Building Resilient Leadership:
Lessons from Covid-19

By Adrian van Breda | Opinion

Abstract

Covid-19 poses the greatest challenges for effective leadership in many years. Covid-19 undermines the deepest security we feel as humans and disables people's capacity to work and create. This opinion piece argues that leaders should not merely hold on until Covid-19 passes, but rather learn the lessons Covid-19 wishes to teach us. In so doing, leaders become resilient to adversity and can facilitate the resilience of employees, teams, and organisations. This article addresses these lessons in relation to our common humanity, the centrality of relationships, the vital importance of spirituality, and the need for structure to enable productivity.

Introduction

Covid-19 has wreaked havoc with leaders and their leadership. We can all—as leaders or as people who are led—look back over the past two years and think of countless challenges that lteaders have faced, sometimes successfully, and perhaps all too often unsuccessfully. I have held formal leadership and management roles for 16 years, in government, research and academic spaces, as well as in church, as a lay person and as a priest. I cannot recall a time that was more challenging than these past two years.

There is a part of me that longs for Covid-19 to be 'over' (whatever that means) so we can 'go back to normality' (whatever that was). But, in truth, things never were 'normal'. And things never were that great in leadership. And I can as yet not envisage a post-Covid-19 society. So, I choose to regard Covid-19 as a companion to be journeyed with, rather than as an enemy to be vanquished. This shift in my construction of Covid-19 first helps me to be less adversarial about Covid-19 and more accommodating and patient. And second, it helps me to think about and even appreciate what Covid-19 has taught me about being a leader.

Leaders in general do not appear to have made radical changes in how they lead during Covid-19. My employers still have the same expectations and targets of staff as they did pre-Covid-19. There has been little or no letting up on targets and indicators; if anything, targets have continued to grow, expressing a philosophy of more rather than sufficiency. As a leader, I am trapped in much the same performative, new managerial, neo-liberal system as everyone else. I wish I could say my leadership has been transformed by Covid-19; it hasn't. But I have come to recognise and appreciate what Covid-19 has taught me about priorities and strategies for leading. I cluster these under four themes: humanity, relationships, spirituality, and structure.

Humanity

A few years ago, I wrote an academic paper titled 'Students are humans too'. In it, I unpacked the myriad personal, family, and community challenges that students face, all while striving to meet our academic expectations for grammar, referencing, and due dates. As I heard the profound challenges students faced daily, I grew to appreciate the heroism of students who pitch up and deliver. As educators, we need to better recognise and celebrate that students are humans too.

In much the same way, employees (be they academics, researchers, administrators, technicians, or labourers) are humans too. They are not just employees. The 'two-worlds myth'—that the worlds of work and life are separate and autonomous—is just that: a myth. These worlds are inextricably intertangled because employees are humans too. Leaders need to better appreciate the lives of employees outside of the workspace. This involves cultivating a holistic understanding of the people we lead. We can no longer afford to think of employees as automatons. We must recognise and engage with the whole person.

Once we know something about the 'private' life of our employees, we can no longer blithely impose our performance targets and working conditions on them. We begin to realise how deeply socially unjust such a managerialist approach is. Instead, we must begin to accommodate the holistic life of employees: their responsibilities towards their children or partner or pets, their health needs, their need for downtime, their need to go shopping or to visit a friend.

In a word, this is about compassion. Or caring. Or even love. It requires us to care not only about organisational performance and targets, but to care also and even more about our employees, their well-being, their capacity to be, to flourish, to grow, and to achieve.

Relationships

Extending from the humanity of employees is the collective experience of a shared humanity through relationships between co-workers. While we all know that teamwork and collegiality are important elements of a healthy and productive team, Covid-19 has helped us recognise that there is more to relationships than collegiality. This is not to say that everyone should become best friends; there may always be people we work with whom we don't

> " My research area is resilience. One of the recurring and resounding enablers of resilience in the face of adversity is the quality of relationships with other people. Relationships characterised by affective support are particularly important, providing a foundation of belonging and the nourishment we need during difficult times. "

particularly like. But the common challenge of a disease like Covid-19, which affects almost everyone in one way or another, helps us recognise and feel compassion towards each other. Shared suffering both necessitates and enables closer and more authentic relationships than in pre-Covid-19 times.

My research area is resilience. One of the recurring and resounding enablers of resilience in the face of adversity is the quality of relationships with other people. Relationships characterised by affective support are particularly important, providing a foundation of belonging and the nourishment we need during difficult times. Relationships are also the crucible for another important resilience enabler: adaptive meaning making. This refers to the capacity to make sense of adversity in ways that enable us to move forward through or around our difficulties. Meaning making is something that is done in families, religious communities, and working environments.

Until Covid-19, I had thought of staff meetings primarily as business meetings to discuss what we need to do and how we need to do it. Covid-19 shifted my understanding to thinking of staff meetings as opportunities to build collaborative, authentic, and compassionate relationships between staff; to cultivate space for silence and reflection that enables quieter members to give voice to their thoughts and feelings; and through this relational foundation to then work on the work. In so doing, we cultivate a collective understanding of the challenges that we face and formulate collective solutions on how to move through them.

Spirituality

While my personal faith has long been central to my life and to how and why I do what I do as an educator, researcher and leader, I have not thought as much about faith and spirituality as I have since Covid-19 arrived in our lives. Some of my clergy colleagues refer to my work at the university as my 'secular job'; implying that it is something almost dirty, compared with the lofty spiritual calling to the priesthood. I always respond that my 'secular' job is as sacred as my work in the church—they are all part of the same fabric.

There are moments, though, when my vocation as a pastor rises in prominence in my 'secular' workspace—when a colleague loses a loved one, when a colleague becomes seriously ill, when the world starts to feel like a dangerous and threatening space. In these moments, my capacity as academic-researcher-priest to hold together the sacred and secular becomes important, because Covid-19 confronts us with deeply existential and thus spiritual challenges.

Covid-19 is not merely a virus; it is a threat to our sense of self, to our humanity, to our survival, to the integrity of our family. These all speak to the deep existential fabric of life, which we may think of as the spiritual dimension of life. Priest or atheist, a leader needs to have the capacity to engage with the deep, intangible, existential layers of life, to create space for them to breathe and be given voice, and to hold and contain them like a living organism. This is the stuff of life. And a good leader needs to be a midwife.

It is within this kind of spiritually-attuned space that a leader can begin to challenge their team members to perform, to produce, to deliver. Working persistently in the midst of a prolonged crisis is an act of defiance and challenge; it is about taking back power and ownership of one's self and one's body, thereby disabling or peripheralizing the threat of Covid-19. This is the collective adaptive meaning-making I mentioned under relationships working to subvert the negative impact of a threat like Covid-19 on our ability to be who we deeply want to be.

Structure

Everything so far may be sounding rather touchy-feely. Some may be wondering when we actually do any work, focus on targets, accomplish goals, and meet our key performance indicators. My experience is that when we create sufficient space for humanity, relationships and spirituality, we are then able to focus on the structure of the work itself. This is not either-or; rather, it is about layering one's leadership to cultivate an environment, a group dynamic and an individual capacity to work, even in the midst of challenge.

The earliest resilience in human development occurs within the secure base established by good-enough parenting in the first year of life. The rhythm, predictability, nourishment and structure of such parenting creates a framework for the world as a manageable and safe space, even during periods of adversity.

During a profound and prolonged crisis like Covid-19, structure is necessary to cultivate a sense of safety and security to contain the many unknowns that Covid-19 presents. A good leader will thus help their team put in place boundaries, procedures, and plans (even if only short-term plans) that form guardrails to contain the anxiety of an unknown, unpredictable, and dangerous environment. My mantra over the past two years has been 'flexibility'. We don't just 'go with the flow'; instead, we plan and structure, and then when things change, we replan and restructure, and again and again, to ensure that we have boundaries that contain, reduce anxiety, and facilitate performance.

A good leader in such times will be constantly looking to the future, to anticipate the opportunities and challenges that lie around the next corner, and to capitalise on or mitigate these as required. Covid-19 has been highly unpredictable and disruptive in many ways. Understanding and anticipating where it is going, even if only a week at a time, is an important role for strong leadership. This enables staff to continue delivering work and to be creative and productive, despite the uncertainty of the world around them.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has wreaked havoc with leaders and their leadership. It has tested us to the limit, or at least to what we may think is our limit. We may long for life to return to 'normal'. But the reality is that life may never be that old 'normal' again. And even if it could be, we should probably not allow it to be. Covid-19 has created unique opportunities for new understandings of what it means to lead and to be a leader during unprecedented times. These lessons should not be relegated to the archives of the Covid-19 era. Rather, we should learn the important lessons Covid-19 has offered to teach us and pull these lessons forward into the world beyond Covid-19.

Fundamentally, Covid-19 has obliterated the division between work and life. For good or for bad, this boundary has been removed. The challenge for leadership going forward is how to use this shift in a way that celebrates and protects the different facets of human life (including both work and life) in a way that is mutually respectful and harmonious. In so doing, leaders in the workplace can contribute to the resilience of individuals and their families, of employees and their work teams, of places of employment and their clients and stakeholders, and of communities and societies.

Leadership is thus far more than getting the job done, or even getting the job done excellently. It is about leading people to flourish, in partnerships with each other, with a sense of the larger and sacred life and world issues around us, and in ways that are socially just and for the common good. If we can journey on this path, leaders can co-create social environments that are sufficiently resilient to handle the future challenges that will inevitably face society.