

## Developing While Working Remotely

By Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA

As you continue to lead through the COVID-19 pandemic from home, it is necessary to develop some new routines. One of the best ways to adapt to your new professional setting is to make time for your own development. The usual triggers of performance review or feedback that focus on personal development are now altered or absent, but with a few modifications, you can still work on improving your skillset. The discipline and routine of this effort will also help your frame of mind as you seek to lead while working remotely over the upcoming months.

Here is advice for developing while working remotely during the pandemic:

- 1. Pick a topic** — Maybe it is something you already know you need. Maybe it has come up as you have been leading in an online context. Just make sure that it is important to you, impactful on your professional performance, scaled for you to make an improvement over a few weeks or months, and focused enough to measure progress. Becoming a better person is admirable but save that for another improvement effort. Let's use improving delegation as an example of a target.
- 2. Read about it** — This may seem obvious, but we often forget that our world of information offers quick access to some useful ways to frame almost anything, from becoming better at delegation to re-grouting your bathroom. Once you have a topic, spend 15 minutes googling it. I just did this for "improving your delegation" and saw a lot of analysis and suggestions. Some of it good, some not so good, some with a great fit for me, and some that seemed foreign. But it was a good, inexpensive start.
- 3. Review your data** — You undoubtedly have past performance reviews, 360-degree reviews, or perhaps you even have some psychometrics, like MBTI or FIRO-B, sitting around. Pull them all up and scan them for themes that might give some insight into how you can be better at delegating. For instance, you might see the message across these data points that you are a perfectionist. If so, you might have trouble letting go of things, which is a possible stumble to being better at delegating. Or, you might get input that you are valued as a big picture or concept person. If this is the case, you may have trouble drilling down to the details necessary to effectively delegate. Don't look for all of the themes, just those that relate to the improvement you are working on now.

### About the Quick-Takes Series

This miniseries, part of the [Medicaid Leadership Exchange podcast](#), provides guidance to help Medicaid leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. The series, which includes companion videos and tip sheets, is developed in partnership with the National Association of Medicaid Directors and the Center for Health Care Strategies through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit [www.chcs.org/quicktakes](http://www.chcs.org/quicktakes).

4. **Develop a hypothesis** — This is where you bring together what you want to improve with the themes you think are relevant, see how they fit together, and what action you might take. For instance, the big picture quality you have is valued in many settings, but for delegation — and when that delegation is to people that need details and processes — it might create disconnect. To address it, you might take a few minutes to think through the needed steps to get something done before the delegation. You might also enlist folks that you delegate to into helping you give them what they need to do a good job. Or you might try to take yourself back to when you first started a position, recall what you didn't know, and use that to drive your understanding of what you need to share in the delegation.
5. **Discuss** — Find someone who knows you well enough that you can have a safe, candid conversation about what you want to improve, your assessment of why this is a struggle for you, and your preliminary thoughts about the corrective actions you are considering. You want them to comment on all three of these. Remember that when receiving any feedback, but particularly that which you have asked for, you need to be in listening and understanding mode, not explaining it away mode. A valuable direction for this conversation is for them to give you input and then the two of you explore it with questions you raise.
6. **Plan** — From your analysis and discussion, you have the necessary elements to put together a plan of action for improvement. The plan should include a bit of **analysis**: “When delegating, I dictate too many details and do not leave room for those I'm delegating to fully engage the problem, leaving them detached and dependent — not what I want.” **Action steps** should also be a part of the plan: “For two weeks I am going to practice delegating where I only share the objective and any quality standards that need to be met. I will be open to questions if they need help, but I will not lead with the information unless asked.” And where would we be without **outcomes**: “I want to foster more independent action and ownership. I will monitor this by having a conversation with my direct reports after they have finished the delegated task or responsibility.”
7. **Do** — Now all that is left is to try it out. I think two weeks is long enough for most improvement projects. If that seems too short, see if you can focus the goal, not extend the time.
8. **Evaluate** — When your conversation with your direct report is over and you have received feedback on your new delegating style there are a couple of questions to ask. What did you learn that you want to incorporate? How can you improve the practice so that it sticks? What have you gained as a leader from making this improvement?

Ready to get started? Make a list of three improvements that are good candidates to enhance your leadership.

## About Ed O'Neil

Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O'Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the Center for the Health Professions, a training institute that he created in 1992. His work across three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit [www.oneil-and-associates.com](http://www.oneil-and-associates.com).

## About the National Association of Medicaid Directors

The National Association of Medicaid Directors supports Medicaid directors in administering the program in cost-effective, efficient, and visionary ways that enable the over 70 million Americans served by Medicaid to achieve their best health and to thrive in their communities. To learn more, visit [www.medicaiddirectors.org](http://www.medicaiddirectors.org).

## About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. To learn more, visit [www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders](http://www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders).