

Shaping the future DHS leader

Facilitators: Tumelo Assegaai and René English

Introduction and purpose

Tumelo Assegaai introduced the webinar by highlighting the importance of leadership in the DHS as a means of navigating reforms including NHI. Ahead of the webinar, registrants were asked what they think is the most important thing for new DHS leaders to do. They shared that engaging in systems thinking, using data-informed decision-making, focusing on people development and navigating the increasing role of technology are all important. Relationship building, collaboration, emotional intelligence and leading through complexity are also key skills that can be challenging to teach in a classroom.

This webinar focused on the lived experience of leaders – how they navigate change in the DHS's complex environment. It was organised around a central question:

What do experienced DHS leaders know now that they wish they had known when they first stepped into leadership and what should future leaders be better prepared to know, do, be and become?

Stakeholder management

Mokete Mary Kekana (Subdistrict PHC Manager, Nkangala District, Mpumalanga Department of Health) provided a five-step approach to stakeholder engagement, a key skill for DHS leaders as their role always demands they work with others. Mary spoke from her experience managing stakeholders as part of her work on the Contracting Units for Primary Healthcare (CUPs) for National Health Insurance in Steve Tshwete subdistrict.



Consider both internal and external stakeholders, as both can positively or negatively impact a project. Profiling stakeholders to understand their motivations for engagement and mapping their interests and influence will enable you to better involve them. Once the stakeholders are identified, profiled, and engaged, clear terms of reference should be written to define who does what and when they do it. These roles and responsibilities should be clear throughout the project, with regular refinement as needed. To enable stakeholders to support your vision, it is important to package messages for the specific audience/stakeholder. Bring information to them in a way that meets them where they are and aligns with their understanding of the issue and priorities. Ask stakeholders whether they prefer email or WhatsApp, then build the communication system and use it continuously.

Mary ended by noting that compassionate leadership is key. Staff are critical stakeholders that require a caring approach to excel.

To learn more about SALAD, access this webinar or explore other SALAD knowledge products, scan this QR Code



Distributed leadership, trust and sensemaking

Handri Liebenberg (Director: Cape Winelands District, Western Cape Department of Health and Wellness) focused her discussion on the importance of trust, psychological safety and building understanding as critical in DHS leadership. Within this broader framework, she gave several concrete pieces of advice:

- Leadership is all about relationships and that is based on building trust. Work across boundaries, departments and stakeholder groups. Do more than what is expected of you.
- Leaders should understand who is in the room. How are the people in the room influencing the discussion? Who is missing from the conversation?
- Leaders must create spaces where people feel they can speak up and disagree.
- Creating time for reflection is an important part of action, it is not a means of delay.
- Building understanding drives collective action. Written guidance is helpful, but true communication requires conversation.



"Leadership can no longer sit in one seat at the front of the train."

The work of leading the DHS cannot be centralised in just a few strong leaders. Leadership must be built and sustained at all levels of the system. Future DHS leaders must therefore be relationship builders, sense makers, mentors and system convenors who turn collective understanding into collective action. Handri ended her reflection by noting that, "We are the people we are waiting for."

Navigating complexity and failure

Salamina Hlahane (Former Director, Acting Chief Director, District Health Services, Gauteng Department of Health) shared a reflection on the profound complexities and challenges she encountered when taking on a leadership role. She specifically highlighted issues with staffing, records management, equipment and the supply chain as key challenges. She found that people expressed more reasons why things could not be done than ideas for how they could be improved. She also faced significant bureaucratic barriers to communication and innovation.

Salamina noted that navigating these challenges was not easy. She had to understand and recognise her own failures in her pursuit to bring change. Holding onto power and control too tightly can also have negative results. She had to learn to let go strategically by analysing the need for control versus freedom on an issue-by-issue basis. By loosening her communication style, others came to her to address challenges more freely.

Salamina closed her discussion with a few pieces of sage advice for future leaders:

- 1) Know your staff, your indicators, your communities and what is happening day-to-day on the ground where you are.
- 2) Be prepared to manage up – you need others' support and you have to work diligently to get their buy-in. At the same time, develop your management team at all levels.
- 3) Lead with data, but remember that there are people behind every number.
- 4) Hold quarterly review meetings across teams to enable broader understanding and open communication. Do not avoid poor performance; confront it.
- 5) Remember that stakeholders are yours to manage; you are not theirs. That means you must bring them along in the process to achieve your vision.

To learn more about SALAD, access this webinar, or explore other SALAD knowledge products; scan this QR Code or email SALADLearning@gmail.com.



Preparing and supporting future leaders

In a panel discussion facilitated by *René English*, *Sibongile Shezi* (Former National Coordinator: DHS Strengthening, Health Systems Trust) and *Ramphelane Morewane* (Chief Director, DHS, National Department of Health) reflected on what new managers within the DHS need to know. Both speakers underscored that the system is constantly shifting, so leading through change is essential.

Sibongile note that the challenges are huge, leaving new managers susceptible to feeling overwhelmed and facing burnout. An individual's mindset around this reality is important. Practicing mindfulness, being humble, and being willing to forgive mistakes are critical to navigating this reality. If you are reactionary, work through that with intention. You must also be a change agent – willing to change yourself as a leader if you want to enable change. In addition, skills in facilitation, mentorship and coaching are essential for all leaders.

Individual performance development plans can miss team-level gaps. Focus on both the individual and the team to build performance. In addition, every program or policy shift needs a deliberate change management plan. It is important to apply a systems lens, as pieces are interconnected and changes may ripple across various components.

Sibongile ended with two pieces of advice: it is important for DHS leaders to be business-minded as you are trusted with resources. This includes owning results and verifying reports across multiple sources. Be willing to seek out information that you do not want to hear. Lastly, to build systems level-thinking, *Sibongile* recommended challenging rank-consciousness and positional thinking as these can be blockages to progress and successful collaboration.

Ramphelane (Rams) reflected on both the history and change faced by the DHS. It is not the same system it was when formed, as the legislative, political and service landscapes have shifted over decades. However, the fundamental platform or foundation of the DHS is the same. As new challenges and programs are added, there is not sufficient consideration on whether that foundation can bear the load. He highlighted that change in the health system is constant, and coalesces around three areas that DHS leaders must understand:

- 1) Politically-driven reform: new leadership, election cycles, reversals
- 2) Service needs-driven reform: NHI, compliance, quality improvement
- 3) Policy-driven reform: unplanned responses to outbreaks, pandemics etc.

It is also critical for new leaders to understand foundational policies for the DHS, including Chapters 4 and 5 of the National Health Act.

To help new leaders prioritise efforts through a leadership transition, *Rams* proposed the following for those who are starting in new leadership positions within the DHS:



Leaders cannot do it alone. Empowering lower-level leaders supports successful succession and eases the burden at the top. Subordinates also have key expertise and experience. They carried

To learn more about SALAD, access this webinar, or explore other SALAD knowledge products; scan this QR Code or email SALADLearning@gmail.com.



the organisation before you arrived. Having a strong team around you is also important. For example, employment issues are a critical management priority and a skilled HR manager can manage negotiations while the leader focuses on implementation and strategy.

Leaders will also benefit immensely from mentors. They provide a sounding board and can help you identify and address your weaknesses.

In response to a question, Rams reflected that integration has to happen for the DHS to function – the division or vertical nature is primarily at the National Department of Health. It is important that national planning is integrated so programs are not duplicative, and noted that household-centric and life-course approaches are essential.

Audience participation

The webinar's audience shared additional reflections on successful leadership that mirrored many of the participants' experiences, including:

- Acknowledging that moving into a leadership role means that your existing relationships will change, but not necessarily in uniform ways.
- Becoming a leader does not mean being responsible for everything. Delegation and trust are essential or you will become a bottleneck.
- Leaders must be honest and realistic with their teams - not promising what cannot be delivered upon – all while preserving hope.
- It is important to draw out quieter voices – sometimes those individuals have the most influence.

Common themes and closing reflections

The webinar participants highlighted several key themes, which the audience's reflections and questions further underscored.

- 1) Managers must be supported to know themselves, know others, and to know their context.
- 2) Change in the DHS is inevitable. In response, leaders must be change agents.
- 3) Leadership in DHS is less about having answers and more about navigating complexity and empowering a wide range of internal and external stakeholders to be a part of the solution. It is also critical to lead with courage and humility while building skills in facilitation, coaching and mentoring.
- 4) Relationships and trust are the foundation of everything. Therefore, communication must be direct, honest, and multi-directional. Leadership must also be distributed so that many people are engaged in leadership.
- 5) Data-informed decision-making is key, but data must be validated and contextualised. Leaders must be open to hearing the truth from multiple perspectives.

The webinar ended with a reminder to add SALADLearning@gmail.com to your contacts to get information about upcoming webinars, including the next planned event in October. Webinar attendees are also encouraged to visit the SALAD Repository to access all previous webinars.

