Health promoter's survival kit: learn to be smart and quick

Historians will say that the tide turned in the 1990s heralding a second public health revolution—or will they? Politicians, policy makers and the public are recognizing the potential of health promotion for social and economic development. In Europe the newly revised Health for All Targets document of the World Health Organization, together with the European Community's recent resolution on international public health action at Maastricht, will both add further momentum and opportunities. This interest and concern is to be welcomed.

However, these opportunities also pose dilemmas. How should health promoters respond when all too often over ambitious public health programmes are demanded with tight or impossible deadlines? Health promotion is a long term capacity building exercise but frequently politicians require immediate success. How are we to survive and thrive in such circumstances? Do we bite the hand that feeds us and risk future opportunities. Alternatively, do we react faster and faster, like a Pavlovian dog, until exhaustion overwhelms us with little to show at the end? We can be sure that there will be plenty of critics waiting to step in if we do not seize the moment or if we fail to deliver. Health promotion is becoming more high profile just at a time when there is a shift towards a more commercially-oriented climate within the public services. How then can we become more effective in such a fast changing environment? What survival kit do we need?

Lessons from business science suggest that the most effective managers do not work harder than the rest, their work is smarter and quicker. We should learn to do the same. What do these mean in a health promotion context? Craig Lefebvre, Regional Editor for the Americas, comments on some of the muddled thinking that can, perhaps understandably, pervade health promotion development (page 61). He points to some ways we can be smarter and quicker—other ingredients can be summarized in two key acronyms.

SMART in health promotion can stand for Strategic, Moral, Articulate, Results-focused and Team-centred. Maintaining a strategic perspective is essential for health promotion planning and delivery. It is so easy to become lost in day-to-day details. We need regularly to take the 'health gain helicopter' up into the sky so that we can see the wood as well as the trees. This means constantly asking 'how is this particular action supporting health?' We pride ourselves on the moral high ground of health promotion but this in turn requires us to demonstrate integrity, honesty and commitment. If we do not live by the values we are promoting then our work will be fatally flawed—Not Very Smart.

Effective communication is another vital ingredient if we are to win the opportunities, commitment and resources from decision-makers and fund-holders. One way to achieve this is to groom a broad constituency of support not least from the community at large. Good communication is also fundamental to this and the accountability process. You are more likely to provide satisfaction to both the public and the purchasers if you can articulate well. All health promotion organizations need also to develop a culture which is output-oriented. It is not enough to do work; we need to achieve results. Target setting can provide a useful vehicle to help us focus on outputs and therefore on winning.

Finally, smart health promoters know the importance of valuing colleagues and delegating authority and responsibility to them. Participation is at the heart of health promotion; so it should be in health promotion management. None of us have a monopoly on ideas or solutions and we cannot do everything. Rather we need to be team-centred, working together and constructively with others. This implies a clear understanding of everyone's
roles and duties so we complement rather than compete with each other.

QUICK in health promotion can stand for Questioning, Utilitarian, Idea-spotting, Courageous and Kidding. Mistakes slow us down and often occur because we are not questioning enough and consequently make ill-informed decisions. We need to be hungry for intelligence, probing and challenging when given the opportunity. Much time can be spent on things that are ‘nice’ to do rather than on the issues that we ‘need’ to do. Pareto’s old rule that 80% of the work can be done in 20% of the time is just as true for health promotion as it is for commerce. We need to be utilitarian in deciding what the really important tasks are and make sure these are accomplished. Important is not the same as urgent.

Learning from others can also speed up our work. Trying to reinvent the wheel helps no-one. Rather we should develop effective information systems and networks (such as *Health Promotion International* and *Positive Health* international news magazine—see below). New theories, concepts, methods and activities can then be incorporated quickly into our work. This implies developing an eye for new ideas, which with a little adaption here or modification there could be extremely valuable in the setting or organization we work in.

Indecisiveness is perhaps the biggest time waster of all. Sitting on the fence is not only very uncomfortable but is also vulnerable to a push from behind (or from the front). Health promoters need to have the confidence of their convictions and demonstrate their own self-empowerment. Courage is vital if we are to have a bias for action.

The final ingredient in the health promoter’s survival kit is a sense of humour. Being able to laugh at one’s self and with others demonstrates a lighter human touch. We cannot take everything seriously and intensely all of the time. More than this, being witty can often break the ice, make people feel more at ease and change the atmosphere in a tense situation. The result often is that business can move on apace. Kidding is to be encouraged and is a much more effective technique than its distant cousin ‘kicking’. The latter is the hallmark of aggressive unproductive organizations which are increasingly going out of business!

Training in health promotion certainly needs to include the science of the key disciplines—but also the art of survival. New techniques and approaches need to be understood and mastered. Forums need to be developed at district, regional, national and even international level so that we can build on each other’s experiences and provide the necessary mutual support and encouragement. We can only imagine what the history books will say about our times and the new revolution in public health. However if health promoters can change their mind sets and learn to be smarter and quicker, historians will not be short of material.

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