

Moral Courage and the Health of the Commons

I was part of a conference panel recently that included 2 nationally renowned leaders in public health. Both acknowledged their greatest professional disappointments related to inability to change tobacco policies more broadly and expediently in their respective organizations. Here were some of our country's most accomplished health professionals, and with barely a prompt they extemporaneously aired regrets about what they considered their failures. They were reacting to a challenge I

from healthcare delivery systems or public health agencies; I simply asked if they had laid a solid foundation on their side of the bridge. How many could say, for example, that the food policies they would advocate for other organizations had been successfully enacted at their workplaces? Only 4 hands of about 400 went up.

I've long held Nelson Mandela as my most revered leadership role model. In *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* he

Leadership in health promotion



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...by Paul Terry

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had issued to the audience. Though the theme of the conference was how to build bridges between sectors to advance the public's health, I posed a dilemma to these aspiring bridge builders. Nearly all in attendance hailed

chronicles a life so full of despair and disappointments that it's obvious why he is a universal icon of moral courage. Mandela wrote: "A good leader can engage in a debate frankly and thoroughly, knowing that at the

In Mandela's case, he sought truth and reconciliation across the table from the likes of people who had jailed him for 27 years, many of whom wished they could still keep him locked away. Health promotion practitioners are much less likely to find a fight against racial oppression as their defining life's struggle. Yet if we're serious about

advancing the health of those we serve, we need look no farther than our own side of the bridge to know that our work involves confronting issues that demand we and “the other side must be closer.”

Legislative reviews of the American Public Health Association (APHA) for the past decades show the same thing year after year: Liberals largely vote in favor of legislation APHA endorses; conservatives largely vote against it. Tobacco taxation, public health policies generally and, most recently, food “sin taxes” are beholden to ideological camps. Liberals see health policies such as increasing tax on sugar sodas as socially conscientious and conservatives see them needlessly paternalistic at best, draconian at worst. Still, we are practicing health promotion in an era where creating a “culture of health” is considered as vital as supporting individual behavior change. Indeed, there is a growing realization that one is much less likely to occur without the other. Accordingly, health promotion leaders who’ve relied on the *expert power* more often associated with supporting individual behavior change will need to become increasingly at ease with the kind of *relationship power* associated with advancing political change.

The authors of *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*¹ offer an edifying example of moral courage (which is also excerpted in an article for *Fast Company* magazine called: “Switch: Don’t Solve Problems — Copy Success”). It’s a story of an international health expert who arrives in a developing country to fight malnutrition but meets resistance from political leaders, who give him “6 months to get results” before they would ask him to leave. As much as other experts had ideas they were ready

to try, he instead asked mothers to show examples of families where the kids were not starving. They learned several key differences about the kind of “adult” food the thriving kids ate and how often they were fed. By simply replicating the practices of these model families, and having mothers “act their way into a new way of thinking,” malnutrition was reduced for 65% of the kids within 6 months. And, according to subsequent research by Emory University, the community changes stuck.

Had the experts acted on their initial instincts, they would have fallen into what Mandela viewed as “arrogant, superficial, and uninformed.” Moral courage involves a scary sort of liberation from relying on your expertise or, as Mandela said, “To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” Like other leaders, when I’ve had occasion to acknowledge my failures, and I’ve had plenty, for me they often relate to the times I forge ahead as an expert in spite of resistance from others. Showing the courage to subordinate my views in the interest of advancing a collective view involves overcoming a fear that’s deeper than fear of failure.

It is increasingly clear that obesity experts believe increasing taxes on sugar soda would help create a culture of health. And it is also the case that some economists believe higher taxes won’t yield enough good for the overall health of the commons. My science-based instincts implore me to listen to experts from Yale² and their findings in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Such are the foibles of thought leadership. But when I put on my leadership cap, which includes appreciation of moral courage and the

veracity of opposing views, I sit down and fully consider the rebuttals from *Forbes Magazine*³. Then we should file the opposing views away and, all of us, go out in search of those shining success stories. 📖

1. Heath, Dan and Chip. “Switch: Don’t Solve Problems — Copy Success,” *Fast Company* magazine, accessed 07-02-2013: www.fastcompany.com/1514493/switch-dont-solve-problems-copy-success
2. “Sugar-Sweetened Beverages/Taxes,” Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, accessed 07-02-2013: www.yaleruddcenter.org/what_we_do.aspx?id=271
3. “Can a Soda Tax Really Curb Obesity?” *Forbes*, Accessed 07-02-2013: www.forbes.com/2009/09/16/nejm-health-obesity-cigarettes-opinions-contributors-soda-tax.html

Little Notes, Big Impact

Want to stand out with participants? Write them a short note. Not an email, but a handwritten note. Some occasions:

- **First-time participants.** “I’m delighted you decided to join us...”
- **Repeat participants.** “I appreciate your continued support...”
- **Significant accomplishments.** “I’m really proud of your achievement...”
- **Big work/life events.** “Congratulations on your recent...”
- **Feedback.** “I want to thank you for the time you took to...”

Don’t promote anything with your note other than your sincere interest in them. 📖