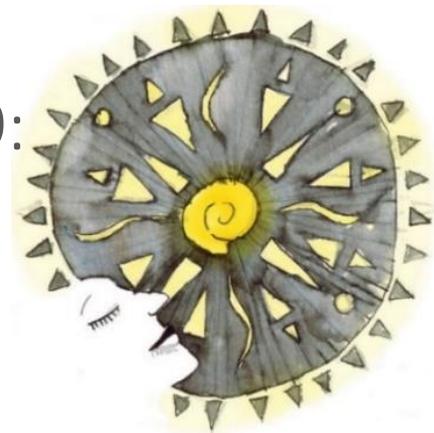


# Leadership in Times of Covid-19: Essential Qualities, Skills and Practices



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“Leaders must reclaim the very thing our culture has so casually given away: Time to think together and learn from our experiences. Without question, this is the most critical act of leadership. It is how we restore sanity and possibility to our work within our sphere of influence.”

Margaret Wheatley, “Leader to Leader”, 2017

“The leader is one who, out of the clutter, brings simplicity... out of discord, harmony... and out of difficulty, opportunity.”

Albert Einstein

**T**he role of managers is to keep the trains running on time, to work with what is known and visible, applying policies, procedures and plans. But when we face a complex, unpredictable and invisible crisis, as with Covid-19, then leadership of an entirely different quality is required: we are more artist than scientist, more facilitator than chairperson, activating self-control in people we lead rather than top down regulation, where guiding principles and values supersede rules and policies, where preparation is more useful than planning, and where thinking people and their creative collaboration outweigh compliance and acquiescence to set-out procedures.

This short writing is distilled from several sources and experiences, presenting some essential features of the crisis to pay attention to, and some of the qualities, capacities and skills needed as leaders. You may feel that you know many of these, but often, when under stress, we revert to our default or defensive behaviours and need to remind ourselves about what matters.

## **Making sense of it all**

This crisis is an existential threat. But as much as we yearn for “normality” this is unlikely to return soon, if ever, and to be frank it was not working very well for us anyway. This crisis calls on us to recreate a new normal, over time, that faces the threats and works with the opportunities that can reshape our

reality. To do this we need to consciously and frequently make sense of the crisis as it unfolds.

To develop greater self-awareness of our fears, anxiety, biases, sensitivities and hopes we need to ask ourselves what lenses we are using to look at the world right now. These well-known questions are helpful:

*What are the threats that worry me the most?  
What are the opportunities that motivate me?*

Crisis reveals the stress lines and possibilities that lie deeply within each of us. But we need both balanced perspectives of the threats the crisis poses, lest we over- or under-react, as well as buoyant opportunities to keep us afloat and breathing as we rush forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks also to the Oxfam Leaders Navigating Culture Pilot Group and the GHT Culture Team

Being conscious of how you make sense of what is going on and sharing this with your peers and teams will help you to understand each other, individually and collectively, and strengthen your capacity to creatively cooperate. In other words, to work as an organisation. In conversations with others, who may have different ways of seeing, you will be better able to challenge and expand each other's views and gain valuable insights into the ambiguities of the real work you do together.

The challenge is to *regularly take time* to sharpen your perspectives, and to clarify the choices you have, enabling wiser decision-making, individually and collectively. *Thinking that you do not have time to regularly reflect on your situation and challenges, whether by yourselves or with others, is no different to woodcutters saying they do not have time to sharpen their axes!*

### **Controlling or facilitative leadership?**

We may be tempted to think crisis always demands strong, directive leaders who are in control. Sometimes this is true: when there is a fire we cannot dither about, arguing which way to exit. When a decision must be made, make it.

But many crisis situations are more complex and need diverse inputs to see and formulate thoughtful responses, and this requires more facilitative and supportive leadership.

This is when inviting staff to give input, to share and discuss their perspectives can enable better decisions to be made, often saving more time later. As a facilitative leader you will prepare and ask empowering questions, rather than give quick and easy answers. Your aim in doing so is to create intelligent community and strengthen team resilience.

It is also a key time to listen to where staff are at emotionally and energetically so that you can see how they need to be led. *What are they thinking, feeling and wanting?* Be curious and ask them.

### **Be aware of power and privilege**

Diversity issues of e.g. race, class, gender, culture, religion, become more significant during crises because disadvantaged groups will usually have a more unfair experience with less resources to cushion the blows while more privileged groups

may be able to remain relatively comfortable and unaffected. *Are you aware of how people in your team from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have less resources and more responsibilities may be handling their home and work life? How will you find out?*

### **Women and single parents are often doubly burdened.**

When working from home they must often see to the house, the food and the kids on top of their work. Balance your expectations and discuss this as a team to help to build supportive relationships and ways to equalise the load.

### **Listen to learn and ask questions that stimulate**

Of all the skills of a leader, listening is the most empowering. Listening to staff enables understanding, builds confidence and nurtures relationship. Not being listened to destroys trust and self-confidence. But listening needs good, open questions to stimulate sharing, characterised by curiosity and empathy.

*When you contact staff, is it only to ask for information or do you call them to take an interest, to listen to their concerns or ideas?*

### **Be authentic**

Share your struggles, fears and self-doubts even as you show the courage to face them. Acting the tough hero disempowers others in their own struggles while vulnerability can spark initiative and fortitude in others.

### **Empathy and connection**

This crisis is characterised by distancing and disconnection. Zoom meetings, conference calls and general emails can keep us connected as a group, but the personal affirmation that comes with one-to-one encounters, peer-to-peer support and learning can suffer. In normal times these happen informally, in between meetings, over tea or in the corridor. Social distancing requires a different, more conscious act of connecting if we want to keep our relationships intact. As a leader,



you need to take time to connect personally, and encourage others to do the same.

### Over-stress and loss of perspective



While some people thrive under stress, a key feature of those who become over-stressed is that they lose their ability to keep perspective and to prioritise. Everything becomes equally important. They become obsessed and

overwhelmed with detail in vain attempts to take control of everything, leading to panicky decisions and even a negative spiral to burnout. Look out for this in others and yourself.

Reconnecting to agreed purpose and priorities are key to minimising stress and enabling good decision-making, as are dealing with your anxieties and the burdens of responsibility. Plan for how you will gain these. Taking a break also enables perspective.

Is there someone in your life to unload onto each day, to describe your experiences, challenges and worries, to get helpful feedback and enable you to clarify your questions, and to find perspective? Offer this to others who need it.

### Approach decision-making situationally

Because of uncertainty and time pressure there is a higher likelihood of errors in making decisions. But waiting till you have the perfect plan is illusory and likely to be irrelevant as the situation changes before your eyes. Because of this, how you approach decisions-making, individually and collectively, needs thinking about.

Investing time upfront in identifying and agreeing who should make what kind of decisions in what kind of situations will enable quicker decisions that are understood and supported, saving more time and preventing confusion later. In crisis times it may be difficult to hold a clear vision of where you are heading, to guide your decisions. But you can focus on these considerations:

**Purpose and priorities:** Do you all understand what the current purpose and priorities of the organisation are in this time of crisis, *in the same way*? If not, decision-making will be confused and may lead to division or conflict. Put time aside to renew purpose and priorities and regularly check that they have not drifted;

**Principles and values:** Do you agree on the principles and values you use to make decisions? E.g. on what principles are you basing decisions for certain staffing and other budget cuts to be made and not others? Have you explored how feminist principles can guide your decisions?

**Who decides?** Is it clear to all who is best placed to make different decisions and why? Is it about position, experience, knowledge, or being closest to the issue or its consequences? What decisions should be collective (by agreement), consulted (informed by others) or taken directly without input? If this is not clear, put your thoughts forward and invite discussion on why and how an important decision should be made, and on what basis.

**Take a learning approach:** Do not fret about finding the perfect decision, especially if there is little time to be sure. Often a bad decision is better than delaying and wallowing about in indecision. But then the remedy is to learn from that experience and make better decisions next time. This can be done through Action Learning (see below). Importantly, keep an eye out for diverse impacts on staff morale and on both present and future unintended consequences of key decisions.

### Action Learning is key

As suggested above, snap decisions must often be made under pressure without the detailed planning and thinking through you are used to. Expect to fail now and then. But afterwards, when the pressure is reduced, put aside a little time to reflect and learn from successful and unsuccessful decisions made, using some of the guiding questions from the Action Learning Cycle at the end of this article. This will help you to be more and more thoughtful and to improve your resilience and adaptability, boosting the ability of your team to think quickly, consciously and collectively in a more creative and disciplined manner. It is about sharpening your axes.

Importantly, do not rush to quick, superficial learnings. *Make sure you have used the Reflection Questions well* to feed the drawing of learnings. This is often the missing ingredient in trying to learn successfully from experience.

### **Prepare your responses to staffing reductions**

Inevitably, crisis takes its toll on finances, leading to reductions in staffing and enormous pain for everyone. Your organisation should have procedures in place for this but how will you deal with the personal and relational impacts on affected staff and their colleagues? What experience is there to draw on? Reflect amongst your peers on how you will deal with this dimension. Can you make the reasoning or principles behind these decisions explicit and transparent, and communicate these personally and compassionately? Are you able to share the financial sacrifice more equally?

### **Prepare for staff becoming sick and some dying**

Anticipate and prepare for these likely eventualities, especially in lockdown and physical distancing conditions. Bring peers and staff together to generate ideas and take collective responsibility. Not preparing for this could be devastating to the staff and the culture.

Be mindful of cultural differences in dealing with sickness and death. Acknowledge pain and loss and understand the stages of grieving. How this happens may be what most defines the future culture of the organisation.

### **People are different in a crisis.**

The better sides of people often emerge under threat and stress, where people are more positive and cooperative. *Notice and appreciate this.*

But there will be times when we are catapulted into situations that threaten our security and stability and emotions may veer out of control, with people losing their ability to interact calmly. Instead of minimising or retreating from these concerns and outbursts listen to them so that people feel heard. *Be empathetic and compassionate.* Take personal interest in each person's situation and encourage the same from everyone. It may take time but avoiding doing so may take more time later dealing with the fallout.

### **Give regular and helpful feedback**

Almost everyone needs feedback to build confidence that they are doing a good job or to get back on track. This becomes intensified under crisis. If good work is not appreciated, staff may become resentful or insecure, unsure about their work and start do something else, undoing their achievements. If you need to give negative or "constructive" feedback, see if you can put it as a challenging question, stimulating the will to learn and change. This is better than blunt criticism that leads to defensiveness. Ask *"Did it go as you wanted? What can you learn from this for next time?"* Help staff to use the Action Learning Cycle too.

### **Be positive**

As Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano said, "Let's save pessimism for better times." Even if things seem hopeless there is positive energy despite everything in deciding to do what is right, in showing courage and having faith in others to do the same. Can you share something positive every day to help people keep their spirits up?

**But beware of inauthentic happy talk** that minimises traumatic experiences. This can be harmful to those who are having difficulties.

### **Finally and most importantly: Be well!**

We can find all sorts of excuses to forget about our own well-being, but this crisis may go on for a long time and needs leaders who can perform at their peak, who can stay awake and stay the distance. Investing in your own physical, mental and emotional health will not only make you happier but it will enable the positivity and perspective you need to be an effective leader.



# Action Learning Guiding Questions

This is about an ongoing cycle or spiral of learning. Use these guiding questions to learn from experience to guide what you do next time. Choose the questions that feel helpful and relevant but be sure to focus well on the Reflection questions in order to access deeper learnings.

Start with Action > Reflection > Learning > Planning > Back to Action and so on...



The Action Learning Cycle is adapted from Barefoot Guide 2 Companion Guide: [Designing and Facilitating Creative Conversations and Learning Activities](#)  
Graphics by Zach Stewart, in the [Barefoot Guide 6: Generative Leadership](#)