

Authenticity, Commitment, and **Compromise** in Health Advocacy

Leadership in health promotion

My last column presented authenticity — owning and acting from both our strengths and weaknesses — as the most important leadership quality for fostering population health improvement. Related to that issue, how would you answer this question: “Which is more ethical: sticking to your principles, or being willing to compromise?” It is this year’s debate topic at the Great American Think-Off (www.think-off.org).

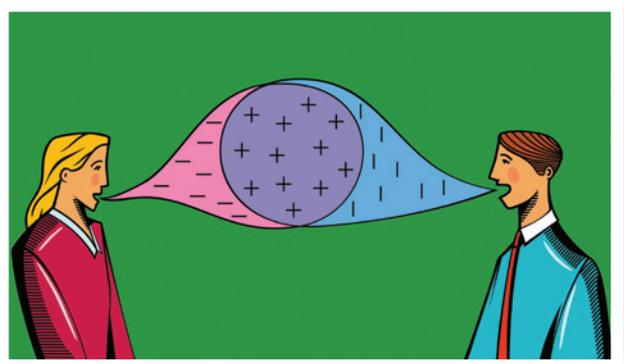
integrity based on strong religious convictions” who was “determined, no matter what the personal cost, to do the right thing for the health of the American people.” But as much as Koop never lost sight of his principles, he had a leadership style defined by tenacity and willingness to compromise. It’s easy to forget Koop’s frequent battles considering, in hindsight, he was our most famous and effective Surgeon General. About



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...by Paul Terry

would be chronically stuck and disappointed. It can be excruciating to trade what I wish in my heart was possible for what I know in my head



I expect some will point to our polarized Congress as a classic example of how unwillingness to compromise defeats progress, while opponents of compromise will argue that when you're right you shouldn't back down, no matter the cost.

But when it comes to bringing authenticity to health advocacy, the question strikes me as a false choice. For me, achieving a compromise is actually the best way to stick to my principles. Being authentic means never having to say you're stubborn.

After the death of C. Everett Koop, one of my public health heroes, I felt compelled to revisit his book *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor*. Billy Graham, a personal friend of Koop's, described him as “a man of

facing political opposition throughout his tenure, Koop wrote: “Just when things seemed darkest there would be a ray of light. Just when it all seemed senseless, I would be given reassurance of a purpose.”

Smoke-free offices, cigarette taxes, speed limits, seatbelt and helmet laws... all were born from compromise. Obesity and the attendant food policy debates ahead will require the same blend of patience and perseverance from health promotion leaders. Without compromise, health advocates

is plausible. But I've learned that incremental progress, even agonizingly glacial progress, is the best way to advance health for all. Examples:

- I'm working on losing a few pounds that, of course, didn't arrive overnight. It took months of overstepping self-imposed guidelines. Should I give myself ultimatums? “No more chips! Period.” Is it time to surrender on my guidelines or crash diet to avoid appearing a wellness hypocrite? Such self-flogging would be as unhealthy as being overweight.

- As a health coach, I don't irritate clients by telling them what I think they should do. Instead, once I understand what *they* value, I agitate for change by holding up a mirror. "Here's what you say you value; how does your current behavior align?" Then we brace for the months of negotiations and trade-offs ahead. Want that beer? Ride that bike.

We say we value our employees' or our children's health, yet we've engineered foods, food marketing, and food access to drive an obesity epidemic. If I were uncompromising in my principle of health for all, I'd settle for nothing less than banning sugar sodas and strictly regulating fats and salts in foods. Yet, humbled by my failed efforts at restricting my own choices, I patiently, though begrudgingly, listen carefully to those who argue that limiting choice is unduly paternalistic, even un-American. Then I think about where, when, and what we can agree on.

Compromises in the food fights have already begun. Beverage companies have started to acquiesce in primary schools. How about publicly funded food programs? Could citizens agree we don't need to subsidize foods that fuel obesity? What ratio of healthy to junk foods in the workplace would enlightened companies be willing to subsidize?

That I gain weight when I slip up, like everyone else, tempers my self-righteousness about the right thing to do with humility and reality. Quality experts hold that "doing the thing right" is as important as "doing the right thing." That means doing the hard work, the incremental improvement work, that it takes to create change for good. And that's why authenticity — moderated by compromise — is uniquely influential in health promotion. 🍷

Advice for New Wellness Professionals

With graduation season behind us, many new wellness professionals are heading into first jobs in corporations, hospitals, health plans, and nonprofits throughout North America. It can be quite a culture shock going from the college environment you've mastered to one where everything is new and different.



But you were hired because someone saw in you the promise of a professional who can help change the lives of those you serve. It's a big, awesome responsibility. Don't let the newness or the challenge overwhelm you. Take a deep breath, then:

- **Be confident.** You've handled economics, calculus, and epidemiology. Wellness isn't easy, but you've proven you have the brain power to do it well.
- **Don't worry about knowing it all on day one.** You'll sound smarter if you ask questions than if you fake knowing the answer. Dive right in, but give yourself 6 months to get the lay of the land.

- **Be comfortable with being uncomfortable.** Although you handled some pretty tough assignments in school, it was all laid out for you in a nice 16-week grid. The real world is a little less structured, but you'll get used to it.
- **Don't plan too far out.** Give yourself a year or so to know if this is really

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what you want, yet be open to the possibilities that come your way.

- **Find a mentor (or 2).** But don't rush it. Look for the right person to help you navigate the organization and give good career advice.

Then pay it forward when you have that opportunity down the line.

- **Work hard, even if it's not expected.** Your first 3-5 years in wellness are critical to your next 20. Become as good at your craft as you possibly can early so you can reap the rewards throughout your career.
- **Know your limits.** Even though you'll work hard, create boundaries for yourself. Separate your personal and professional life so you don't burn out and can enjoy a long, healthy career in wellness.

Good luck. 🍷