

Strengthening the Public Health System

Using Systems Thinking to address emergent challenges in Public Health and set tangible goals for the immediate and long-term sustainability of local and regional public health systems.

In the Fall of 2020, the Midwestern Public Health Training Center brought together 30 stakeholders across the four-state region (Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska and Kansas) to conduct an analysis of Public Health systems and its workforce by highlighting existing and emergent strengths, identifying areas for growth and setting tangible goals to improve these systems.

The long-term vision for this work (our Guiding Star) is **"A valued and capable Public Health system that is seamlessly interwoven within communities and across institutions to provide adaptive, respectful, and informed leadership that enables health and dignity for the full, beautiful diversity of our population."** The short-term goal (our Near Star) was to figure out how we might, as a system, successfully navigate the forces that have led to a

complex public health structure.

To develop a common understanding of the current dynamics of the system we asked the following Framing Question:

"What forces account for the current ability of the Public Health workforce to demonstrate impact and value of public health for the whole of the population?"

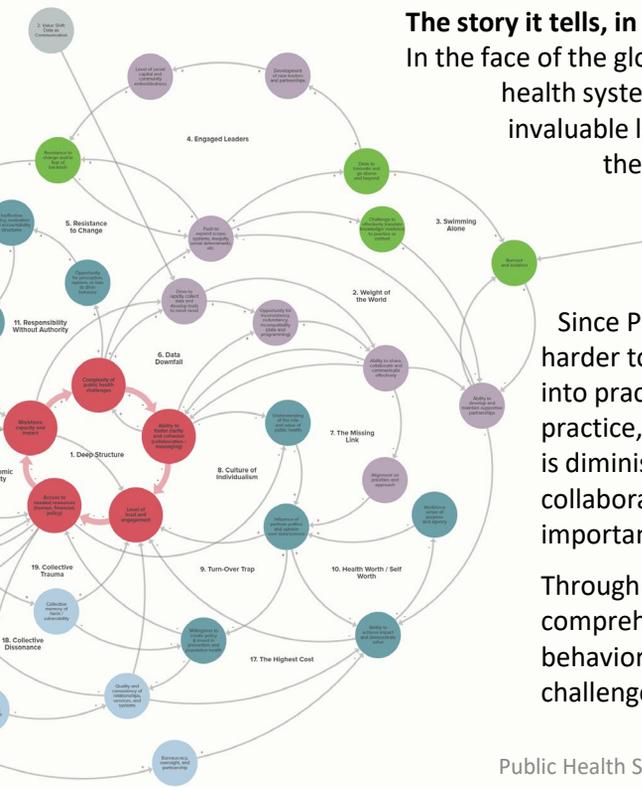
The result was a working map with top-priority forces that play an important role in driving system behavior. This map represents a cohesive and comprehensive visualization of the mental models, patterns of behavior, and structural elements producing the outcome that we see and experience in the Public Health System.

The story it tells, in brief:

In the face of the global crisis of COVID-19, our communities, as well as our public health systems, are in a moment of unprecedented challenge, but also invaluable learning. The ways that we are stretched and fall short, as well as the way we come together to achieve the seemingly impossible, all provide critical insights for how we can focus system strengthening efforts to effectively address the emergent challenges of the future.

Since Public Health encompasses a wide scope of subjects, it becomes harder to clearly and effectively translate our knowledge and evidence into practice. With poor alignment across these multiple spheres of practice, levels of trust and engagement with the public health workforce is diminished. This shows up as weakened partnerships, unsupportive collaborative structures and misperceptions of the purpose, and importance, of public health.

Through Systems Practice, MPHTC has created a cohesive and comprehensive visualization of the mental models, patterns of behavior and structural elements to better understand and address these challenges faced by the Public Health system.

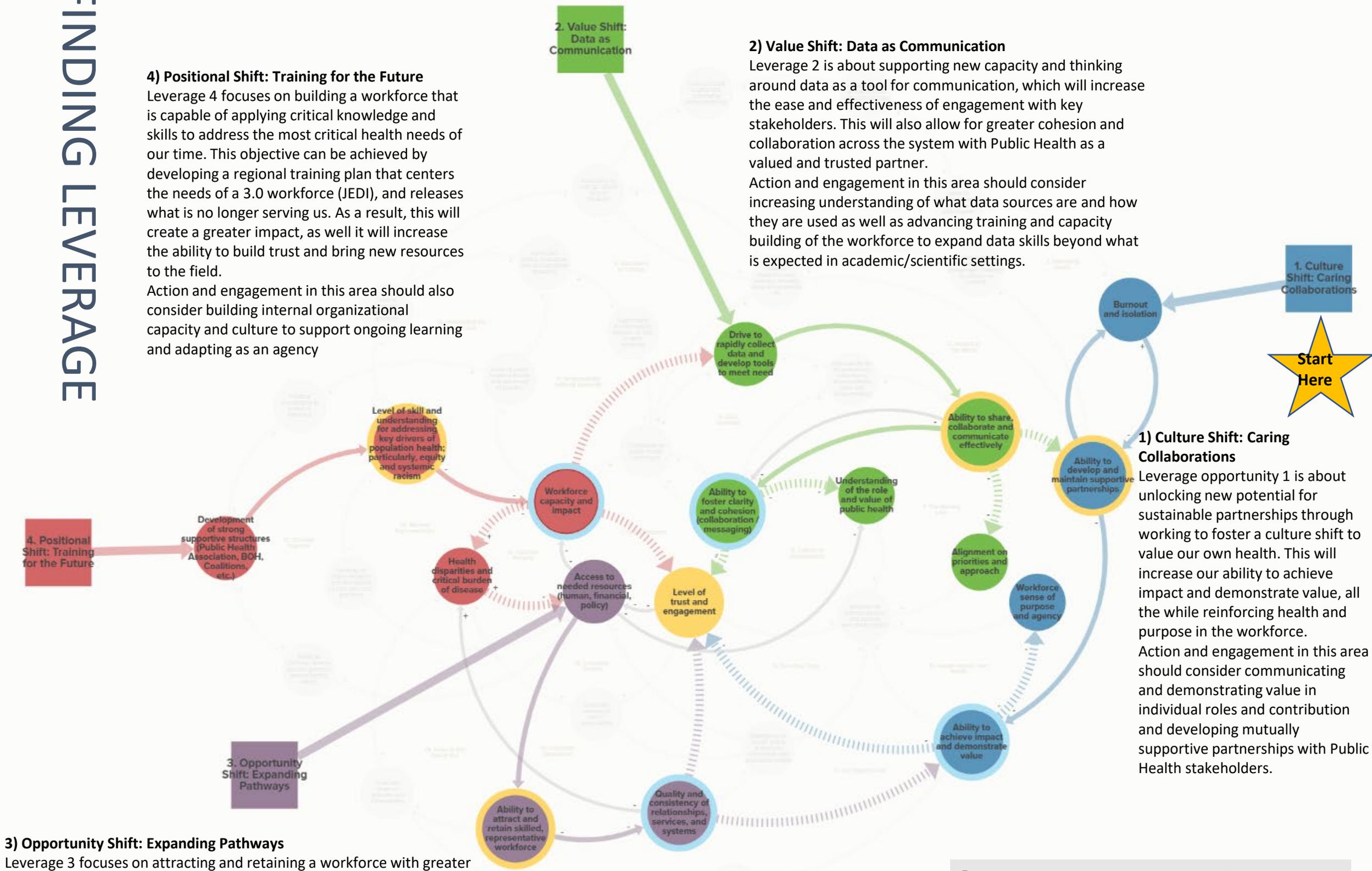


FINDING LEVERAGE

4) Positional Shift: Training for the Future
 Leverage 4 focuses on building a workforce that is capable of applying critical knowledge and skills to address the most critical health needs of our time. This objective can be achieved by developing a regional training plan that centers the needs of a 3.0 workforce (JEDI), and releases what is no longer serving us. As a result, this will create a greater impact, as well it will increase the ability to build trust and bring new resources to the field.
 Action and engagement in this area should also consider building internal organizational capacity and culture to support ongoing learning and adapting as an agency

2) Value Shift: Data as Communication
 Leverage 2 is about supporting new capacity and thinking around data as a tool for communication, which will increase the ease and effectiveness of engagement with key stakeholders. This will also allow for greater cohesion and collaboration across the system with Public Health as a valued and trusted partner.
 Action and engagement in this area should consider increasing understanding of what data sources are and how they are used as well as advancing training and capacity building of the workforce to expand data skills beyond what is expected in academic/scientific settings.

1) Culture Shift: Caring Collaborations
 Leverage opportunity 1 is about unlocking new potential for sustainable partnerships through working to foster a culture shift to value our own health. This will increase our ability to achieve impact and demonstrate value, all the while reinforcing health and purpose in the workforce.
 Action and engagement in this area should consider communicating and demonstrating value in individual roles and contribution and developing mutually supportive partnerships with Public Health stakeholders.



3) Opportunity Shift: Expanding Pathways
 Leverage 3 focuses on attracting and retaining a workforce with greater representation and skills. This can be done by expanding pathways for entering the public health workforce to begin earlier, including more diverse pathways, and reducing restrictive and complex HR policies. As a result, we will see an increase in the quality of services and community embeddedness which will make a real impact on health disparities.
 Action and engagement in this area should consider assuring that the workforce is able to apply their full potential within their roles.

Process: In a similarly participatory fashion, 30 stakeholders from across the four-state region were brought together to call on their vast and unique experiences to identify areas of out-sized impact illuminated by the map. These four Leverage Hypothesis are the synthesis of their findings.

Early Impact and Progress

- **The Mental Health Initiative** intends to support the mental health and wellness of the public health workforce, focusing on needs manifested by the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative emphasizes individual and interpersonal wellness strategies, public health leadership and organizational approaches, and policy, with a foundational goal of developing a supportive workplace, building towards an organizational culture of health and wellness. Having a more supportive environment will minimize resilience and will advance wellness in the workplace.
- **Building Health Equity** aims to create the building blocks of a sustainable culture of health equity practice to transform public health in Iowa. A team of staff, faculty, practitioners, and students are developing, implementing, and evaluating a health equity training for health departments across the state of Iowa.
- **Effective Communication Framework** aims to strengthen the ability of raising awareness and advocating towards a better public health system. Working with policymakers and communities to reposition efforts at advancing advocacy.

Next Steps

- **Initiating regional workshops on Systems Practice:** Bringing together public health professionals across the four-state region to reengage with the Systems Map and to identify ways that will positively impact the system.
- **Working towards strengthening the Workforce Development Coalition:** This will be done through advancing strategies that aim at involving more stakeholders into the decision-making process.
- **Implementing Public Health 3.0 Approach:** Shifting Iowa's Local Public Health Systems towards emphasizing collaborative engagement and actions that directly affect the social determinants of health inequity.
- **Cultivating leadership across the system:** Focusing not just on the public health workforce and their pathway, but also looking at the entire ecosystem where the workforce is entering to. Aiming at developing concrete practices to attract and retain the workforce.

Explore, engage, improve

For more information, including the full, interactive digital version of the map, visit:

<https://kumu.io/engaging-inquiry/midwestern-public-health-training-center#theory-of-context>

To share your feedback or resources related to the map, please contact us at:

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