

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Lead From Where You Are

From time to time colleagues tell me that they are looking for an opportunity to be promoted into a leadership position. I ask them if they mean they want to be a leader or if they are seeking a position in management that has more responsibility and authority. I go on to explain that being a leader is not at all dependent on position.

In fact, the history of environmental health is replete with leaders who emerged from obscurity and made an enormous difference. For example, consider Lemuel Shattuck (1793–1859). Shattuck was a school-teacher and bookseller with a great interest in genealogy and vital statistics. In 1845, he organized a census of Boston. (Later, the U.S. Census Bureau adopted many of his methods.) He was appalled by the high mortality rate, especially among children and women giving birth. Review of birth, marriage, and death records for Boston neighborhoods revealed significant disparities in life expectancy between working class neighborhoods and more affluent neighborhoods. To address this issue, Shattuck convinced the state legislature to appoint a commission to conduct a sanitary survey of Massachusetts.

The commission, with Shattuck as its chairman, completed its survey and published the *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Massachusetts* in 1850. The commission concluded that sanitary conditions affected the mortality rate and recommended the creation of a state health department and local boards of health in each town. The local boards of health Shattuck and the commission envisioned would be responsible for

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- developing environmental health ordinances,
- appointing inspectors to identify offensive sanitary conditions,
- conducting periodic sanitary surveys of communities, and
- carrying out public works projects to improve sanitary conditions.

Sadly, like many pioneers, Shattuck was ahead of his time. The recommendations of Shattuck's commission were not implemented in Massachusetts for many years. The commission's report, however, provided a public health framework for others to follow over the next hundred years as the science of environmental health developed. Shattuck, as a volunteer with no medical or environmental health training, led from where he was.

Another great example of environmental health leadership is Ann Reeves Jarvis (1832–1905). Jarvis was a stay-at-home mother and lived in a rural area of Virginia (now West Virginia) prior to the Civil War. She had 13 children. Tragically, nine of her 13 children died before reaching adulthood, many of them from infectious diseases such as measles, typhoid fever, and diphtheria.

The loss of so many of her children in epidemics that were common at that time in rural Appalachian communities inspired Jarvis to take action to address unsanitary conditions and to prevent infectious childhood diseases. In 1858, Jarvis organized women in five communities near where she lived into Mothers' Day Work Clubs. Club members visited households in their communities to educate mothers and their families about improving sanitation. They developed a program to inspect milk for wholesomeness. If a mother suffered from tuberculosis or other health problems, the local club raised money to buy medicine or hired women to assist the ill mother with household chores.

After the start of the Civil War in 1860, the area where Jarvis lived was deeply divided with neighbors joining both the Union and Confederate armies. Jarvis convinced her clubs to declare their neutrality in the conflict and to provide aid to ill soldiers on both sides. Members of Jarvis' clubs nursed soldiers quartered nearby when typhoid fever and measles broke out in their camps. The Mothers' Day Work Clubs also clothed and fed soldiers in need. After the Civil War, Jarvis worked tirelessly to heal her divided community and bring reconciliation between the soldiers who had recently fought each other in the many bloody battles and skirmishes in the area.

Jarvis saw environmental health needs in her community and, with no formal medical or environmental health training, tackled them head on. In 1907, Jarvis' daughter organized a private commemoration to celebrate the life of her mother. Today we celebrate Mother's Day each year in May to recognize

devoted mothers everywhere. Few people know that Mother's Day began as a celebration of the life for Jarvis, an obscure environmental health hero who worked tirelessly to improve sanitation in rural West Virginia.

So, what can we learn about leadership from Shattuck and Jarvis? To me, seven things stand out about these two individuals.

1. Shattuck and Jarvis cared deeply about their communities. Each was willing to selflessly invest themselves in helping others. Neither one of them sought position, power, wealth, or recognition. Both of them embodied the characteristics of servant leaders.
2. Shattuck and Jarvis saw specific problems in their communities and took ownership of them. The world is full of people who see problems and say, "Somebody ought to...." Shattuck and Jarvis identified problems and concluded, "I ought to...."
3. Shattuck and Jarvis realized that they did not know how to solve the problem and made a commitment to educate themselves on the causes of child and maternal mortality. Shattuck learned from the efforts of sanitary reformers in England and other parts of Europe. Jarvis consulted her brother, a physician who had worked to control outbreaks of typhoid fever in their area.

4. Shattuck and Jarvis took decisive personal action. Many people have great ideas. Far fewer have the gumption and grit to roll up their sleeves and implement them.

5. Shattuck and Jarvis clearly articulated a vision for a better future. Their passion inspired people who had previously accepted things as they were to share their vision. They persuaded others of the necessity of change.

6. Shattuck and Jarvis organized and motivated people in their communities to work for change. As leaders they led by example. Sadly, although Shattuck was successful in organizing support for the study of sanitary conditions in the Boston area, he failed to win support for implementation of the study's sweeping recommendations for reform. Perhaps his report proposed more change than the state government could accept at one time. In contrast, Jarvis created small teams of women and led them to successfully make incremental changes in the surrounding communities.

7. By definition, leaders of change challenge the status quo. Shattuck and Jarvis led without fear of failure or criticism. Their courage to persevere, despite the naysayers around them, marked them as true leaders.

They instinctively knew what my friend Larry Gordon often says, "Dogs never bark at parked cars."

Leaders are not focused on what is in it for them, but rather on solving problems for the common good. Leaders identify problems, take personal ownership of them, and then act decisively to solve them. Leaders inspire others with their vision for a better future and motivate them to join in the work.

There is a vast difference between being a manager or supervisor and being a leader. You can be a leader where you are right now. No promotion is required. Problems needing resolution (opportunities) and good ideas needing implementation are all around you. Pick an issue you are passionate about and take action. That is how environmental health heroes are born. 🐶

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P.S. Don't forget to tell Jarvis' story at the dinner table on Mother's Day. You can read more about her at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Jarvis.

Did You Know?

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