

Shifting Leadership in Times of Crisis: A Role for DAC

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The 2020 pandemic of COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) has been led by a 100 nm-sized particle known to scientists and researchers as severe acute respiratory syndrome–CoV-2.¹ COVID-19 has influenced every facet of society as we know it. It has been nondiscriminatory in its selection of subjects becoming infected by its virulent replication process. There have been and continue to be many social, economic, political, and scientific reactions from COVID-19, both negative and positive.

One of the most positive has been the self-actualization of the community around us and our ability to lean on each other and not the institutional norms or values that influenced all of us prior to COVID-19. Silos between researchers and research communities have been broken down. Each person is reaching beyond their normal boundaries of day-to-day routine and raising their hands to help find a solution to a problem. This is leadership.

Leadership is not a formal role or responsibility we should place upon an individual within an institution. Leadership is instead a mutually accepted process used to achieve a shared DAC (Direction, Alignment, and Commitment)² between each other to achieve a goal. It is an alignment among leaders and followers who understand the behaviors and relational framework of each other in order to navigate the spaces needed for change.²

There are many theories, styles, characteristics, and behaviors we are seeing in leaders around the globe. Many of the positive qualities are leveraged by their ability to keep perspective on the global impact of their decision-making processes, relate to the impact of what was going on in the world around them, and do so without assigning blame or pointing fingers.³ The onset of the pandemic instantly shifted our sense of normalcy and created within each of us immediate feelings of disorientation and anxiety, which rapidly transitioned into: How do we work together to find solutions? We immediately looked around for guidance, support, and instruction. Our attention and need to maneuver through these challenges were shared and mutual.

Many questions began to arise from within our institutions: How do you ramp down research for a pandemic? How can we continue to do research? Which research resources cannot be ramped down? How do we prioritize research and access to equipment? How do we maintain social distancing, proper personal protective equipment precautions, and sterilization of our labs? How can we help the people within our institution? How do we support the emotional and mental health of our employees?

Many of us were caught off-guard and unprepared for how to manage the effects of a pandemic that was cutting its way around the globe. Yet we were immediately able to reach out to our research communities and help each other through dyadic conversations to formulate solutions to these questions. No semantics, no politics, just sheer action to put the priorities and actions necessary into play. We were, evermore, directionally aligned and committed to developing solutions together. We had each other's back, and unknowingly, we were creating DAC.²

Albert Einstein once said, "The current problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking." What triggers unconventional thought and some of our best problem solving is often a disorienting experience and a finite pressure of anxiety and stress.⁴ It is this finite pressure of anxiety and stress that creates a new flow of thinking, thus allowing us the realization of a new path forward and crafting solutions for us to emerge from such disorienting experiences.⁴

These disruptions to our norm induced us to role switch,⁵ allowing us to emerge together in a dynamic unfolding of intra-action by reorienting our flow of practice with one another. We changed from the way we used to previously interact and collectively redefined our resources and reality, thus creating an environment that allowed for innovation and an exchange on the flow of ideas instead of being stifled by institutional norms and policies.⁶

So, what has the pandemic taught us about leadership and the ability to create change under the guise of DAC? It has taught us a few things:

1. The need to distribute leadership.

Our ability to create change needs to happen with a greater level of understanding and perspective. We need to have an enhanced ability to be empathetic and attentive to the impact of our decisions at a larger scale. This requires the need for us to become less reliant on authority and more dependent in aligning our abilities to self-organize the capacities of individuals working toward shared goals.⁷

2. Increase the flow of ideas.

Institutions have shown the ability to increase the flow and exchange of ideas to create solutions. This was demonstrated by way of the quick-acting response of gathering and analyzing information on how to manage shut down procedures for research operations. At all levels of the Institution we were working to create greater access to information and actually reduced many of the standard control functions that would have, under normal circumstances, restricted our abilities to enact change in a unified stream of understanding.

3. Create stronger boundary-spanning networks of community.

Network organizations link people together through technology; the essential nature of any network is not hierarchical but rather organized around shared meaning. People who are deeply connected to a cause do not need directive, rewards, or leaders to create goals for them. Instead these goals are self-organized, managed, and tailored to the network's needs.¹ Yet networks need to function and operate in the same way asterisms are observed in the sky. They should be informal yet identifiable and boundary-spanning in the sense that they can be a part of not one but many constellations.

The role of chaos—the great destructive energy that dissolves the past and gives us the gift of a new future—is

often experienced as a profound loss of meaning. Nothing makes sense in the way it did before, and nothing seems to hold the value as it once did. But we emerge changed because we create and grow through fearful realms of disintegration. The destruction created by chaos is necessary for the creation of new. As such, COVID-19 is inviting contributions and involvement, generating new information that is needed to reorder the universe.

The capacity to create solutions without traditional hierarchies or formal leadership is found everywhere, not just within the confines of societies facing disasters. We can assume the leaders we need are already here. We need to consider carefully what we are learning about leadership in times of crisis. People working together, in unison, bringing into the process their shared knowledge, understanding, and expertise is all part of the leadership process. Leadership happens when we are each invested and engaged and contribute toward a shared goal.

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