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American Academy of Sanitarians

The Quiet Skills of Strong Leaders in Environmental Health: Listening, Translating, and Connecting

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.

Ask most people what makes a strong environmental health leader, and they will point to technical expertise, regulatory authority, and the ability to take decisive action under pressure. While these skills are crucial—and our training rightly emphasizes them—they form just one piece of the foundation. The most effective leaders in our field rely just as heavily on a set of quieter, less visible skills: listening, translating, and connecting. In today's fast-changing field, effective leaders succeed not just through what is visible but by applying quieter skills such as listening to comprehend, translating complexity into clarity, and connecting with employees so that one can move forward.

These skills are not “soft skills” in the sense of being optional. They are foundational competencies that determine whether policies are implemented effectively, communities trust public health guidance, and teams remain engaged and resilient over time. In a profession where success often depends on influencing behavior, aligning diverse partners, and navigating uncertainty, these quiet skills are what turn knowledge into impact.

Listening: More Than Hearing

Listening is strategic, not polite. In environmental health, strong leaders listen to understand the context, constraints, motivations, and concerns of what is being said, not merely to respond to the speaker.

In practice, this skill means creating space for multiple perspectives. An environmental health professional might be working with restaurant owners, community members, policymakers, and fellow public health staff, all of whom bring different priorities and pressures. Listening carefully to each group reveals not only what they are saying but also why they are saying it.

For example, when a restaurant owner pushes back on a new requirement, the instinct could be to repeat the rule or threaten enforcement. But effective leaders pause to listen more deeply, building trust in the process. Is the concern about cost? Feasibility? Lack of clarity? By demonstrating genuine attention and respect for the perspectives of our partners, leaders foster confidence that their input will be understood and valued. What might initially present as resistance is often a sign of misalignment or misunderstanding.

Listening also plays a vital role within teams. When an inspector mentions they are “fine,” but you notice they are responding to complaint calls late at night, that information is data. When a specialist begins missing scheduled meetings, that is a signal. Environmental health professionals are experiencing increasing workloads, evolving expectations, and, in many cases, resource constraints. Leaders who listen—in formal check-ins and informal moments—catch burnout early, identify capacity gaps, and find solutions before the problems become crises.

Listening is not passive. It requires intentionality. It involves asking open-ended questions, resisting the urge to interrupt or immediately solve the problem, and reflecting back on what is heard to ensure understanding.

Over time, this process builds trust, which is essential for effective leadership.

Translating: Bridging Worlds

Environmental health sits at the intersection of science, policy, and practice. As a result, one of the most crucial leadership functions is translation—making complex information accessible and actionable for different audiences.

Leaders translate scientific data into language that policymakers can use. They interpret regulations so businesses can comply. They explain risks to communities in a manner that is clear, credible, and culturally appropriate. A blood-lead testing result might be “9 ppb” to a laboratory, “above the action level” to a regulator, or “unsafe for your child” to a parent.

The challenge is not just simplifying information but tailoring it. Different audiences require different approaches. A technical report serves a regulatory body, while a one-page plain-language summary serves a community meeting. A data table works well for one audience, while a story works for another.

Effective translation matches the message to what the audience needs and how they will use it. For a business owner, the focus could be on operational impact. For a community member, it could be on health outcomes and safety. For a policymaker, it could be on feasibility, cost, and public response. Leaders who can frame information in ways that align with these priorities are far more likely to achieve buy-in.

In an era of rapid information exchange—and misinformation—this skill is more important than ever. Environmental health leaders are often called on to clarify evolving guidance, address uncertainty, and maintain credibility. Clear, consistent, and audience-centered communication helps prevent confusion and builds confidence in public health systems.

Connecting: Building Relationships That Sustain the Work

At its core, environmental health is a relationship-driven field. Regulations, programs, and interventions are only as effective as the relationships that support them, which is where the third quiet skill—connecting—comes to play.

In environmental health, connecting means building relationships across unusual combinations, such as restaurant owners and

food inspectors, epidemiologists and water operators, tribal leaders and state regulators. These are not natural partnerships; they require intentional cultivation and recognition that no single entity can address environmental health challenges alone.

Strong leaders intentionally cultivate connections within their teams, across agencies, and with external partners. They understand the value of collaboration and look for opportunities to align efforts, share resources, and leverage complementary strengths.

For example, addressing a vectorborne disease issue might require coordination between environmental health, epidemiology, health-care providers, local government, community organizations, and residents. A leader who has already built those relationships could mobilize the response in hours, not days.

Connection also supports innovation. When leaders bring together diverse perspectives, they create space for new ideas and approaches. This action is particularly important in addressing emerging challenges, where traditional solutions might not be sufficient.

Within organizations, connecting fosters a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Leaders who take the time to understand the strengths, interests, and goals of their team members can better align roles and responsibilities, leading to increased engagement and effectiveness.

Integrating Quiet Skills

While listening, translating, and connecting can be discussed separately, their true power lies in how they work together.

A leader who listens well gains insight into the needs and perspectives of partners. That insight informs how they translate information, ensuring it is relevant and accessible. Effective translation, in turn, strengthens connections, as partners feel understood and respected. Strong connections then create more opportunities for meaningful listening, completing the cycle.

Consider a scenario where a new environmental health policy is being introduced. A leader who begins by listening to their partners can identify potential concerns and barriers. They can then translate the policy to address those concerns, using language and framing that resonate with each audience. Engaging partners throughout the process

and building connections increases the likelihood of successful implementation.

This integrated approach is particularly valuable in times of change. Whether responding to emerging threats, adapting to new regulations, or navigating organizational shifts, leaders who employ these quiet skills are better equipped to guide their teams and communities forward.

Developing These Skills

These skills can be developed and strengthened over time. They do not require a formal title or position; they can be practiced at every level of the environmental health workforce. Leaders can also model these behaviors, creating a culture where listening, clear communication, and collaboration are valued and expected.

Some practical strategies include:

- **For Listening:** Schedule regular check-ins with team members and partners. Ask open-ended questions and focus on understanding before responding. Reflect key points to confirm clarity.
- **For Translating:** Practice explaining complex concepts in plain language. Seek feedback on whether your communication is clear and useful. Tailor your message based on the needs and priorities of your audience.
- **For Connecting:** Invest time in relationship building, even when there is no immediate project or issue at hand. Follow up, show appreciation, and look for opportunities to collaborate.

Moving Forward

Environmental health professionals operate in a dynamic and often challenging environment. Technical expertise will always be crucial, but it is the ability to apply that expertise through effective leadership that drives meaningful outcomes.

The quiet skills of listening, translating, and connecting might not always be the most visible aspects of leadership, but they are among the most impactful. They enable leaders to navigate complexity, build trust, and move work forward in ways that are inclusive, responsive, and sustainable.

As the field continues to evolve, these skills will only become more important. Organizations like the American Academy of Sanitarians help foster the development

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ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CALENDAR

UPCOMING NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION (NEHA) CONFERENCES

August 3–6, 2026: NEHA 2026 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition, Sheraton Kansas City Hotel at Crown Center, Kansas City, MO, <https://www.neha.org/aec>

June 28–July 1, 2027: NEHA 2027 AEC & Exhibition, Oregon Convention Center, Portland, OR

NEHA AFFILIATE AND REGIONAL LISTINGS

Colorado

September 21–24, 2026: Mega Annual Education Conference, Colorado Environmental Health Association, Western Association of Food and Drug Officials, and Rocky Mountain Food Safety Conference, Denver, CO, <https://www.cehaweb.com>

Georgia

August 26–28, 2026: Annual Educational Conference, Georgia Environmental Health Association, Buford, GA, <https://geha-online.wildapricot.org>

Illinois

November 3–4, 2026: Annual Education Conference, Illinois Environmental Health Association, Starved Rock, IL, <https://www.iehaonline.org/conference-registration>

Iowa

October 7–8, 2026: Fall Conference, Iowa Environmental Health Association, Des Moines, IA, <https://www.ieha.net/2026IEHAFallConference>

Minnesota

May 7–8, 2026: Spring Education Conference, Minnesota Environmental Health Association, Cohasset, MN, <https://mehaonline.org>

North Dakota

May 5–7, 2026: North Dakota Public Health Conference, North Dakota Environmental Health and Public Health Associations, Bismarck, ND, <https://ndeha.org/wp/conferences>

Oregon

October 27–29, 2026: Annual Education Conference, Oregon Environmental Health Association, Lincoln City, OR, <https://www.oregoneha.org>

Texas

October 5–9, 2026: 70th Annual Educational Conference, Texas Environmental Health Association, Fort Worth, TX, <https://myteha.org/events>

Utah

May 6–8, 2026: Spring Conference, Utah Environmental Health Association, Bryce Canyon, UT, <https://sites.google.com/ueha.org/ueha/home>

TOPICAL LISTINGS

Water Quality

October 25–28, 2026: Onsite Wastewater Mega Conference, National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association, Westminster, CO, <https://www.nowra.org/conference/mega-conference> 🌸

Did You Know?

Whether you are seeking your next career opportunity or looking to hire talented professionals, our Career Center offers a variety of resources to help job seekers and employers. Under the Career Resources tab, job seekers can find advice for finding the right job, getting the job, and on-the-job tips once they land the right job. Learn more at <https://jobs.neha.org>.

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of these critical skills within the environmental health profession, strengthening the capabilities and effectiveness of the workforce. By investing in these competencies—individually, collectively, and with guidance from experienced mentors and reviewers—the environmental health workforce can

strengthen its ability to protect and promote public health in an increasingly interconnected world.

In the end, strong leadership in environmental health is not just about what we know. It is about how we engage—with our teams, our partners, and the communities we

serve—and how we leverage trusted expertise to guide, support, and inspire others along the way. 🌸

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