How to Focus Your Training and Professional Development Efforts to Improve the Skills of Your Public Health Organization

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Introduction:

During the last half of 2011, staff of the Public Health Foundation (PHF) presented a series of workshops at national public health conferences to engage public health leaders in discussing the following question: "Given the realities--economic, organizational, and political--of today, on what Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals (Core Competencies) domains would you focus your limited resources for training and professional development to improve your public health organization's overall skill level?" This paper presents the results of the interactive workshop sessions conducted at the 2011 annual meetings of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), the National Association of Local Boards of Health (NALBOH), and the American Public Health Association (APHA). To help public health leaders decide where to focus their professional development efforts, a quality improvement (QI) tool, the Prioritization Matrix, was utilized to identify critical Core Competencies for improving the skill levels within their public health organizations.

The goals of these workshops were to have public health professionals:
- Be able to describe the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals;
- Identify Core Competencies-related strengths and weaknesses of their organizations using a QI tool; and
- Practice using a QI tool to help organizations prioritize and focus on where to build competency with the organizations.

Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals:

The Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals are a set of skills desirable for the broad practice of public health. Collectively, these competencies reflect the characteristics public health professionals may wish to have in order to effectively deliver the Essential Public Health Services and protect the health of their communities. They serve as a starting point for identifying and addressing training and other workforce development needs.

The Core Competencies are a product of the Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice (Council on Linkages), a collaborative of 19 national public health organizations working to strengthen the public health workforce. Originally developed in 2001, the Core Competencies were revised in 2010 to reflect changes in the field of public health and improve

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measurability. The Core Competencies are based on extensive input from public health professionals and organizations and are in widespread use across the country.

The Core Competencies are available for professionals at three levels of career development--entry level, management/supervisory level, and senior management/executive level--and are divided into the following eight domains, each reflecting a specific area of knowledge and skills:

- Analytical/Assessment Skills
- Policy Development/Program Planning Skills
- Communication Skills
- Cultural Competency Skills
- Community Dimensions of Practice Skills
- Public Health Sciences Skills
- Financial Planning and Management Skills
- Leadership and Systems Thinking Skills

Assessment based on the Core Competencies can help to identify areas of strength for a public health professional or organization, as well as areas where additional professional development may be beneficial.

Process Utilized:

A Prioritization Matrix is a QI tool that provides a way of sorting a diverse set of items by order of importance and can be used by groups to achieve consensus about an issue under study. It enables the relative importance of items to be identified by deriving a numerical value of the importance of each item.

In each of the workshop sessions conducted at the 2011 NACCHO, NALBOH, and APHA annual meetings, a Prioritization Matrix was used by participants to help them focus on the critical Core Competencies that would improve the skill levels of their public health organizations and decide where to focus their professional development efforts. Participants were asked to sort and rank order the eight domains of the Core Competencies in response to the question/decision criteria: "Given limited resources, what are the particular competency areas where you would focus your limited professional development dollars and time to improve the skills of your public health organization?" Completed matrices show the competency domains that are the most important to work on improving first given the limited resources at organizations' disposals.

During these workshops, participants were divided into small teams representing state and local health departments, local boards of health, academic institutions, and not-for-profit organizations, depending on the work environments of the audience. Comparing the rankings produced by these groups would help to determine if different groups focus on different competencies.

To complete a Prioritization Matrix, each group did a pair-wise comparison of each competency domain to all of the other competency domains, judging how much the domain contributed to

achieving the stated decision criteria. Numbers reflecting these decisions were assigned to each competency domain using the following scale:

- 1 – Equally important
- 5 – Significantly more important
- 10 - Exceedingly more important
- 1/5 - Significantly less important
- 1/10 - Exceedingly less important

For example, if one competency domain was significantly more important in achieving the decision criteria, it was assigned a 5. The competency domain to which it was being compared, received the reciprocal score of 1/5, showing that it was significantly less important. Two competency domains of equal importance both received a score of 1. The numbers assigned to each competency domain in relation to all other domains were summed to calculate a total score for that domain.

The Prioritization Matrix used in the workshops is shown in Figure 1. The line running through the center of the matrix ensures that a competency domain is not compared to itself. The numbers across the top represent the same eight Core Competencies domains as are labeled on the left side of the matrix.
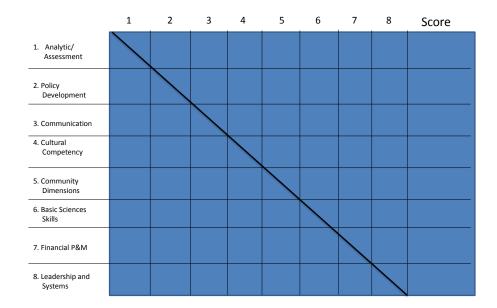

Figure 1. Sample Prioritization Matrix for the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals

Results:

Prioritization Matrices were completed by groups of public health professionals representing state and local health departments, local boards of health, academic institutions, and not-for-

profit organizations. A Prioritization Matrix completed by professionals from state and local health departments is shown in Figure 2.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Score
1. Analytic/ Assessment		1/5	1/5	1/5	1/10	5	1/10	1/10	5.9
2. Policy Development	5		1	1	1	10	1	1	20
3. Communication	5	1		1	1/5	5	1/5	1	13.4
4. Cultural Competency	5	1	1		1	10	1	1	20
5. Community Dimensions	10	1	5	1		5	1	1/5	23.2
6. Basic Sciences Skills	1/5	1/10	1/5	1/10	1/5		1/10	1/10	1
7. Financial P&M	10	1	5	1	1	10		1	29
8. Leadership and Systems	10	1	1	1	5	10	1		29

Figure 2. Prioritization Matrix for the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals Completed during the 2011 APHA Annual Meeting by Professionals Working in State and Local Health Departments

The results of the rankings by the different participant groups in the various workshops are shown in Table 1 below. The table indicates the first (1) and second (2) ranked competency domains for each group.

Competency Domain	State and Local Health Departments	Local Boards of Health	Academic Institutions	Not-For-Profit Organizations
1. Analytical/Assessment				
2. Policy Development/ Program Planning		1		
3. Communication		2		
4. Cultural Competency				
5. Community Dimensions of Practice			1	
6. Public Health Sciences				
7. Financial Planning and Management	1*			1
8. Leadership and Systems Thinking	2*		2	2

Table 1. Rank Scores for Competency Domains of the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals by Workshop Participant Group
* Domains received equal prioritization scores. Ranking was determined through a second comparison using only these two domains.

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Analysis:

In workshops conducted during the 2011 NACCHO, NALBOH, and APHA annual meetings, the Prioritization Matrix proved a useful way to identify skill areas within the Core Competencies that should be given priority when planning for professional development. Areas identified varied between types of public health organizations, although there was significant overlap in some cases. Both state/local health departments and not-for-profit organizations ranked Financial Planning and Management Skills as their top priority, followed by Leadership and Systems Thinking Skills. Leadership and System Thinking Skills were also ranked highly by academic institutions, second only to Community Dimensions of Practice Skills. The top two areas named by local boards of health--Policy Development/Program Planning Skills and Communication Skills--were not shared by the other types of organizations represented in the workshops. However, these results reinforced an earlier ranking conducted by a state health governance body, which had identified Communication Skills as its number one priority and Policy Development/Program Planning Skills as number two.

Conclusion:

The Prioritization Matrix, a tool used for QI efforts, offers an effective method for prioritizing the domains comprising the Core Competencies based on organizational goals. This allows the identification of key focus areas for a public health organization and supports the optimal use of limited professional development resources to improve skill levels within the organization.

Additional Resources:

- 3-Step Competency Prioritization Sequence – http://www.phf.org/resourcestools/Pages/3Step_Competency_Prioritization_Sequence.aspx
- Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals – http://www.phf.org/resourcestools/pages/core_public_health_competencies.aspx
- Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice – http://www.phf.org/programs/council
- How to Focus Your Training and Professional Development Efforts to Improve the Skills of Your Public Health Organization: Workshop Presentation for the 2011 American Public Health Association Annual Meeting – http://www.phf.org/resourcestools/Pages/APHA2011_Prioritization_Matrix_Core_Competencies.aspx