Becoming the Leader You Were Meant To Be

With more than two decades of experience in healthcare, Doreen Samelson is skilled in leading change, championing patient access to care and developing high-quality clinical programs. Much of her career was spent at Kaiser Permanente, where she managed a team of more than 100 psychologists, therapists and support staff as the Director of Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Services. Since 2017, she has served as Senior Vice President for Clinical Excellence for Easterseals Bay Area, based in Walnut Creek, California. As a leader, Samelson utilizes her own background in psychology and emphasizes team building, mentoring and collaboration. She values her ability to be self-reflective and open, and encourages others to do the same.

Q: How did you become a leader? What’s been your recipe for professional success?

Samelson: I had some formal leadership training, including a two-year fellowship with the California Health Care Foundation, as well as professional mentoring. But many of my leadership skills developed because I was given opportunities and experiences — some of these involved falling on my face but I’ve always tried to learn each time.

As a leader, I believe you have to look at your own temperament, personality and experiences and be the leader you were meant to be. I have always watched other leaders and made notes of things to do and not to do. It is fine to take traits from others, but you should adapt them so that it works for you. Observe your own behavior and ask: Did that work? If not, why? Executives who recognize when they make mistakes are the ones who are able to improve their approach the next time.

Q: You have spent more than two decades at Kaiser Permanente before joining Easterseals. What have you learned simply being within a new organization?

Samelson: I’ve learned so much. Large ships are hard to turn and, for me, moving to a smaller organization where change can happen more quickly has been enjoyable. In smaller organizations there tends to be less bureaucracy and more opportunities to jump into new projects and initiatives because roles are not as formally defined.

One of the tricky things about leadership is knowing how much oversight is too much or not enough. Given the size and structure of Kaiser Permanente, I knew that I usually had to stay in my lane and not get too involved in things that were led by others. Here, you can easily get out of your lane and try new things. This has its challenges and success is not guaranteed — each leadership role is a work in progress.

Q: When you’re starting a new position or project, how do you get buy-in? How do you get people on board with your ideas?

Samelson: One of the things that helps get buy-in is that when I make a mistake or go down the wrong road, I am transparent and willing to admit my mistakes and follow others’ paths. When people realize they can push back a little, you get more trust and
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**Doreen Samelson, EdD, MSCP**

buy-in. People know you want to have a real discussion. Of course there are points when I say, “This needs to be done by this date,” and there’s little discussion. But if you don’t do that too often, people will get on board.

**Q:** Do you see team building and mentoring as essential in leadership today, to develop and support those around you?

**Samelson:** Absolutely, and that’s the fun of it. You want to mentor your way out of a job. Develop your staff so that if you did leave, three people could step in and everything would be fine. In order to do this, you must understand everyone’s goals. If your employees have not formed goals, ask them to do it.

Also, I recommend encouraging one’s staff to go back to school and take training. Try to give people more responsibility and put faith in them to find the answers. Pick responsibilities that are achievable, not something they cannot do. If you do make a mistake and don’t give enough support, own it and start over. Most importantly, in order to truly understand and support others, always listen.

**Q:** Executive burnout is a major issue today — as a mental health expert, what advice do you have for leaders in terms of taking care of themselves?

**Samelson:** Research shows that people who are burning out are working a lot but aren’t necessarily being productive or effective. Working more is not the answer! I try to be very careful about sleep, and try not to work too much at home. I find self-soothing activities when I get home and try to be in the moment.

If you’re not being productive or the work is not fun anymore, it’s time to ask questions: Can I change what I’m doing? Is it time to go? Executives spend a lot of time at their jobs and, if the work is no longer engaging or intellectually challenging, it may be time to reconsider.

**Q:** Please complete the following phrase: “Good leadership requires . . . .”

**Samelson:** . . . the ability to act on your insight. Simply having insight is not enough; you must use the insight to change your behavior or work differently. For example, if I feel as though I’m not listening enough (as I tend to be an extrovert), that insight doesn’t do me any good unless I actually do take time to hear what others have to say.

**Q:** Finally, what’s the best career advice you’ve ever gotten?

**Samelson:** Similar to what I stated above, I believe you have to develop into a leader that fits you, your personality and temperament. One of my previous supervisors was a strong leader and very analytical, while I’m less analytical and more “big picture.” From her I learned how to look at details and analyze situations, but realized I would never be like her as a leader. I have to be a big-picture person who can pay attention to details when necessary, or find others who can support me in doing so. As a leader, I know I must be myself and build a team to complement my strengths.

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