

Career Compass No. 81: We Need Adaptive Leaders Now

There is great uncertainty about when and how to act. Yet the leaders and followers must act anyway.

By Frank Benest | Apr 21, 2020 | ARTICLE



I am the HR director of a large city government. I serve on our COVID-19 response team and lead a smaller team looking at our “workplace of tomorrow.” We in Human Resources are trying to respond to a lot of employee questions and help the city manager and department heads communicate with employees. Many of our employees are working remotely, as well at city facilities and in the field.

My city government is a fairly rule-bound organization. Our rules and procedures are well-suited for a stable environment. Yet now we are overwhelmed with new challenges, such as keeping everyone safe and healthy, and of course dealing with projected budget shortfalls. Senior management and all employees feel a lot of anxiety and distress.

I am very committed to the organization and to our employees. I especially worry about lower-income employees in our city government and service workers in the community, who are all very vulnerable as we enter this deep recession.

If there was ever a time to adapt, now is the time. However, I feel much trepidation about this leadership challenge. Can you provide some suggestions on how senior managers can help everyone adapt?

I commend you for trying to provide positive leadership during these uncertain and messy times. Yes, it is the role of senior managers to help the organization adapt amid uncertainty and complexity.

What is adaptive leadership?

Ronald Heifetz coined the term “adaptive leadership” in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994). Adaptive leadership is the act of mobilizing a group of individuals to take on difficult challenges and emerge triumphant at the end of the process. Adaptive leaders start conversations with employees and other stakeholders, convene people to work on the challenge, facilitate problem solving and mobilize action, all in an

environment in which many groups can block forward movement or veto the possible solution.

Adaptive leaders encourage and support followers in grappling with challenges where there are no technical solutions that all people will accept and, therefore, no right or wrong answers. Every stakeholder group has its own preferred solution. There is great uncertainty about when and how to act. Yet the leaders and followers must act anyway. The adaptive journey typically transforms the leader and the followers.

Adaptive leaders need not be senior managers. They can emerge from anywhere. Adaptive leaders encourage people to take a step or two forward and make a difference within their own spheres of influence, even if they have little formal authority.

In a messy, uncertain world, what is focus of leadership?

Adaptive leaders must **zoom in** and **zoom out**. You must zoom in and mobilize people and other resources to confront the immediate crisis (such as a pandemic public health challenge). However, at some point, you must zoom out to address the larger budget and organizational challenges.

In your case, you must zoom in and respond to employee questions, such as:

- “Will the city guarantee my employment until the end of the fiscal year?”
- “If I’m furloughed, will my benefits continue?”
- “If I’m working remotely, what kind of IT support can I expect?”

As you zoom out, your “workplace of tomorrow” team will need to figure out:

- Can we permanently sustain more remote work or telework?
- How do we retain talent as we make budget cuts?
- How do we promote more flexibility and autonomy for employees?
- How do we streamline hiring practices as well as modernize rules about moving employees around to meet current challenges?
- What are new ways of providing professional development and learning?
- How do we reenergize the workforce in tough times?
- How do management practices need to change?

What are your circles of control, influence, and concern?

Kip Harkness, deputy city manager and EOC director for San Jose, California, points out that leaders need to prioritize their time and energy during a crisis. He suggests that leaders follow the guidance of Stephen Covey to identify and leverage their circles of attention and action. (See Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 1989.)

The three spheres are your circles of control, influence, and concern. The first circle is your **circle of control**, in which you can make things happen and deliver upon your commitments. In your **circle of influence**, you can guide and shape outcomes but only indirectly and usually only partially. In your **circle of concern**, you may have interest and may be impacted by what happens but you have little control or influence. In promoting

adaptive behavior, Covey's suggestion is that leaders focus on their circles of control and influence and seek to understand what is happening in their circle of concern.

How can you effectively lead others on your adaptive journey?

Helping others adapt to new realities is a journey with many twists and turns and requires a portfolio of different leadership skills and behaviors.

Here are my suggestions to promote adaptive leadership.

1. Confront your fears

We all need local government leaders to act and lead **NOW**. We can't wait. However, you may feel uncertain on how to proceed. You may fear that you are not up to the task.

Courageous people acknowledge their fears:

- "I may fail."
- "People may not follow."
- "People may not like me."
- "If I fail, I will lose all credibility."

Undefined fear is the greatest barrier to acting now.

Once you identify your fears, mine your experiences in your past professional and person lives when you did act with courage despite your fears. Reflecting on these stories will give you the fortitude to proceed.

To overcome your fears, it is also a good idea to calculate and acknowledge your bank account of trust and credibility. As an effective leader, you have a large bank account. Let's say that you have been effective and have deposits totaling \$100,000 in your bank account. Even if you fail in one of several leadership endeavors going forward and there is a withdrawal of \$10,000 worth of credibility, you still have \$90,000 in your account. By recognizing that you have a large bank account of trust and credibility, you can act without so much fear. (See [Career Compass #58 "Overcoming Deep-Seated Fears."](#))

Courageous people acknowledge their fears. . .and then they act anyway.

2. Emphasize your core values

As you make decisions and give advice to the city manager, other department heads, and the city council, you need to be guided by your core values. I sense that you have a strong sense of values. For instance, you may be guided by your beliefs that:

- Serving others and making a positive difference are noble endeavors.
- The health and safety of employees and community members come first.
- The city must protect and support employees and their families even as you cut the budget.

- Now is the time to support high-risk and vulnerable members of the city’s workforce and the community.
- To serve amid adversity and uncertainty, you must do whatever it takes to find creative solutions, even if it means changing rules and long-established ways of doing things.

As you make decisions and take action, always refer to your beliefs and values. People may disagree with the decision, but they generally respect values-driven leadership.

3. Be clear about goals

To adapt, you need to ask yourself and others “What do we aspire to achieve?” and “What does success look like?” (Dan Rockwell, “[12 Questions That Move Dreams to Reality](#),” *Leadership Freak* blog, Feb 7, 2015).

For example, the city of San Jose, California, has three big goals during the pandemic and is striving to:

1. “Save Lives”—Slow and reduce the spread of COVID-19 and support the most at-risk people.
2. “Save Livelihoods”—Support individuals, families, and businesses so they make it through the shelter-in-place and rapidly and safely return to work.
3. “Preserve City’s Fiscal Health”—Ensure the short- and long-term fiscal health of the city organization so that it can continue to do #1 and #2 while providing essential services.

Your core values and clear goals will help you and your team navigate the turbulence that you encounter. You may want to follow an axiom of military strategy. Military strategists advocate **clarity** about direction and **flexibility** about how you get there.

As you move forward with others, tie your decisions to clear goals and align the actions and activities of staff with the goals.

4. Be brave—do something

Amid all the messiness, you must do something. Figure out with your team the next two or three steps forward. For instance, how do you. . .

- Ensure that all employees have sufficient sick time on the books?
- Redeploy staff to high-priority response areas (regardless of job descriptions)?
- Ensure that remote workers have adequate IT tools and support?
- Provide child care for the school-age children of emergency or other essential workers?

No one can tell you the right answer or response. With your team, you must figure it out. “FIO” (figure it out) is a critical skill of adaptive leaders. (See [Career Compass #65 “FIO—The Key Competency of 21st Leaders.”](#))

Even when everything is complex and uncertain, taking action brings clarity. You take several steps forward and determine what is working and what is not working. “The path forward emerges as you move forward, not before” (Dan Rockwell, “[Making Decisions When the Path Is Uncertain and Confusing](#),” *Leadership Freak* blog, Jan 20, 2020).

It certainly takes courage to act. As Eleanor Roosevelt (one of my heroines) said, “You must do what you think you cannot do.”

When you are held to account for action amid crisis or uncertainty, it is easier to explain why you took action than to explain why you did not. (See Peter van Uhm, "[Leadership, Courage, and the Power of Collective Thinking](#)," *Strategy + Business* blog, April 8, 2020.)

5. Connect with others and demonstrate empathy

To stay connected, send an email or better yet call to see how someone on your team is doing as they work from home. Ask about family. Share how you are surviving. Share some Netflix recommendations. Check in on the person before asking about work assignments or how you can help. (See Elaine Pulakos and Robert Kaiser, "[To Build an Agile Organization, Commit to Organizational Stability](#)," *hbr.org*, April 2, 2020.) And of course, express appreciation for the person as well as gratitude for the person's work contributions.

To respond to the needs of team members who are taking care of kids at home as well as working, occasionally schedule a Zoom meeting off hours.

Connection creates influence. Followers will likely follow you and adapt if they feel connected to you. (See [Career Compass #79 "Leading By Connecting."](#))

6. Engage others to leverage collective intelligence

Since no one leader or no one leadership team has all the answers, leaders must mine the knowledge, experience, and creativity of all those around you. While leaders need to take control in a crisis, we don't need to be directive about many things. A key question is how do we engage employees, professional colleagues, and community members to crowdsource creative ideas (see Atta Tarki et al, "[The Coronavirus Crisis That Doesn't Have to Lead to Layoffs](#)," *hbr.org*, March 20, 2020) or create "idea markets" (see Alex "Sandy" Pentland, "[Managing the Flow of Ideas in a Pandemic](#)," *MIT Sloan Review*, March 25, 2020.) For instance:

- How do we redeploy staff resources to support nonprofits, support community engagement and neighborhood volunteer efforts, and reach out to small businesspeople and link them with local, state, and federal assistance?
- What do we eliminate, at least for the short term (i.e., parking enforcement)?
- What administrative duties or reports add little value and can be minimized or ignored?
- What can we in-source (i.e., fleet maintenance) to utilize workers who may be at risk of lay-offs?

As you engage people, you need to exhibit some vulnerability and ask for help. Vulnerability creates connection. Again, people will tend to follow if they connect with you.

As you implement creative ideas, you need to demonstrate that you are using the ideas generated by others. Decisions will tend to "stick" to the extent that people get their fingerprints on the solution.

7. Seek opportunity

The Latinized form of the Greek word for crisis is "krisis." It means "turning point."

Adaptive leaders can use adversity and disruption as opportunities and “turning points” to change things for the better. The pandemic and the resulting budget crisis, can provide opportunities to:

- Eliminate non-value-added activities or practices (i.e., free up hundreds of hours of staff time by redesigning or eliminating the annual performance evaluation ritual).
- Streamline such processes as purchasing and contracting.
- Create new partnerships.
- Insource or outsource.
- Raise new revenue.
- Create a new emphasis on learning and smart risk-taking.
- Promote additional flexibility for employees.
- Change out-of-date and/or burdensome civil service rules that do not provide opportunities to redeploy employees so they are aligned with current priorities, contribute more, and learn more.
- Change the way managers manage (As Warren Bennis once noted, most organizations are over-managed and under-led.)

8. Communicate with confidence

Even though there is uncertainty, communicate with confidence.

One of the paradoxes of leadership in crisis is that leaders need to share the ugly truth but also spread optimism about moving forward. (See James Lucas, “Managing Through Meltdown,” *MWorld*, Fall 2002.) In a calm and confident manner, tell people what you know and what you do not know. (Dr. Fauci, the infectious disease expert from the CDC, is a good example of an effective communicator.)

As indicated by research from the University of Cambridge, telling people “I don’t know” does not diminish trust. (See blog post by Scott Ostler, “It’s Okay To Be Uncertain,” *LinkedIn.com*, April 11, 2020.) In fact, being transparent with employees and other stakeholders and showing that you care increases trust. Trust is the key currency of adaptive leaders.

You must also share the good things happening, not just the challenges that your organization faces. As Napoleon stated, leaders are “dealers in hope.” (See Elaine Pulakos and Robert Kaiser, “[To Build an Agile Team, Commit to Organizational Stability](#),” *hbr.org*, April 7, 2020.)

Followers need to know that you are thinking about the immediate needs of people, as well as the big-picture challenges for the organization.

As people experience adversity and distress, they need calm leaders who are steady and optimistic and demonstrate a can-do, action-oriented approach. The Swedes have an expression “ice-in-the-belly.” Be calm and confident. (See Atta Tarki et al, “[The Coronavirus Crisis That Doesn’t Have to Lead to Layoffs](#),” *hbr.org*, March 20, 2020.)

Finally, don’t be afraid to over-communicate. In times of high stress, people only hear about 20% of what you are saying. Therefore, when you think you are communicating too much and repeating your key messages over and over again, communicate some more.

9. Find co-leaders, allies, and partners

You cannot lead and innovate by yourself. You need to seek out co-leaders with whom you can share the leadership role and responsibilities. It is a plus if your co-leaders have complementary skills and aptitudes, since no one leader has all the competencies required to lead successfully.

In the midst of turmoil, we must also enlist allies and partners who can:

- Generate creative ideas and approaches
- Share resources
- Provide social support
- Share the risk

If you act (and you must), you will be taking some risks. As you engage allies and partners, you spread the risk. It is more difficult for opponents to attack you for taking action if you do it in partnership with other departments and stakeholders.

10. Learn as you go

When faced with an adaptive challenge, leaders cannot learn before they act. They learn while they act with others. You must learn as you go, not before you go. (See Dan Rockwell, "[7 Questions That Confront Paralysis](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, Oct 5, 2014.) To learn as you go, you need to reflect (for instance, start a journal) and help your team reflect. The best way to reflect and learn as you go is to constantly debrief with your team. As we take action, ask:

- What is working well?
- What is not working so well?
- What are we learning to fine-tune our immediate responses?
- What micro-innovations can be made permanent in some form or another?
- What are we learning to create a better workplace for tomorrow?

(See Karin Hurt and David Dye, "[How to Capture What You're Learning From This Crisis Now](#)." *Let's Grow Leaders* blog, March 3, 2020.)

Some responses or actions won't work out. To learn from mistakes and "fail forward," you need to create "psychological safety" in your team. Psychological safety in a team is when group members feel safe to express themselves. In a team characterized by psychological safety, team members. . .

- Feel that they can give voice to their ideas and perspectives without fear of reprisal or rebuke.
- Believe that if they make a well-intentioned mistake, others won't penalize them or think less of them

Psychological safety allows team participants to regard mistakes and failures as pathways to learning and growth and better performance over time. (See [Career Compass #69 "Psychological Safety—The One Key Determinant of Team Effectiveness."](#))

11. Show progress

It is important to show progress in responding to the immediate challenge (i.e., public health crisis) or longer-term problems (i.e., smart downsizing). People will stay motivated if you help them see that good things are happening and there is progress along the way in addressing the goals established by the city leadership.

12. Plan ahead

When the crisis response team is mobilizing to deal with the public safety and health challenges, the organization must plan ahead for a new future. Your “workplace of tomorrow” group is a good example of a “plan ahead” team that is looking at how to implement micro-innovations and make them permanent in some form or another (for instance, new ways to promote remote work, communicate with employees and neighborhoods, engage volunteers to serve high-risk community members, get homeless of the streets). (See Martin Hirt et al., “[Getting Ahead of the Next Stage of the Coronavirus Crisis](#),” *McKinsey.com* newsletter, April 2020.)

Again, adversity and crisis allow for new opportunities if you seize them.

13. Take care of yourself

Adaptive leadership is a marathon, not a sprint. Leaders must take care of themselves if they are to persist and function effectively.

Self-care takes many forms:

- Minimizing any exposure to the virus.
- Taking walks or engaging in other exercise.
- Eating healthy.
- Moderating any alcohol use.
- Meditating, deep breathing.
- Spending quality time with family and friends.
- Joining colleagues for coffee or a drink.
- Finding quiet time to reflect.
- Engaging in hobbies or non-work creative pursuits.
- Laughing.

You cannot lead if you don’t take care of yourself.

How will you respond to this crucible experience?

Real leaders are forged in crisis. If you choose to respond and help people adapt and make a positive difference in crisis, then you are a real leader. (See Nancy Koehn, “[Real Leaders Are Forged in Crisis](#),” *hbr.org*, April 3, 2020.)

The pandemic and the opportunity to adapt on many fronts is a crucible moment for local government leaders (regardless of your formal position). Crucible experiences are filled with uncertainty and adversity. (See Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas, “[Crucibles of Leadership](#),” *Harvard Business Review*, Sept 2002.)

Crucible experiences can engulf and incapacitate you or bring out the best in you. If you respond as a leader to a crucible moment and help yourself and others adapt, the experience can transform you for the better as a leader and as a person.

Related Career Compass Columns

[Career Compass #58 “Overcoming Deep-Seated Fears”](#)

[Career Compass #57 “Leading by Living Our Values”](#)

[Career Compass #65 “FIO—The Key Competency of 21st Century Leaders”](#)



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