Navigating Covid19's next stage: A strategy of adaptive leadership

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It will no doubt take medical and social scientists of many stripes decades to tell the full story of Covid19 and dissect its full impact, meaning and lessons. Unfortunately, the leaders we now look to for keeping us safe, rebuilding our economies and mitigating both the social and (geo)political damage caused by the virus do not have the luxury of time. They have to make sense and act in real-time, under conditions of high uncertainty, in a rapidly changing landscape, amidst enormous expectation and for exceptionally high stakes. What can they draw upon to improve their chances of leading wisely and effectively through to that elusive 'New Normal'?

A new context requires new thinking and approaches. It may seem indulgent to become theoretical, but as the maxim goes, "*Theory without practice is foolish; practice without theory is dangerous.*" One conceptual tool that is both useful and timely for public servant leaders is the Adaptive Leadership model, developed by (10)(2e) at the Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Their works provide leaders with both a sense-making, diagnostic framework and a range of actions to guide their practice.

In a crisis, the first task of any responder is to diagnose the nature of the challenge they face. The temptation for leaders to make sense intuitively and rapidly and then to rush into action using familiar approaches and repertoire is understandable but potentially unhelpful. Heifetz distinguishes between *Technical* problems and *Adaptive* problems. Technical problems are ones we face that are within our current range of understanding and amenable to our current skill set. They can be dealt with by the expert-policymaker who can draw on their formal authority and apply their existing repertoire(s). The margins of uncertainty and disagreement are limited to questions about which of the available known solutions will work most effectively, most efficiently and with least negative side effects.

We have seen multiple examples of Technical problems being addressed in exemplary fashion during the past few months, with IT managers, HR departments, economists, education departments, school principals, health experts, engineers, hospitals mobilising their expertise and systems to tackle various aspects of the Covid challenge. The extraordinarily successful response to the health dimension of the crisis in Australia and New Zealand has been testament to both quick and sensible public policy settings and the collective skill and agility of the public services. The public at large have rediscovered, as with the summer fire crisis, that when it comes to the technical work of countering serious threats to public health and safety, governments *can* be trusted to deliver. In-fact in times of crisis it is *only* governments that have the power, resources and experience to protect lives, the economy, jobs, people's welfare, whole industries. In other words, we have been largely successful at the technical side of the challenge.

The nature of the second type of challenge (10)(2e) discern is significantly trickier. *Adaptive* challenges are ones that are unfamiliar, where is there is no real agreement on the exact nature of the challenge or the required response. Think climate change, race, inequality, refugees. When something changes in our operating environment and our systems encounter these challenges, we need to undertake not only important technical work but also orchestrate a process of adapting existing mindsets, values, attitudes and behavioural norms. The problem with many leaders faced with adaptive challenges is usually that they focus on the former and fail to do the latter.

The past few months can offer significant clues on the what this adaptive work might consist of. In a few short, brutal months this pandemic has swept in, disrupting all in its path. Faced with the overwhelming threat of a pandemic and the resultant economic tsunami we have seen firms, governments and community sector organisations respond with remarkable innovation and agility, engaging in remarkable feats of improvised temporary adaptation. They figured out how to stay afloat and continue to operate with entire workforces moving within days to working off-line from home. They have made vital logistical and infrastructural chains work under very difficult circumstances. Working through this period with multiple leadership groups across continents we have continually heard executives express surprise and delight that 'within days we managed to take steps which usually take us months or years to achieve.'

Why is this? Firstly, we had a clear orientating purpose to work towards. There is nothing like a genuine crisis to focus the collective mind. Secondly, and related, the heat was turned right up by the nature of the challenge. We were staring into life and death, mass-unemployment, the collapse of the economy. Thirdly, the lack of time freed us up to take risks, experiment and innovate.

One such agency is the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Appreciating the critical need for new and accurate statistics to inform governments and the community about the impacts of the spread of COVID-19, they immediately set up, in the words of Chief Statistician Dr David Gruen, a 'statistical war room' to bring together all the key ABS people brainstorm and prioritise: *"we knew there was more we could offer. We were in a unique position to provide enormous value by collecting and publishing near real-time information about how individuals and businesses were responding to the rapidly changing circumstances."*

This was not just technical work – the ABS could not have achieved its new purpose (the real-time 'war room') without making significant changes in its existing operating model and cultural norms. One Senior Executive, [(10)(2e)] described how *"we gave permission to generate new ideas, move quickly, bypass the usual committees. It was like some shackles were lifted."* There was a pragmatic understanding that had to be an inevitable trade-off between quality and speed; a bolder attitude about who they approached for data; a pausing of some existing projects; and an agile movement of resources to where they were most needed. This cultural shift filtered down through the organisation: *"Our middle managers came up with the ideas and ways to make this happen, and then backed their team to deliver it. Which they did in spades. Our SES instilled in their teams a strong belief that they could do this, and were very present and re-assuring in what were some rocky moments. Everyone really rose to the challenge."*

Under enormous pressure the ABS was able to deliver more than 10 new or more timely products each month, including real time Covid-18 household and business surveys data, fortnightly data on jobs and wage impacts, and a range of interactive maps of relevant health data. This critical, timely data and statistics allowed informed decisions to be made on both the health and economic front. Examples Agencies like ABS need to both continue to deliver while turning their attention to the next challenge: how do they ensure that this temporary adaptation is not a moment in time response to the crisis? Too many organisations speak of being 'good in a crisis,' and then resort to business as usual with familiar siloes, fragmentation, safety, and bureaucratic inertia. How in this moment can they lean towards becoming a bit more New and a bit less Normal?

The adaptive leadership framework can offer leaders like [(10)(2e)] at the ABS a roadmap for increasing the likelihood of their systems engaging in successful adaptation. Its 9-part strategy looks like this:

Articulate a clear orientating purpose

If in a period of great turbulence and uncertainty, we are asking people to reconsider and adapt long-held beliefs, familiar structures, well-established practices and perhaps even core values, it is critical to connect this to some authentic, compelling 'why' that will resonate and motivate. Too often employees are offered a half-baked rationale for change and a top-down, rushed trajectory to its implementation. People know when they are being hoodwinked and 'being changed' - and will use voice, exit, or other strategies of avoiding adaptation. In contrast, leaders who engage openly and honestly, listen deeply to people's concerns and fears, and elicit and absorb their ideas even while confronting them with inconvenient realities and unpalatable possible futures, have a much better shot a mobilizing collective will and creativity to self-examine, experiment, innovate, learn and, ultimately, adapt. Think of teachers, health workers and police officers needing reinvent their crafts as their organizations are seeking (and needing) to consolidate C19-induced improvisations in their operating models.

Distinguish technical work from adaptive work

C19 harbours both technical and adaptive challenges for every policy domain, organisation and profession. The challenge is to sort out which is which in your specific circumstances. Undertake diagnostic work and figure out which parts of the overall challenges are technical and which adaptive, then create a dual strategy. Technical work should be addressed within the domain of experts and can be organised using existing structures and channels. Undertake technical work as efficiently as possible, to free up time, energy and resources to address the adaptive side of the problem. The Adaptive work requires a different strategic approach and mindset. It is neither simple, nor lean, or fast. But it is essential to go through when the crisis knocks loudly on the door of the very premises, taken-for-granted assumptions and value propositions of your organisations.

Maintain sufficient pressure for the system to keep working at it

Our grandparents were right when they said, 'necessity is the mother of invention.' Change happens during a crisis *because* the heat is high enough to demand movement. Once the intensity of the crisis begins to alleviate, fears subside and the immediate threat is brought under control, there is a collective sigh of relief and a push for the normality to resume. When this occurs, a crucial leadership task is to maintain sufficient pressure, or heat, to continue the adaptive process that is required to not just survive the battle of the moment but to come through the larger war it is part of or helped unleash. Create processes, with time pressures, and retribution-free rules of engagement that invite people to speak up and challenge conventional wisdoms and taboos.

Generate systemic sense-making and learning

The capacity to generate deep learning in real time is at the core of an adaptation process. Generate and encourage learning in multiple ways. Encourage reflective processes, as did one major police division who have created a regular, facilitated session to step back from the normal operational demands do important sense-making and reflection work. This regular 'pause' allows them to learn, shift their practice and innovate amidst the crisis. Allow different and new people and voices to step into the expert role. Listen to 'softer' voices in your system, as innovation rarely comes from the centre. One Director at a university setting recalled how in the midst of the initial crisis it was the newest, most junior and quietest member of his team who came up with a whole new temporary operating model. Initially her idea of setting up 21 small, agile project teams was drowned out in the noise, but once the director ensured the meeting stopped and listened, she was able to share her breakthrough idea. Lastly, share resources and articles to stimulate thinking and develop shared language and frameworks.

Ensure conflict is being had productively

Productive conflict of ideas and values is a crucial element of the adaptive process. Bring the differing views, or factions together to work on a shared problem. Creating a robust and supportive 'holding environment' is one of the key elements to generating adaptation. This is a combination of

psychological safety; shared language, purpose and meaning; clear rules and boundaries; and visibility and engagement of key leaders. Holding environments are ways of orchestrating and having conflicts in a productive manner. They are buffeted by robust rules of engagement and a joint focus on the 'real work' that needs to be undertaken for the system to be able to survive and thrive. should help generate this sense of safety. A classic example of doing this even in the midst of an acute international crisis occurred in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. President Kennedy moved to split his inner circle of national security advisers into two groups that both were given the task of recommending options on what to do in the face of the Soviet build-up of nuclear launch capacity in Cuba. Absenting himself as much as possible from their deliberations took the power out of the room. Encouraging both groups to push the envelope in examining the options and forbidding contact between them meant he would get more and unfiltered options on the table than he would normally get in the regular, large-size, collegiate, leader-centred committee structure.

Create space for working through losses

People don't avoid change per se, they avoid the loss involved in change; the loss of certainty, resources, competency or identity. Denying the loss is both morally callous and strategically unwise. Leaders needs to support people through the loss, uncertainty and pain of change. Not only did Jacinda Adern make a series of fast and decisive decisions to tackle the Covid-19 threat but she has also emotionally connected and supported the NZ people through the stress and uncertainty of the crisis. Choosing to speak live on Facebook, late at night in her pyjamas after putting her baby to bed, was a tangible way of reaching out and demonstrating empathy and reinforcing the core message of being in this together.

Encourage experimentation

Create settings for free thinking, where ideas can flow, new things can be tried out. Provide (parts of) your system with a license to innovate so that it feels supported in maintaining an experimental mindset, allowing them to fail without fear and learn deeper and faster than usual. People scan their environment and then make a risk-assessment on the level of risk they are willing to take. It's called survival. If we want to encourage greater risk taking, we need to create a conducive environment. As one person recently remarked, "I need to know if my manager is going to throw me under the bus or stand by me and offer some protection before I'm willing to step out and take risks."

Name avoidant patterns of behaviour

The Adaptation processes can be confusing, disorientating and overwhelming when we are in the midst of the action. Ensuring that people don't get lost in the process and start 'avoiding' the core task is essential. It is likely people will get distracted, or look for ways to reframe the issue, displace responsibility and stall momentum. When we see this happen remind people of purpose, what is at stake and what is expected. One senior executive of a critical agency described how in the early, critical stages of the pandemic he observed a small, but key, group of middle managers maintaining an outdated operating mindset and therefore slowing progress and collaboration. He contacted each individually reminding them what was at stake, what was needed and expected from them and addressed any concerns they had about the operating in the new context. This led to an immediate shift in attitude and behaviour and key outcomes to be achieved in a timely fashion.

Moral leadership

Undertaking adaptation is not just a strategic challenge, it is at its core a moral undertaking. We chose to do this because we believe something precious is at stake. People's livelihoods, the safety of our community, the health of our families, the wellbeing of our employees. One of the key catch phrases of recent months has been "*We're all in this together.*" This is a moral declaration of fairness, decency, purpose and connection. When we feel we *are* in it together the social contract will be strengthened. 'Be the change you want to see' is not just a cliché, it is a strategic leadership imperative. To act on it in the context of a crisis and with your system facing deep adaptive

challenges that it rather just saw go away, is not at all easy. We expect honesty, integrity and authenticity from our leaders and if people see leaders act in ways that contradict or undermine the espoused intentions those leaders will quickly lose moral capital, trust and influence. We despise it when we see or suspect hypocrisy from those with power. When Boris Johnson's senior advisor Dominic Cummings broke the lockdown's 'we're all in this together' social contract, the public's fury and the immediate loss of trust that resulted spoke volumes. The contrast with the way Jacinda Ardern has maintained enormous levels of trust through her moral leadership could hardly be bigger.

The encouraging news is that the ABS is already thinking about the future and this next adaptive phase. It is unrealistic and inappropriate to think that the ABS can simply maintain its Covid19 way of working indefinitely. It will need to figure out what to keep, alter, discard going forward. As one senior manager remarked, *"The cultural change is already sticking. Much of what we have done will most certainly become a permanent part of our psyche. We now need to come up with a model that will work on a permanent basis."* It's as simple and as difficult as that.