of a group of laboratory leaders drawn from across the country.

I. Minimal Qualifications

A. Credentials that meet any state requirements, plus the federal requirements outlined in the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA).

- CLIA regulations apply to laboratories performing non-waived testing of patient specimens for medical management. Under this legislation, the so-called *CLIA director*, that is, the person listed as director on the CLIA certificate, must meet minimum educational requirements.
- For a laboratory performing high complexity testing, the CLIA director must meet the requirements listed in Table 1.
- While CMS does not mandate that the designated CLIA director be the officially designated public health laboratory director, best practice does.

B. Training that includes the level and area of formal training required for the position.

C. Experience and technical expertise at a level and in an area that prepares the Individual for success in the position.

D. Practical understand of public health systems.

Table 1. CLIA Laboratory Director Requirements for High Complexity Testing

(As of February 24, 2003)

The CLIA laboratory director must:

- Be a doctor of medicine or doctor of osteopathy licensed to practice medicine or osteopathy in the state in which the laboratory is located; and be certified in anatomic or clinical pathology, or both, by the American Board of Pathology or the American Osteopathic Board of Pathology or possess qualifications that are equivalent to those required for such certification; or
- Be a doctor of medicine, a doctor of osteopathy or doctor of podiatric medicine licensed to practice medicine, osteopathy or podiatry in the state in which the laboratory is located; and
- Have at least one year of laboratory training during medical residency (for example, physicians certified either in hematology or hematology and medical oncology by the American Board of Internal Medicine); or
- Have at least 2 years of experience directing or supervising high complexity testing; or
- Hold an earned doctoral degree in a chemical, physical, biological or clinical laboratory science from an accredited institution and
- Be certified and continue to be certified by a board approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

II. Preferred Qualifications—General Skills

A. "Visionary" and "forward-looking" personal characteristics that enable the individual to look beyond where the laboratory "is" to where the laboratory "should be" to fulfill its evolving mission.

The director must be able to see the big picture and grasp the strategic context in which the laboratory functions, including the laboratory's relationship with assorted external entities and its role addressing specific public health needs.

B. Ability to facilitate laboratory functions.

C. Ability to manage relationships with external stakeholders and partners, including health authorities, law enforcement authorities, legislators, the state governor or city mayor and others. Such ability requires skills in:

- Marketing.
- Advocacy.
- Interpersonal relationships, including the ability to establish relationships with new stakeholders as turnover occurs.
- Communication, particularly as it relates to explaining laboratory needs and roles to those unfamiliar with the laboratory.

D. Ability to deal with uncertainty and to manage change, with strong decision-making skills, accountability and adaptability.

E. Ability to obtain and maintain an adequate laboratory budget. Among other things, the director must be adept at identifying and securing external grants.

III. Preferred Qualifications—Staff Development Skills

A. Mentoring skills.

B. Willingness and ability to foster an environment in which staff are encouraged to assume leadership within their areas and to incorporate playfulness into their work.

C. Dedication to providing opportunities for staff to gain experience in unfamiliar technical and managerial areas as needs and interests dictate. Such opportunities might include:

- Cross-training staff for emergency preparedness.
- Releasing staff to pursue a state legislative internship.
- Creating sub-management teams that focus on issues ranging from outreach to "making the workplace fun."

D. Perceptiveness to identify and encourage staff members who have management interests.

The director should find "director-critical, leadership-relevant" opportunities to help interested individuals further develop their leadership skills.

E. Ability to facilitate the development of grant-writing skills among key staff members.

F. A work style that values accessibility to staff.

G. Ability to foster a productive and collegial institutional culture; for example, to change the culture from "command-control" to "collaborative management."

H. Possession of important personal qualities:

- Optimism (being a "cheerleader")
- Willingness to make and uphold unpopular decisions.
- The self-awareness necessary to recognize areas of weakness.
- The confidence to seek out and work with individuals with complementary skillsets.
- Ability to set priorities.
- Good communication skills. (See also separate chapter on communication.)
- Ability to inspire trust and to motivate others.
- Ability and willingness to encourage new ideas and to include creative thinkers on the management team.

The Recruitment Process

Internal workforce development or external recruitment to fill supervisory positions, such as the laboratory director, must be performed over a *long-term time frame*, within an *identified budget* designated for this purpose and with *supervisors' endorsement*. It encompasses four broad activities.

I. Needs-Gap Analysis

The needs-gap analysis is a proactive measure to forecast human resource needs three to five years.

II. Identifying Candidates

Potential sources of candidates include the public health laboratory system, the broader community of technical laboratory partners, and post-doctoral fellows and medical residents. Within the public health laboratory, managers can use the performance evaluation process to help identify those with leadership skills and interests.

III. Formal Training Opportunities

Formal training opportunities include internal state or agency training programs, leadership training institutes and academic programs that be technical or managerial in nature (and may or may not lead to a degree).

Laboratory leaders must not only identify such opportunities, they must create an environment in which staff members are able to pursue them.

IV. On-the-job Mentoring

On-the-job mentoring encompasses:

- Creating opportunities for staff participation in leadership activities.
- Freeing staff to participate in external activities and training sponsored by APHL, the CDC or other groups.
- Involving staff in strategic planning, laboratory-wide leadership activities and meetings with laboratory partners.
- Encouraging cross-training so that the laboratory has well-trained back-up staff.
- Creating a culture in which mentoring is expected and valued.

External Factors

Public health laboratory leaders must be aware of important factors that may function as constraints or opportunities in succession planning or workforce development/recruitment.

Possible constraints include:

- Federal, state or local human resource regulations that define salary scales, personnel classifications and other employment parameters, thus limiting leaders' ability to promote/recruit candidates of their choice.
- State or local policies, such as zero growth mandates and frozen budgets.
- Unions, civil service systems, contractor designations and other factors that drive personnel classification systems.
- State and federal licensure laws.
- External, private-sector and government competition for candidates.
- Limited understanding of the public health laboratory among entities that evaluate and grade positions, such as state human resources (HR) offices.
- Limited understanding of public health and the cost-benefit relationship of public health services among policy makers.
- Budgets that fail to provide flexible or sufficient funding to make laboratory positions attractive.

- An ongoing laboratory workforce shortage, which may be more acute in rural areas.
- The public health laboratory facility and technology infrastructure; that is, the work environment available to current and potential future staff members. (Although for some laboratories this will be an asset.)

Possible strategies to turn constraints into opportunities include:

- Career ladder traineeships for "vertical development" of staff.
- Exemptions to legislative HR mandates.
- Input from other agencies to define (or redefine) employee classifications for all or a class of laboratory employees.
- Reclassifying positions as partially exempt to justify salary adjustments.
- The use of alternative employee classification systems for public health.
- Leveraging university appointments to justify increased salaries.

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