

Leadership in a crisis: doing things differently, doing different things

Abstract

This article summarises the findings from a review of publications related to healthcare leadership that were published during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. The review discusses a range of strategies for leaders to adopt in challenging situations and identifies three aspects of leadership which are considered essential when leading teams during a crisis: 1) communication, 2) decision making and 3) mental health and wellbeing. This article identifies key principles for each of these three aspects and provides practical tips for how leaders can use the lessons learned from the pandemic in their own contexts.

Key words: COVID-19; Crisis management; Leadership

Submitted 16 October 2020; accepted following double-blind peer review: 16 October 2020

Graça Paixão¹

Chloe Mills²

Judy McKimm³

Mohammed A Hassanien^{4,5}

Abdulmonem A Al-Hayani⁶

Author details can be found at the end of this article

Correspondence to:

Judy McKimm;

j.mckimm@swansea.ac.uk

Introduction

In light of the huge adaptations that health workers have been making during the COVID-19 pandemic, including remote or distant working, it is timely to consider what was being learned about leadership during the crisis. This article presents an overview of information collected from a rapid literature review, carried out in August 2020. The review identified three aspects of leadership considered essential when leading teams during a crisis:

1. Communication
2. Decision making
3. Mental health and wellbeing.

This article provides practical tips for how leaders can apply these skills and the lessons learned from the pandemic to their own contexts.

Background and context

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a series of challenges around the world, causing many leaders to think, react, and drastically change their focus (Kaul et al, 2020; McKimm et al, 2020; Roberts, 2020). As a result, we are currently living through a crisis scenario (D'Auria and De Smet, 2020). This unexpected phenomenon has generated a high degree of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (a 'VUCA' world; Bolman and Deal, 2015), disrupting complex social, economic, and technological systems as never before. Healthcare organisations have been severely impacted by the pandemic, not only having to deal with the high volume of severely ill patients, but also coping with the fear and anxiety of those working in the services. There has also been a widespread sudden switch to working remotely which poses great challenges to healthcare leaders and their teams, who have not traditionally worked virtually.

During times of uncertainty, leadership is paramount for the success of any organisation as it helps us navigate crises, rebuild communities, and forge ahead in moments of ambiguity (Watkins, 2013). Leaders across the world, particularly in healthcare, have found that creative problem-solving skills, providing immediate responses to rapidly changing threats and generating connectivity through meta-leadership (McNulty et al, 2019) are in high demand and the leadership approaches discussed here are fundamental to leadership in these challenging settings.

Methodology

This article presents a summary of findings from a rapid literature review, carried out in a 4-week period in August 2020 when the pandemic had been and was continuing to spread

How to cite this article:

Paixão G, Mills C, McKimm J, Hassanien MA, Al-Hayan AA. Leadership in a crisis: doing things differently, doing different things. *Br J Hosp Med*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.12968/hmed.2020.0611>

rapidly around the world. Search terms included: virtual/remote leadership; leadership in crisis; leading amid COVID-19; communication; decision-making; mental health and wellbeing; leadership and uncertainty. The review accessed bibliographic databases (Google Scholar, PubMed, ResearchGate, National Centre of Biotechnology Information), websites of relevant agencies, reference lists of identified articles and reviews, and relevant grey literature including videos and blogs posts. The data were extracted using titles and, when available, abstracts, and were then analysed into themes.

How to lead effectively and remotely through a crisis

To lead effectively under normal circumstances is a challenge, but in a crisis, the challenges are immense. Different people will adopt distinctive strategies and leadership styles, from compassionate and inclusive to a more traditional style such as 'leading from the front' or 'top-down' (Kalina, 2020). There is no consensus on the correct way to lead remotely during a crisis, or the best leadership style to adopt. However, there is agreement about basic desired values and traits for leaders during these unique times (Owen, 2020; Fernandez and Shaw, 2020), including clarifying and re-inventing purpose, staff empowerment, building organisational resilience and redesigning supply chains (Kaul et al, 2020; Nicola et al, 2020; Roberts, 2020).

The three key features of effective leadership which were identified by the review are now discussed in more detail: communication, decision making, and mental health and wellbeing.

Communication

Communication can be verbal or non-verbal and involves the transfer of thoughts, information, emotion and ideas through gesture, voice, symbols, signs and expressions from one person to another (Eldridge et al, 2020). During high levels of uncertainty, people are overwhelmed with sometimes conflicting and incorrect information from various sources. Inaccurate information generates anxiety and stress among leaders and their teams, therefore being able to communicate effectively is a vital leadership skill in times of crisis. Leaders need to communicate the reality of the situation in order to reinforce a clear perspective on what is happening and what it means for the organisation or department they are leading.

Principles of communication during a crisis

Leaders need to remember some simple rules during times of crisis to communicate effectively with, and to gain and maintain the trust of, their teams and remote internal and external stakeholders.

Communicate clearly, simply and consistently

Information about a crisis can be complex so, when communicating to their team, leaders must use simple terms and avoid jargon (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020; Mendy et al, 2020). The message should be clear and to the point (Eldridge et al, 2020). To give effective communication, the primary purpose of each communication must be considered, and the disseminated information must be consistent across all information platforms (Nicola et al, 2020; Roberts, 2020).

Be open and transparent

As teams rely on their leaders for reassurance and guidance it is vital that communications are transparent (Nicola et al, 2020). Leaders should provide clarity on what they know, but also admit that they do not have all the answers (Forster et al, 2020; Kaul et al, 2020). By being transparent and demonstrating humility, leaders can gain their followers' trust and collaboration, even if their decisions turn out to be flawed or wrong (Mendy et al, 2020). Moreover, to avoid anxiety and mitigate the risk of rumours or misinformation being spread, leaders must refrain from communicating false or non-evidence-based information (Forster et al, 2020).

Share your vision and positivity

During times of crisis a leader must continue to communicate their vision and goals for the organisation's future. It is important that this vision is both optimistic and realistic. This will reassure all stakeholders that there is a strategy in place for crisis resolution (Mendy et al, 2020). Some writers suggest that leaders should try to avoid sugar-coating bad news, but it is essential that a message of positivity is included so people do not despair (Mendy et al, 2020).

Walk the walk

'Perhaps the most important leadership communication activity for leaders is to be present, and show they care' (Roberts, 2020). An engaged leader who chooses to be authentic, present (even if working remotely) and empathic will engender respect and collaboration from their followers (Forster et al, 2020; Roberts, 2020).

Tailor your communications

While communication must be consistent, it also needs to be adaptable and tailored to the needs of different audiences and the stage of the crisis. For example, information given to senior management will be more complex than that shared with junior staff members (Eldridge et al, 2020). For communication to be effective, it is crucial that leaders tailor information according to what people need most in the moment.

Identify channels of communication

In a crisis, delivery is just as crucial as the message itself. A sudden change to distant working means you and your team are more dependent on electronic tools such as email and video conferencing. However, a leader should consider all channels for communication and select the most appropriate one for each situation. Leaders could consider the following three categories as routes for communication channels:

1. Digital communication including websites, microsites, social media, videos, emails, blogs, annual reports and infographics
2. Printable communication including comprehensive reports, executive summaries, one pagers, fact sheets, posters, signage, brochures and handbooks
3. Channels for outreach including executive question and answer sessions, roadshow presentations, training courses, events, speaking engagements and contests.

Adapt to communicating virtually

Followers also need to be assured that their leaders are in control and in touch even if they are not physically present. Leaders should develop a communication routine and maintain that frequency throughout the crisis, even if there is nothing new to be said (Mendy et al, 2020; Watkins, 2020). Methods of communication might include live streaming of updates or emailing daily briefs, especially when things change (Eldridge et al, 2020; Field, 2020). But it is equally important for leaders to maintain a balance in the amount of communications: too much and the message is tuned out, too little may prompt concern and anxiety (Field, 2020).

Virtual meetings can be intimidating, and some people have trouble engaging on the same level that they would if meeting in person (Saltman, 2020). So, virtual leaders might start video team meetings by asking everyone to check in with something about themselves (such as a personal check in, sharing concerns or sharing something they have been doing since the last meeting); this may increase the team members' connections and feelings of belonging, enhancing psychological safety and making them feel more relaxed. It is also essential to facilitate all members having an opportunity to share their opinions and collaborate. Using virtual platforms' features such as raising a hand, chat and breakout rooms can help manage people's contributions.

Owing to the physical distance, people lack social interaction, and are more prone to depression, feeling isolated and burnout. Virtual meetings are essential for disseminating and discussing information, but leaders should also use them as a safe space to share concerns and to laugh together (Prasad, 2020). In some healthcare organisations, teams take a 'virtual lunch' or 'coffee break' together as they would if they were in the office which may bring a sense of community that is vital in time of crisis (Eldridge et al, 2020; Prasad, 2020; Watkins, 2020).

Decision making

Under the best circumstances, it is difficult for leaders to make quick, effective decisions but in a crisis, when decisions made have much higher stakes, this is even more challenging. These challenges are compounded by the information available being scarce, incomplete or inaccurate, and leaders might need to make decisions that may negatively affect their teams (Anderson, 2018). In order to make bold decisions during times of uncertainty, leaders can follow the four principles below.

Principles of decision making during a crisis

Take a breath

In a crisis, leaders might think that the correct thing to do is to execute things quickly, but the literature states the opposite (Alexander et al, 2020). Leaders must give themselves a moment to step back and analyse the situation in order to plan the next steps, using a cycle of pause–assess–anticipate–act (D’Auria and De Smet, 2020). This technique helps to maintain a calm approach to simultaneously prioritise pressing decisions and avoid overreacting to new information. This might sound conflicting as there are times during a crisis where leaders need to take immediate action, but there is always a moment to pause and reflect on future actions (Berger et al, 2020; D’Auria and De Smet, 2020). Uncertain times are related to high levels of stress that can produce negative emotions and, by allowing time to think, leaders are more likely to rely on positive emotions and avoid decisions made from a negative perspective (Bavel et al, 2020).

Think outside the box

A successful leader encourages flexible thinking by their team. In the initial stages of a crisis most leaders tend to make decisions based on evidence or traditional models of data; however, iterative strategies must be implemented to cope with uncertainty (Kaul et al, 2020). In uncertain settings, leaders will often improvise most of their responses instead of relying on a pre-defined plan (D’Auria and De Smet, 2020). Although this sounds ineffective, flexible mindsets and behaviours are essential when making high stakes decisions and looking ahead (Watkins, 2020).

In this VUCA world, leaders must see their organisation through multiple lenses and be able to adapt their views and behaviours according to the frame or situation with which they are dealing (Bolman and Deal, 2015). However, experience and confidence are necessary to use this skill successfully, as some ‘hero’ leaders (and followers who believe this type of leadership is most effective) might see changing their minds as a sign of weakness.

Involve people

Good decision making also requires leaders to encourage collaboration from stakeholders by eliciting as many views and opinions as possible (Roberts, 2020). Alexander et al (2020) cite an example of using a fishbowl model where decision makers and experts sit around a real or virtual table to make a decision. The table also has one or two empty seats for relevant stakeholders from the team to rotate in and share their views. By involving a wider group of people, leaders gather more ideas on which to base their decisions, which can be reassuring both for leaders (as they are less likely to miss important facts) and their teams (Berger et al, 2020).

Be bold

Although flexibility is important, organisations also need individuals that can make tough calls when they are needed, even if that means they become less popular (Alexander et al, 2020). No leader is perfect, and often the information needed to make a decision is patchy or lacking, but is all that is available. Even if a decision is not the most accurate, sometimes leaders just have to work with what they have, acknowledging that if mistakes are made, they will strive to learn from them. A good leader appreciates that a delayed decision or no decision can lead to a worse outcome than a wrong one (Alexander et al, 2020; D’Auria and De Smet, 2020; Kaul et al, 2020). Therefore, it is fundamental that leaders show decisiveness because this will build organisational confidence and keep followers engaged in finding solutions for the challenges they face (Alexander et al, 2020; D’Auria

and De Smet, 2020). Finally, Roberts (2020) suggests that if a leader is uncomfortable in publicly describing their decision-making process, then they should reconsider the process.

Mental health and wellbeing

The shift to remote working, increased workload, and social isolation brought by the COVID-19 pandemic have had a significant impact on individuals' mental health and wellbeing, with emotional distress, anxiety, stress and depression being the most common mental health issues exhibited (Chartered Management Institute, 2020a; Dawson and Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020; Hoay Khoo et al, 2020; Kar et al, 2020). Identifying methods of psychological coping and understanding how to help and protect their team's wellbeing and mental health is of utmost importance for leaders.

Principles for maintaining mental health and wellbeing during a crisis

Think about yourself first

A leader's ability to manage stress and complex situations sets the tone for their teams (Anderson, 2018). Therefore, leaders need to first concentrate on their own wellbeing and establish their needs to keep healthy, before they can do the same for others (D'Auria and De Smet, 2020; Nielsen et al, 2020; Harvard Business Review, 2020d).

Be kind and offer support

During times of crisis, leaders can make a positive difference in people's lives (D'Auria and De Smet, 2020). Therefore, it is vital that leaders show kindness and empathy by listening to their team's concerns and demonstrating that it is normal for people to feel stressed and anxious (Bavel et al, 2020; Foster, 2020; Walton et al, 2020). Leaders should check in frequently on their employees and their families and ask personal questions to demonstrate their interest in their wellbeing (Nielsen et al, 2020).

Organisations must show meaningful support by attending to staff's basic needs (food, accommodation and rest) and also by regularly expressing gratitude with words or small tokens of appreciation (Nielsen et al, 2020; Hoay Khoo et al, 2020). Remote leadership should focus on developing virtual support measures to promote staff wellbeing and a feeling of proximity between leaders and their teams (Kar et al, 2020; Walton et al, 2020). This might even include virtual leisure routines where teams play games or practice meditation together with their leaders (Rangachari and Woods, 2020; Saltman, 2020). The UK NHS has developed several online resources that aid individuals with mental health concerns such as: Learn 4 mental health, How are you feeling NHS? - Toolkit and Rethink Mental Illness (Kings Fund, 2020a).

Make work a safe place

In uncertain times, staff must feel physically and psychologically safe at work and comfortable in sharing their emotional distress with their superiors and peers (Nielsen et al, 2020). Leaders must strive to develop psychological safety in the physical and virtual workplace (Rangachari and Woods, 2020; Walton et al, 2020). Organisations need to have available support systems, helplines, online psychological interventions and support group meetings, and leaders must be attentive to their employees' concerns to direct them accordingly. Research shows that, when employees trust that their organisation prioritises their wellbeing, they feel psychologically safe and, consequently, more confident to focus on their performance (Nielsen et al, 2020; Kar et al, 2020). By gaining trust, leaders can promote team spirit and cohesion which help to develop future organisational resilience (Kar et al, 2020; Kings Fund, 2020b).

Conclusions

Effective leaders will use the lessons learned from this pandemic as a catalyst to disrupt the status quo and create new organisational processes and cultures. Organisations should develop crisis management toolkits and robust digital strategies for use in times of crisis.

Table 1. Summary of leadership principles and practical tips

Leadership feature	Principles	Practical tips
Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communicate clearly, simply and consistently 2. Be transparent 3. Share your vision and positivity 4. 'Walk the walk' 5. Tailor your communications 6. Adjust to virtual communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Set up a glossary of meanings for everyone ■ Communicate with your team through daily briefings (Chartered Management Institute, 2020b; Owen, 2020) ■ Create a positive mantra and repeat it at the beginning of every meeting (Harvard Business Review, 2020b) ■ Let everyone say something at the beginning and end of every meeting; 'virtual handshakes' (Harvard Business Review, 2020a) ■ Schedule meetings for the same time of day or day of the week, to fit with people's work-life balance (Watkins, 2013; Kings Fund, 2020c) ■ Maintain one-to-one meetings to check status and provide feedback (Watkins, 2013; Kings Fund, 2020c)
Decision making	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take a breath 2. Think outside the box 3. Involve people 4. Be bold 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pause, look at the 'bigger picture' write down what you 'see' (Watkins, 2013; Nielsen et al, 2020) ■ Be intuitive (D'Auria and De Smet, 2020; Nielsen et al, 2020) ■ Share and rotate the power (Watkins, 2013; Harvard Business Review, 2020b; Roberts, 2020) ■ Set clear goals that everyone agrees with (Foster, 2020; Harvard Business Review, 2020a; 2020c) ■ Share calendars and action plans with the team (Harvard Business Review, 2020a; 2020e) ■ Have an online 'deliverables dashboard' for people to record their progress and to be visible for the team (Chartered Management Institute, 2020b; Harvard Business Review, 2020e)
Mental health and wellbeing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Think about yourself first 2. Be kind and offer support 3. Make work a safe place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Practice deep breathing and meditation on your own or with your team (Harvard Business Review, 2020d; Rangachari and Woods, 2020; Saltman, 2020) ■ Take time out of your day to 'worry' and write down your concerns (Harvard Business Review, 2020d) ■ Keep a gratitude journal: write three things you are grateful for daily (Doucette, 2020; Hoay Khoo et al, 2020) ■ Ask your team about their children, pets and families (Harvard Business Review, 2020a) ■ Always say thank you to your followers (Doucette, 2020; Harvard Business Review, 2020a; Kaul et al, 2020) ■ Offer flexible working hours with frequent breaks (Chartered Management Institute, 2020a; 2020b; Kings Fund, 2020c) ■ Schedule online lunches or coffee breaks with your team (Chartered Management Institute, 2020b; Eldridge et al, 2020; Prasad, 2020) ■ Have a psychological support system in place (Chartered Management Institute, 2020b; Dawson and Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020; Kar et al, 2020) ■ Let go of what you cannot control

Digital transformation must be incorporated into working routines to provide flexible working and maintain employee satisfaction. Organisations must invest in dedicated mental health training, review the impact of any crisis on organisational resilience and identify coping mechanisms that can be included in future leadership training.

Leadership publications during the pandemic have discussed a range of leadership approaches. However, this review has identified that paying attention to communication, decision making, and mental health and wellbeing are key to effectively leading remotely and through uncertainty and crisis. These leadership components are not independent and it is important for leaders to embrace a complex systems' thinking perspective and be adaptive, so as to provide safe working environments for themselves and their teams to thrive through times of uncertainty and ambiguity. Alongside this reminder, a clear

Key points

- Effective leadership is paramount during periods of uncertainty.
- Three aspects are key for effective leadership during a crisis: communication, decision making, and mental health and wellbeing.
- Leaders need to communicate clearly and effectively in order to gain and sustain the trust of their teams and stakeholders.
- Leaders must make quick, effective decisions when necessary.
- Leaders must protect and prioritise their own and their team's wellbeing and mental health.

message emerges from this review, that while crises cause huge shifts in everyday life and priorities, they can also provide leaders with the opportunity to stimulate positive change and innovation.

Author details

¹Nuclear Medicine and PET/CT Department, University Hospitals Birmingham, NHS Foundation Trust, Birmingham, UK

²Department of Applied Linguistics, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

³Swansea University Medical School, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

⁴Department of Pharmacy Practice, College of Pharmacy, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

⁵College of Medicine, Tanta University, Tanta, Egypt

⁶Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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