Durable Agility:
Necessary Adaptivity of Organizational Leadership
In Light of COVID-19
Christopher Cone, Th.D, Ph.D, Ph.D

While we do not yet know exactly where we are in the lifecycle of this particular crisis, COVID-19 has already proven to be a catalyst for global change. The timeless principles of what is important doesn't change. But the method, the format, the pedagogy, the medium, the context, the technology – these things endure the constant of change, and in times of crisis, the pace of change can accelerate exponentially. COVID-19 has been an accelerant unlike anything we have seen since the arrival of the smart phone and since the tragedies of 9/11 before that. While we brace ourselves for the potential that there may not be a quick resolution, we must also prepare for existence and function in a new *post-pandemic world.*

This world has encountered the millennium's first swift and truly global health threat, and much has changed nearly overnight. Especially for organizations historically resistant to change (like higher education institutions, for example) this means painful but necessary and rapid reinvention in nearly every area of strategy and tactics. Anticipating our eventual emergence from this current pandemic means considering what changes might be temporary and what will be durable, and how organizations and their leaders must adapt in response to those changes. COVID-19 has changed the landscape, reminding us of foundational principles. Things will never be the same after this pandemic, and the emerging *new normal* demands we consider at least seven concepts for organizational effectiveness as our paradigms are encountering seismic change.

1. The Ever-Present Threat of Mission Drift

While many things must change, *the main thing must still be the main thing*. Crisis management can sometimes cause us to take our eyes off of our mission. Mission drift often happens undetected in times of crisis, when attention is shifted from institutional purpose and value to institutional survival. For any worthwhile organization, the mission is priority one and sustainability is priority two. When mission and sustainability are conflated, the organization begins to lose its worth and failure is usually not far behind. Of course, many organizations faithful to their mission fail anyway due to unsustainability, but at least those organizations were worthwhile in their existence and served something greater than their own existence. Failure happens, and no organization is immune, but those organizations that are best equipped to thrive even in times of crisis are those that have a clear mission and value proposition, and that have teams engaging with those critical principles through transformational rather than transactional leadership.[1] *Crisis does not*

---

[1] E.g., "in a crisis situation, transformational leadership behaviors are associated with higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of negative affect among team members, which in turn relate to higher resilience. These results are consistent with the argument that transformational leaders influence team members' feelings by envisioning a positive picture of the future, expressing confidence in team members' abilities to meet high expectations, and conveying shared values." S. Amy Sommer, Jane M. Howell, Constance Noonan Hadley, "Keeping Positive and Building Strength: The Role of Affect and Team Leadership in Developing Resilience

change the values to which our missions are tethered. Crisis simply tests the strength of the tether.

2. Movimiento es Vida[2]

While we may prefer a return to the old normal, after a crisis, things almost never return to their previous state. As one philosopher said, we cannot step twice into the same river. If we underestimate the durability of chaos that this pandemic and other change-catalysts like it represent,[3] then it is more likely that we will prepare poorly or fail to be proactive altogether. Organizational (and individual, for that matter) desire for normalcy can be a disability in the face of a durable chaos. A much more viable approach is to develop resiliency and agility for dealing not only with times of crisis but also for peacetime. Making the most of opportunities and good stewardship are best engaged with a culture of agility, and that culture is no longer optional. While it is very difficult to be poised to respond to the kind of extreme market conditions that would necessitate 6.6 million jobless claims in one week alone,[4] agility or death is the new reality, and it is not entirely new, for that matter. If its necessity wasn't obvious before, it most certainly is now. When COVID-19 limitations meant that Costco had to stop serving samples to customers, rather than see the employees of Club Demonstration Services lose their jobs, Costco re-tasked many of them to help with various responsibilities including in-store sanitation. While that wasn't sustainable long term, for roughly a month, Costco's agility helped many workers to continue to work much longer than they otherwise would have.[5] Organizations like this that are exercising continuous agility and able to anticipate and be proactive in implementing needed change – both offensive and defensive – are those which can be most effective.[6] Managing *change management* is as important as change itself.

– Built-in agility for rapid change in expense cost models will be needed in anticipation of future disruptions. Budgeting for any possibility can include modular scaling of expenses in increments or blocks that allow for increases and decreases to be made quickly and with predictable levels of organizational disruption. Early estimates indicate a 40-50% reduction in consumer spending at this stage, and that will surely impact every budget.[7]

During an Organizational Crisis" in *Group and Organization Management*, Vol. 41, Issue 2, April 2016, viewed at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1059601115578027.

[2] A survival reference from *World War Z*, Directed by Marc Forster, Paramount Studios, 2013.

[3] See Scott Atran, "ISIS: The Durability of Chaos" in *NYR Daily*, July 16, 2016, viewed at https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/07/16/nice-attack-isis-durability-of-chaos/.

[4] As occurred the week ending March 28, 2020, per Department of Labor figures, viewed at https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf.

[5] Brianna Sacks and Ryan Mac, "The Company That Handles Free Samples at Costco is Shutting Down Because of the Coronavirus" *Buzzfeed News*, April 2, 2020, viewed at https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/briannasacks/costco-contractor-cds-free-samples.

[6] Andre de Waal and Esther Mollema, "Six courses of action to survive and thrive in a crisis" in *Business Strategy Series*, 11(5), September, 2010: 333-339, viewed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254191864_Six_courses_of_action_to_survive_and_thrive_in_a_crisis.

[7] Sven Smit, Martin Hirt, Kevin Buehler, Susan Lund, Ezra Greenburg, and Arvind Govindarajan, "Safeguarding our Lives and our Livelihoods: The Imperative of our Time." *McKinsey and Company,* March 2020, viewed at https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/safeguarding-our-lives-and-our-livelihoods-the-imperative-of-our-time.

- Better preparedness for resiliency in the face of disruption and decline means better readiness for seizing opportunity. Creating and maintaining durable margin for growth and expansion means that organizations can take a posture of seeking out ways to enhance market positioning even in market decline.

3. Community Has Flipped

Until the social media boom, community was necessarily perceived as including a physically in-person element. The pandemic has especially altered that, necessitating social distancing and forcing new standards for what is acceptable community interaction. Technology is no longer nuisance nor mere add-on, as conferencing and interaction tools are being utilized to an unprecedented extent. While the pandemic may pass, attitudes regarding the importance of social distancing and guarding personal health will likely change social posture from seeking out in-person interaction to a more practical and perhaps safer approach using technology since even those who avoided social technology in the past have gotten a crash course and are now becoming comfortable. Perceptions of social responsibility have changed, and the current peer pressure to respond accordingly will have lasting effect. Current criticism of those who aren't properly social distancing adds impetus for our understanding of the idea of "social" to be permanently changed.[8] It has been suggested that "Instead of asking, 'Is there a reason to do this online?' we'll be asking, is there any good reason to do this in person?'"[9]

- For higher education, for example, online synchronous *and* asynchronous pedagogy and delivery is no longer optional. Providing flexibility for the end user to receive instruction and guidance in the mode of their preference will be necessary for staying power.

- Working from home is nothing new, but thousands have now proved it can be effectively done in industries that previously shied away from the work at home paradigm. In many more cases than before, "being in the office" no longer necessarily includes the trappings of geography. Organizations will need to assess carefully when and what roles require physical presence and what can be accomplished online.

- Online resources for customer service will need to be comprehensive, as people expect even their fast food restaurant experience to be completely online. Because the market has proven that it *can* operate that way, consumers will expect that their service providers *must* operate that way.

- Traditional obstacles for online delivery of products (such as regulation of online education, medical services, and perhaps even voting) are quickly being removed

---

[8] See for example, Todd Brock, "Florio: Dez-Dak workouts violate NFL stay at home orders, NFL should 'do something' *CowboysWire,* April 8, 2020, viewed at https://cowboyswire.usatoday.com/2020/04/08/dez-bryant-dak-prescott-workouts-violate-coronavirus-orders-league-should-do-something/.
[9] Deborah Tannen, "The personal becomes dangerous," in *Politico*, "Coronavirus Will Change the World Permanently. Here's How" March 19, 2020, viewed at https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579.

by necessity, creating opportunity for those who can engage the technology well. Vendors are recognizing the gravitational pull of the market, and opportunistically ensuring that the tools are accessible.[10] The genie will not go back in the bottle, and organizations must function well *online* first.

4. Expertise Still Matters

In an age of fake news and misinformation, credible information is more difficult to recognize. With the democratization of information through technology, everyone can have a voice. The anti-intellectualism stemming from the democratization of information is countered in crisis – especially in times of pandemic, when people come to realize that novices can mislead and do great harm. Accurate information is vital, and expertise still matters, but this also means that the "authorities" will be afforded *more* authority.

– General education will still have value, of course, but the sciences and health industries continue to move to the forefront as market needs in those areas are particularly exposed during a pandemic. The publicly acknowledged heroes of the day are those laboring in health service industries, especially. Organizations will need to recognize that the images of heroism are changing, and be able to reach their constituencies in these contexts, with powerful value statements, by meeting some needs related to these areas, or by at least employing the imagery in communications.

– While in some areas, regulation will decrease, freeing up enterprise to deliver online, in at least one other key area, regulation will greatly increase. Just as after 9/11, the Patriot Act and TSA regulations limited personal freedoms without overwhelming public outcry, governmental enactment of authorities not seen in decades (e.g., shelter in place orders) were employed with little public concern for personal liberties. This underscores a society that has been well trained from the aftermath of 9/11 to prefer safety over liberty. Organizations must anticipate the areas that regulatory reach and overreach might impact their functions and be prepared.

5. Research and Assessment Cycles Are Shortened

The traditional annual cycles of data assessment are inadequate to meet the present informational need in a rapidly changing environment. Consumers are changing perspectives based on rapidly emerging information, and the faster the flow of information, the faster the changes. For example, 11% of high school seniors who were already planning to attend a traditional college or university in the Fall of 2020 have since changed their mind due to COVID-19, while 25% of those who plan to attend say they COVID-19 influenced their choice of which college to attend.[11] Further, 44% say that it is highly likely

---

[10] Steven Blackburn, "55 free higher ed resources during coronavirus pandemic" *University Business*, April 7, 2020, viewed at https://universitybusiness.com/free-college-management-software-faculty-resources-coronavirus-covid-19?oly_enc_id=5912E4542589D3Z.

[11] Simpson Scarborough, *Higher Ed and COVID-19 National Student Survey*, April, 2020, 11. Viewed at https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4254080/SimpsonScarborough%20National%20Student%20Survey%20.pdf.

their choice of college may still change based on COVID-19.[12] Current college students are also changing their opinions based on issues related to COVID-19. Simpson Scarborough reports that 44% of current college students have a lower opinion of their school than before the crisis.[13] These numbers underscore how fluid opinion forming and decision making is in this present era of disruption. Organizations who are able to acquire, contextualize, and apply information quickly are better able to understand the perceived needs of their constituencies and to respond accordingly.

–   With updates happening in real time and coming through many media (especially social media), consumer expectations of information flow have changed. It is no longer acceptable, for example, for organizational websites to operate as historical archives or as marketing vehicles, rather they must provide up to the minute content and contextualization of events for the benefit of the constituency in real time.

–   A remarkable 64% of high school seniors prefer to observe an online class and take a virtual campus tour rather than visit in person. Organizations that have not retrofitted to offer their products and services in formats preferred by their constituency will simply lose market share. Understanding constituency habits, needs, desires, etc. must happen quicker than ever before.

–   The manner of response to the data is equally as important as the data processing itself. Accepted modes of official organizational communication includes social networks. Incorporating social media into web presence is important, with 3.8 billion social media users in 2020.[14] Finding ways to directly interact with constituencies in real time is critical. Social media is currently the most utilized vehicle, but the demand for live *interactive* video is rapidly changing how we utilize social media.

6. Democratization of Assembly is Here to Stay

In recent decades we have seen the democratization of the arts and of information, as technology has enabled production and distribution tools to be more readily available. Anyone can put together a movie or record a multi-track song using the most basic of tools. In the same way, COVID-19 has forced alternative methods for assembling. Video conferencing is nothing new, but trying to connect hundreds and thousands or more in real time in *interactive* ways has presented new challenges.

In the past organizations whose product is heavily dependent on assembly have focused on in-person community, and whichever ones have been best equipped to attract the most people to their location have been able to grow the organizations as they grow their assemblies and thus their consumer base. Responding to market share decline since 2015,[15] the NFL has sought to expand its base from its core of 50-59 year old males to

---

[12] Ibid., 14.
[13] Ibid., 20.
[14] J. Clement, "Number of social network users worldwide from 2010 to 2023" *Statista*, April 1, 2020, viewed at https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/.
[15] Jim Johnson, "A Look Inside the Modern Sports Fan: NFL vs. NCAA vs. MLB vs. MLB" *Huffpost*, December 20, 2017, viewed at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-look-inside-the-modern-sports-fan-nfl-vs-ncaa-vs_b_5a3a9ed9e4b0df0de8b061a3.

especially target 20-29 year old males and women of all ages. Networks have incorporated new technologies to engage audiences with additional features. At the core, the NFL is still a spectator sport, and COVID-19 has threatened the most core element of the sport. The NFL has already canceled this year's major draft event originally planned for Las Vegas and is planning an online alternative. How leagues like the NFL handle the new and necessary extreme of online community will help shape how smaller groups respond to similar challenges.

Churches have been particularly resourceful during this pandemic as even those churches that had resisted broadcasting or livestreaming now have sufficient motivation to engage their constituency with technology. The implementation of technology that has taken many churches a generation to implement has been accelerated at an unprecedented pace. Just as it has been proven that people can be productive working from home, it has now been demonstrated that assembly can be accomplished in an online setting. It has yet to be seen how many churches see their in-person attendance return to pre-pandemic levels and how many retain a larger constituency through online interaction instead.

The tools that are now being implemented to convene assemblies online have enabled access to assemblies that were previously geographically inaccessible for most. Now a person can "attend" their favorite church service regardless of its location. Again, the technology is not new, but the current high degree of participating churches is. The standard for assembly has changed, as has the perception of what community actually is. While one person recently lamented to me "I miss humans," it is not yet discernible (from this writer's perspective) how that dynamic of perceived need will impact habits of assembly after this pandemic has passed. For certain there is a window of opportunity for those organizations of assembly to have incredible outreach possibilities, with an eye focused on engaging rather than simply communicating to constituencies.

- Leaders of those organizations need to recognize that just as the democratization of the arts and information have dramatically changed how we interact with people and with media, the democratization of assembly (through technology now readily accessible and easily implemented) will likewise change how we meet in community.

- There is a continued trend toward interactivity and away from what Friere referred to as the "banking concept"[16] of depositing information in learners. Communicators and educators (and thus organizational leaders) need to engage their constituency rather than simply talking at them. This writer advocates that as a necessary component of transformational learning,[17] and suggests that the current environment provides fertile soil for innovation in facilitating that kind of *transformative engagement*. Even this concept is nothing new, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts that readers "consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking the assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another…"[18] Encouraging and stimulating – these are terms of *engagement*, not simply one-way communication.

---

[16] Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 72.
[17] Christopher Cone, *Integrating Exegesis and Exposition: Biblical Communication for Transformative Learning* (Fort Worth, TX: Exegetica Publishing, 2015), 45, 302.
[18] Hebrews 10:23-25a.

7. Collaboration is King

One of Waal's and Mollema's five factors of high-performance organizations (HPO's) is "the presence of an open and action-oriented organizational culture. An excellent organization "promotes interactive internal communications ("an open dialogue") between members of the organization to ensure that open and continual exchanges of information take place both vertically and horizontally throughout the organization."[19] Internal collaboration has always been vital, as have external partnerships and cooperation.[20] Crises and pandemics heighten the need and the value of cooperative efforts. In the wake of SARS, Jonathon Schwartz and Muh-Yong Yen considered the importance of collaboration across various components of society in order to meet future pandemic threats, discovering that some of the most effective policies were those that "rely heavily on public participation."[21] In the United States during this pandemic, federal and local guidance stopped short of martial law, but included shelter in place orders that were largely adhered to by much of the population. While there were outliers who refused to participate, slogans like #stayathome helped to provide a common purpose – and perhaps even more importantly – a common practice to mobilize the public to combat the unseen enemy together by…not mobilizing.

Mark Athitakis highlights some of the collaborations between public and private sectors that are helping to meet the crisis,[22] observing that "the partnership conversation may need to be [even] more broad and urgent, focused on the needs particular members have right now."[23] The WHO, UNICEF, and CEPI are working together, as Elizabeth Cousens, WHO president announced, "There has never been a more global need for global cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic shows us that we can all do our part to stop the spread."[24] What we see in current high-level collaborations are strategies to help constituencies recognize the need to unite in one transcendent purpose against a current common enemy (COVID-19).

– It has been said that deadlines make contracts, and the urgency created by pandemic implies all sorts of unknown deadlines that can foster collaborative effort readily beneficial for involved parties. One obstacle to collaboration between organizations is the lack of agility that can plague organizations in peacetime when the need for elasticity is not so apparent. Another potential obstacle is institutional fear of uncertainty, but when that uncertainty includes potential scenarios that extend beyond tolerable pain thresholds the fear of uncertainty can actually be a catalyst for collaboration. Obstacles will always

---

19 Andre de Waal and Esther Mollema, Ibid.
20 For examples of how partnerships are impacting sustainability of Christian higher education institutions, see Christopher Cone, "The Disappearing Middle Class in Christian Higher Education," March 3, 2013, viewed at http://www.drcone.com/2017/03/13/disappearing-middle-class-christian-higher-education/.
21 Jonathan Schwartz and Muh-Yong Yen, "Toward a collaborative model of pandemic preparedness and response: Taiwan's changing approach to pandemics" in *Journal of Microbiology, Immunology, and Infection*, Volume 50, Issue 2, April 2017: 125-132.
22 Mark Athitakis, "Leading During a Pandemic: A New Normal For Partnerships" April 5, 2020, viewed at https://associationsnow.com/2020/04/leading-during-a-pandemic-a-new-normal-for-partnerships/.
23 Ibid.
24 World Health Organization, "WHO and UNICEF to partner on pandemic response through COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund," April 3, 2020, viewed at https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/03-04-2020-who-and-unicef-to-partner-on-pandemic-response-through-covid-19-solidarity-response-fund.

remain, but healthy organizations are able to overcome obstacles and partner in ways that are needed and beneficial.

–   What is next? Part of wise oversight is recognizing what threats might be possible and preparing to meet those challenges, even the unlikely ones. Identifying what are the "transcendent causes" that are motivating current action and considering what those causes might be in the future is at least a helpful exercise if not a necessary investment. Considering what potential threats may be ahead is helpful in identifying partnerships that are mutually beneficial so they can be engaged *before* they are absolutely necessary.

Conclusion

Today's crisis may pass quickly, or it may be prolonged. While we may have some good indicators to work from, we all have to face the same uncertainties in leadership. We simply don't know,[25] and as Solomon reminds us, we have to run full steam ahead into the unknown using our best attempts at wisdom and the counsel of the wise to guide us.[26] It is in these times that we can be assured of the unchanging certainty that *change will happen*. For those who care to look, there is confidence to be found in the knowledge that there is One who is not taken off guard as these events unfold.[27] To lead an organization well demands that we consider how change will affect those in our charge, and that we maintain a durable agility to meet those changes. But before we can lead others to true peace in times of tumult, we must look to the Source of knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and wellbeing for our own individual sustenance. With Him, we can endure any trial and run any race with endurance, no matter how threatening and no matter how frightening.[28]

---

[25] Ecclesiastes 8:7.
[26] Proverbs 15:22.
[27] Psalm 46:1-3.
[28] Isaiah 40:28-31, Hebrews 12:1-3.