

## CHLNet COVID Corner Blog: June 3, 2020

### Two Faces of VUCA

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The COVID-19 pandemic has invaded our physical and psychological safety bubble and disrupted our health, education, social, and economic systems. It has created a VUCA world; one that is *Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous*.<sup>1</sup> During COVID time—and into the new normal—the need for leadership to create and sustain major change is pronounced.

Why? Because VUCA environments exacerbate the potential for fear, unpredictability, and confusion. Fear is a natural response to an unknown: i.e., a virus we cannot see, of other people who may be infected, and of situations and circumstances we cannot control. “When fear is your trigger, you are always going to be late”, Dr. Joanne Liu reminds us.<sup>2</sup> Uncertainty relates to how social distancing will change our lives (e.g., will we be able to comfort a loved one in a long term care home), whether or not there will be a second wave, and second wave or not, what will the interactive effects of economic, mental health, social and educational conditions portend for the future? Confusion, in the form of misinformation, arises from multiple experts, conflicting advice, and regional disparities of experience making it difficult to make informed decisions, to know how to act to protect self and others. For example, mask or no mask? Open the economy or keep it closed? How to remain psychologically healthy in isolation? Confusion can instill a sense of victimization. It can rob us of agency.

All these conditions are real. But leadership *is* agency. So, it is how we react to them and deal with them that is our choice. Indeed, dealing with fear, unpredictability and confusion, is what separates managers from leaders: “Leaders are comfortable in ambiguity and confusion”.<sup>3</sup> Leadership employs positive VUCA is an antidote to the negative VUCA caused by COVID 19. The elements of positive VUCA are *Vision, Understanding, Clarity and Agility*.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Vision.**

A vision is a clear and concise description of a desirable future. It is the light at the end of a dark tunnel; the long-term goal that makes our efforts meaningful and sustainable through short-term trials and tribulations. Having a purpose can sustain us through psychologically trying times, even years of disconsolation and negativity.<sup>5</sup> Where do we see a vision today? We see it personified by Chief Medical Officers across Canada such as British Columbia’s Dr. Bonnie Henry with her daily mantra: *Be kind, be calm, and be safe*. Or, what health care workers call, their *duty to care*. Or, for many others: *family first*. If a leader’s vision embraces hope, empathy, and an appeal to the caring in all of us, regardless of the role one is in, it can sustain us in chaotic times. Each leader must look within to ‘be in touch’ with that vision and then use it to act.

### *Understanding.*

As leaders—whether we are leading a country, province, hospital, department, family, business, or community endeavour—we must expand our understanding. Understanding the science, for example, diminishes fear. Comprehending the feelings of others creates empathy. Knowing society has triumphed generates optimism. Collectively, this understanding reduces uncertainty, fights confusion, and creates a sense of agency. However, given the nature of COVID 19, none of us will ever be in full possession of all the knowledge necessary to inform a perfect decision or action. Leaders must then act consonant with their values and understanding of self: what will satisfy your own conscience. Take heart that if your moral code is infused with caring, compassion, and concern with societal health, it will lead you to the best decision in the moment.

### *Clarity.*

Clarity of the reality of the circumstance one is in is vital to being authentic as a leader and leading effectively.<sup>6</sup> Canadians are getting regular daily briefings about the efforts of government and professionals to combat the virus and the related economic and social ills. Health care workers across the country are hearing nightly—at 7:00—how the citizenry values their work. Regular CEO updates, evidence-based news bulletins, free webinars, and e-learning opportunities, and supports for mental health are available daily.

Yet it is said that the first casualty of any war is the truth. Despite the best efforts of many leaders to be clear, there are always individuals—for their own purposes—who choose to muddy the truth. Leaders condemn in no uncertain terms actions that are antithetical to those truths, such as wilfully ignoring social distancing and racial profiling. Modeling them is also important.

Clarity also means being up front about what you don't know. Many of our leaders have instinctively understood the importance of clarity: clarity of the simple rules that will combat the virus: wash your hands; stay home if you are sick; don't touch your face; maintain social distance. However, they also acknowledge their inability to predict and define all aspects of our collective response. Here an appeal to the good inherent in all Canadians is necessary.

### *Agility.*

Agility is a combination of adaptability, responsiveness, flexibility, and speed. It is characterized by acceptance of and support for innovation; dismantling barriers that mitigate quick action; and being creative in both exploring and accepting valuable ideas that protocol and procedure otherwise might have rejected. During the COVID crisis we have seen multiple examples of agility in action: the Canadian Medical Association working with a factory to convert its traditional work, almost over night, to manufacture protective face shields; organizations embracing digital technologies in ways never before contemplated; working from home; virtual patient visits by primary care doctors—the list goes on. Agility is important because it gives permission for seeking a rapid response to an emergent problem or issue; it empowers workers to rely on their professional expertise; and it challenges cultural and structural barriers that are glaringly obvious as limiting effective action.

### *Summary.*

The Corona virus respects no political boundaries or geographic borders. It has truly been the catalyst for a VUCA world: a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous place in which to lead and work. It demands positive VUCA leadership: leadership that relies on vision, understanding, clarity, and agility. This combination gives the leader resilience in times of crisis. For many of us, it is hard to take our eyes off the COVID road long enough to look ahead and look beyond the next curve. It's even harder to pull

over to the side of the road to look in the mirror to see how you are doing. Yet during such times it is especially important to take the time to reflect, even briefly each day, on whether your leadership embraces the *vision, understanding, clarity and agility* to help lead us through the pandemic. Being more intentional and mindful will substantially decrease stress and anxiety while enhancing resilience; and ensure we move to the future we desire.

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<sup>1</sup> Dickson, G., & Tholl, B. (Eds.). (2020). *Bringing Leadership to Life in Health: LEADS in a Caring Environment: Putting LEADS to Work*. Springer Nature.

<sup>2</sup> Liu, J. (2020, April). Interview with Dr. Joanne Liu, former President of Médecins Sans Frontières. [Audio podcast]. Podcasts: Canadian Society of Physician Leaders. <https://physicianleaders.ca/podcasts.html>

<sup>3</sup> Goldsmith M, Govindarajan V, Kaye B, Vicere A. (2003). The many facets of leadership. New York: Pearson.

<sup>4</sup> Laszlo, A. (2018). Leadership and systemic innovation: socio-technical systems, ecological systems, and evolutionary systems design. *International Review of Sociology*, 28(3), 380-391.

<sup>5</sup> Frankl, V. E. (1985). *Man's search for meaning*. Simon and Schuster.

<sup>6</sup> Kaczorowski, R. (2020, April). The Light at the End of the COVID-19 Tunnel. *Insights: Longwoods, Healthcare Quarterly* (23: 1). <https://www.longwoods.com/content/26185/the-light-at-the-end-of-the-covid-19-tunnel>