

7-1-7 implementation: The leadership factor



The 7-1-7 target has gained global traction, with dozens of countries at various stages of adoption, implementation, and use. A review by Resolve to Save Lives (RTSL) conducted late 2024 assessed enablers and barriers to implementation. This briefing note focuses on the leadership learnings from the review—examining leader’s traits that have driven 7-1-7 adoption, factors that have hindered or enabled effective stewardship, and challenges in sustaining momentum.

Leadership is a decisive factor in leveraging 7-1-7 as a tool to identify gaps and drive system-wide improvements in outbreak response. Beyond technical competencies, strong leadership is essential to foster a nuanced understanding of 7-1-7 as a tool for strengthening response systems rather than merely a measurement framework. Effective leadership develops innovation appetite in technical teams, works to integrate 7-1-7 into existing systems, enables cross-sector collaboration, and mobilizes stakeholders to drive incremental yet sustained improvements. In our review, the presence of engaged leadership at different levels was consistently identified and linked to deeper institutionalization and more impactful use of 7-1-7 in practice.

Challenges in leadership and government buy-in

Unclear roles and responsibilities It is at times unclear which individual(s) or agency(ies) holds the authority to drive an initiative like 7-1-7. Fragmented or competing public health mandates can create tensions, while the absence of a clear leader responsible for aligning strategies and making critical decisions can result in inconsistent efforts and accountability gaps.

Weak or nominal leadership In some cases, leaders offer superficial approval that does not translate into actual commitment or capacity to fully support 7-1-7 implementation efforts. This can result in technical staff being left without necessary resources or backing to address bottlenecks, often due to political dynamics or disconnect between leadership and implementation teams.

Challenges in securing government buy-in across levels and sectors Government ownership is crucial for the successful adoption and sustainability of 7-1-7. However, securing ownership at all levels (central, subnational, and across sectors) can be challenging due to competing priorities and fragmentation. The ability of the 7-1-7 lead to coordinate effectively depends on their mandate or authority to reach out and coordinate across sectors and is influenced as well by the country’s political governance structure.

Leadership is one of the most difficult things to measure. Yet we know it is a critical part of our work and because 7-1-7 is asking for radical change, leadership is even more important.

—Interviewee, October 2024

Enabling factors

High-level political leaders driving momentum and sustaining success Political leaders—such as Ministers of Health, Directors General, and senior government officials—are key to generating momentum and good will in the initial stages, and to ensure the sustainability of the 7-1-7 performance improvement approach in the long term. Early on, they help establish buy-in, set strategic direction, and secure necessary resources. Over time, they play a crucial role in embedding 7-1-7 into existing systems, linking 7-1-7 to national priorities and global commitments, and fostering cross-sector collaboration. While not involved in daily operations, their influence helps integrate the framework into policies, budgets, and staffing plans.

You need someone who knows and is known and understands how to bring people together behind a vision, who knows how to build consensus to move forward.

—Interviewee, October 2024

National technical leaders bridging vision and operational excellence Technical leaders—such as heads of epidemiology, surveillance—are responsible for the day-to-day management and technical implementation of 7-1-7. Their role is pivotal in translating political directives into operational procedures and ensure consistent framework application. Conversely, they play a key role in interpreting 7-1-7 technical data and presenting it to political and financial decision-makers, helping bridge the gap between the technical performance and the political will needed to drive change. Effective technical leaders display an ability to influence beyond their direct authority and integrate 7-1-7 into broader national processes, ensuring that data informs continuous improvement rather than becoming a routine reporting exercise.

Subnational leadership engaged from the start For 7-1-7 to be successfully adopted at subnational levels, regional leaders—such as governors and provincial health directors—must champion its implementation. In decentralized systems, their engagement ensures local ownership and sustained application of the target.

Leadership traits

The review identified several traits that distinguish effective leaders in driving the implementation of the 7-1-7 target. These leaders go beyond endorsing the initiative—they actively champion its adoption, navigate institutional complexities, and cultivate an environment that fosters continuous improvement. Their effectiveness is rooted in a combination of personal commitment, strategic and innovative mindset, and change management. The table below sums up some of these critical traits.

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| Entrepreneurial | Effective leaders possess an entrepreneurial mindset, consistently seeking out opportunities for innovation and improvement. They actively iterate on approaches, demonstrating curiosity and flexibility in problem-solving. |
| Challenger of the status quo | Leaders exhibit a certain “productive impatience.” They are not satisfied with adhering to existing status quo. They push for better results and improvements, embracing innovative approaches with a readiness to bend bureaucratic or traditional norms. |
| Strategic and system-oriented | 7-1-7 leaders see beyond the technical realm, they are strategic and systems-oriented, driven by a vision to optimize workflows and enhance performance across systems. They are committed to building learning organizations. |

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| Adept change manager | Successful 7-1-7 leaders excel in change management. They understand the complexities of change, from addressing resistance to fostering buy-in and creating a thriving improvement culture. |
| Builder of shared agenda | Leaders are skilled at building alignment on the bigger picture among diverse stakeholders. They are deliberate at fostering collaboration across levels / institutions to secure buy-in and coherent delivery. |
| Personally committed | Leaders show personal passion and deep commitment to the success of the 7-1-7 target. They invest time in understanding 7-1-7 and advocating for its integration, recognizing that individual conviction alone does not ensure collective ownership. |

Effective leadership traits in driving the implementation of the 7-1-7 target and performance improvement approach.

Recommendations to countries implementing 7-1-7

Refine selection of leaders Target individuals who not only possess technical expertise and hold key functions within the system but also have a track record of driving change, political acumen to navigate complex dynamics, and the ability to collaborate across sectors. Prioritize a multilevel approach by identifying leaders across levels and ministries from the outset, ensuring alignment with the country's governance structure.

Expand leadership capacity support Support leaders beyond technical aspects to equip them at all levels with the skills needed to drive 7-1-7 adoption. This includes building capacities in change management (e.g., overcoming resistance and addressing anxieties, leading organizational evolution), stakeholder influence and cross-sector coordination (e.g., securing support particularly when lacking direct authority, fostering alignment, managing stakeholder dynamics), and effective communication (e.g., articulating 7-1-7 goals and benefits, securing support to address bottlenecks).

Develop peer learning Encourage leaders and their staff to engage in communities of practice and exchange visits. This facilitates shared learning and leadership resilience, ultimately reducing isolation.

Conclusion

Leadership is a decisive factor in leveraging 7-1-7 as a tool to identify gaps and drive system-wide improvements in outbreak response. Beyond technical excellence, strong leadership is needed to ensure that 7-1-7 is not merely seen as a measurement tool but used as a catalyst for systemic improvements. Building well-rounded leaders—who can navigate complex stakeholder dynamics, drive change, and foster cross-sector collaboration—will not only strengthen 7-1-7 implementation but also enhance the broader field of health security.