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American Academy of Sanitarians

Next-Generation Environmental Health Leadership: Embracing a New Mindset and Evolving the Role of Environmental Health Leadership

Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based on meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through this column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal's* readership. The conclusions and opinions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

Leadership has always been essential in protecting communities from environmental health risks, but the demands of the 21st century call for a broader, more dynamic approach. Environmental health professionals are no longer tasked solely with traditional regulatory and inspection roles. Today, they must also grapple with climate change, emerging diseases, new technologies, environmental justice, and shifting political landscapes. These challenges require a reimagining of leadership—one that values technical expertise but also emphasizes innovation, adaptability, and collaboration. The future of environmental health leadership

will not be defined by positional authority alone. It will be shaped by professionals who can inspire others, influence policy, and build bridges across sectors.

Environmental health leaders today are found in public agencies, academia, non-profit organizations, and private industry. They are educated, credentialed professionals who bring a wealth of technical expertise to areas such as food safety, drinking water, vector control, hazardous materials, and housing. These leaders have demonstrated resilience in times of crisis—whether during natural disasters, disease outbreaks, or the COVID-19 pandemic. Their ability to mobi-

lize quickly, enforce regulations, and reassure communities has been indispensable.

Despite these strengths, current leadership models face significant limitations. Environmental health is often under-recognized within the broader public health system, resulting in fewer resources and less visibility. Workforce shortages are intensifying as experienced professionals retire, leaving gaps in institutional knowledge and mentorship.

While these challenges are significant, they also create an opportunity to cultivate a more dynamic and inclusive leadership model. Leadership roles have traditionally been tied to supervisory positions that risk overlooking informal leaders who demonstrate initiative and innovation outside formal hierarchies. Today's leaders have built a strong foundation, but the challenges ahead demand a new vision of leadership that is more inclusive, agile, and forward-thinking.

Emerging Trends and Challenges

The future of environmental health leadership will be influenced by powerful forces that are transforming the field. Climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, reshaping disease patterns, and exacerbating food and water insecurity. New and emerging pathogens continue to test surveillance systems and response capabilities. Chemical exposures, air pollution, and microplastics pose additional risks to human health and ecosystems. Leaders will need to understand these issues not in isolation but as interconnected, global challenges. At the same time, environmental health voices are needed more than ever in policymaking. Regulations are evolving in areas such as per-

and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination, climate resilience, and workplace safety. Leaders must be prepared to translate science into policy, advocate effectively, and ensure that evidence-based decisions guide the regulatory process.

The environmental health workforce is shifting. Many established professionals are approaching retirement, while newer professionals bring fresh perspectives but may have limited opportunities for mentorship and advancement. Leadership must prioritize recruitment, retention, and the creation of clear career pathways to sustain and strengthen the profession. Rather than remaining tied to legacy practices or outdated terminology, we must actively adopt a next-generation perspective—anticipating what we can achieve 1 year, 5 years, and even 20 years into the future.

Technological advances—from AI and big data to GIS mapping and digital communication—are transforming how environmental health professionals assess risks, monitor environments, and engage communities. Leaders must embrace these tools thoughtfully, ensuring they are applied ethically and equitably.

At the same time, communities are demanding greater transparency, cultural competence, and environmental justice. Leaders must not only safeguard public health but also build trust, address inequities, and engage communities as true partners in solutions.

Together, these trends underscore the complexity of the challenges ahead and the need for next-generation champions capable of navigating systems, collaborating across disciplines, and shaping the future of the profession.

Skills and Competencies for Tomorrow's Leaders

The environmental health leaders of tomorrow will require a distinct set of skills that blend technical expertise with interpersonal and strategic abilities. They will need systems thinking to recognize how environmental health intersects with One Health, climate resilience, and global health security, connecting local issues to global trends and identifying interventions that address multiple outcomes simultaneously. They must also be persuasive communicators who can translate complex science into clear, actionable messages. Whether speaking to policymakers, community members,

or the media, they will need to inspire trust and motivate change. Advocacy, grounded in science and ethics, will be essential to secure resources, influence policy, and elevate the profession.

Tomorrow's challenges cannot be solved in silos, so collaboration will be indispensable. Future leaders will need to foster partnerships across disciplines such as medicine, engineering, and urban planning, as well as work effectively across government, industry, nongovernmental organizations, and communities. Addressing disparities and advancing environmental justice will require cultural competence and equity, with leaders practicing cultural humility, listening to diverse voices, and designing interventions that respect community values and needs. Adaptability and resilience will be equally important. The future is uncertain, and crises are inevitable, requiring leaders who can pivot quickly, manage ambiguity, and sustain morale during challenging times.

Just as vital will be mentorship and workforce development. Leadership is not only about advancing one's own career but also about nurturing others. Environmental health professionals must actively mentor, coach, and support rising talent in this field, ensuring that the workforce remains strong and diverse.

Professional associations will play a crucial role in shaping the future of environmental health leadership. Organizations such as the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA), American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS), and other allied associations provide essential platforms for education, credentialing, and networking. Credentials such as the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS), Certified Professional–Food Safety (CP-FS), or Diplomate status with AAS signal professional competence and commitment to the field. They help ensure that leaders are grounded in recognized standards of practice while demonstrating credibility to policymakers and the public.

Associations can also serve as incubators for professional growth and competency development. Leadership academies, mentorship programs, and recognition awards create pathways for professionals to grow, showcase their contributions, and step into higher levels of responsibility. Just as important, associations provide opportunities for professionals

to serve on committees and boards, gaining valuable leadership experience outside traditional employment structures. By championing credentialing and fostering professional communities, associations strengthen the environmental health discipline and prepare the next generation of leaders to succeed.

If the environmental health profession is to thrive, deliberate strategies must be implemented to nurture and empower emerging leaders. Experienced professionals must make time to mentor new practitioners, sharing not only technical expertise but also lessons in leadership, resilience, and professional ethics. Academic programs should integrate leadership development into their curricula, exposing students to policy, communication, and management alongside technical training. Hands-on opportunities such as fellowships, field placements, and real-world problem-solving projects allow future leaders to practice skills in authentic contexts.

Further, leadership should not be limited to supervisory positions. Informal leaders who demonstrate initiative, lead projects, or build networks must be recognized and encouraged. Expanding diversity in the profession is also essential. A diverse leadership reflects the communities served, ensures broader perspectives, and strengthens innovation. Active recruitment and support of underrepresented groups will be vital.

Collectively, these strategies create a group of leaders who are prepared to meet future challenges with confidence and creativity.

A Future-Focused Vision for Environmental Health Leadership

Imagine an environmental health workforce where leadership is broadly shared, inclusive, and dynamic. Leaders are recognized for enforcing regulations, as well as for shaping policy, engaging communities, and advancing equity. They are as comfortable analyzing data as they are building partnerships. They mentor the next generation while continuously learning themselves.

In this future, environmental health leaders are central to protecting global health security, advancing sustainability, and building resilient communities. Their contributions are visible, valued, and celebrated within the broader public health system. Furthermore, this vision will require commitment from individuals, institutions, and professional

associations alike. Leadership must be cultivated deliberately, supported systematically, and recognized widely.

The future of environmental health leadership is both challenging and promising. Complex global issues, rapid technological change, and shifting community expectations require leaders who are adaptable, collaborative, and visionary. Leadership will no longer be defined solely by position but by the ability to inspire, advocate, and connect.

By investing in mentorship, education, and professional development, and by embracing diversity, the environmental health profession can ensure a strong group of future leaders prepared to meet tomorrow's challenges. Associations and credentialing bodies will remain important in providing the structures and recognition that elevate the profession.

The call to action is clear: Environmental health professionals at all career stages must embrace their roles as leaders. By doing so,

they will safeguard the health of today's communities and the resilience of future generations. AAS remains steadfast in cultivating ongoing partnerships with NEHA and other environmental health entities to continue to champion the future of environmental health together. ✨

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Did You Know?

You can invest in the future of environmental health by donating to support our mission to equip environmental health professionals with the training, resources, and connections they need to make a difference for their communities. Your donation helps to build and maintain a skilled workforce working toward healthier communities and environments.

As a professional association, we provide everything our members need to advance in their careers. One of our biggest challenges, however, is to find the funds needed to support the future of the profession. We depend on the support of members and donors to reach our mission. Your generous donations continue to support and encourage us to keep evolving for the profession. To learn more and donate, visit www.neha.org/donate.

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Nomination deadline: April 15, 2026

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