Leadership in the time of crisis

Sam Foster, Chief Nurse, Oxford University Hospitals, considers what leaders need to do in this time of COVID-19

Responding in our various roles as health professionals to COVID-19 is, without doubt, the most challenging time of our careers. I write this, following a week of planning that has stressed and stretched us, and the daily national updates relating to the demands for UK healthcare, indicate that our plans need to be further stretched. I'm writing this at the weekend–its Mother's Day today, schools closed on Friday as did our theatres, gyms, restaurants and pubs. It is probably the last 'weekend' as we know it for some time, and by the time this article is read, the situation will have changed again.

On a personal level the pressure feels high, I feel scared, but proud multiple times per day, a very stressful set of emotions. I have taken an hour out to reflect on what leaders need to do in a crisis and put pen to paper. Hall (2020) breaks the situation down into how employees consider 'whether you're up to snuff as a leader'. This is how Hall (2020) says they will decide:

- Concern for employees
- Community engagement
- A focus on the greater goal
- Empathy
- A sense of opportunity.

Concern for employees

Hall (2020) states that 'great leaders care about their employees as people first and workers second. That distinction may not be noticed during a typical workday, but it becomes critical during a crisis.' Staff safety has been the priority driver for all of the decisions that we have made as team to date. This has been challenged by the pace at which COVID-19 has been understood and advice changed to reflect this. For example, initially, COVID-19 was identified as a high consequence infectious disease, this was downgraded on 19 March 2020 (Gov.co.uk) which in turn changed the level of personal protective equipment (PPE) required—the communication of this has been very challenging and has also been affected by media and staff concern over the decision-making of the national guidance often manifesting as a cost saving measure rather than being scientifically driven.

Community engagement

Hall (2020) states that 'companies in discretionary industries are an important part of their communities They have the most to lose during a pandemic, but they also have the most to prove.' The response from the wider communities to the NHS has been phenomenal, our learning continues to be how we can best coordinate the many offers of support—on a wider community scale, this is also true—as a gesture, the major supermarkets protected some of their opening times for NHS staff this weekend and saw huge unmanageable crowds, which completely went against the governments social distancing guidance.

A focus on the greater goal

Hall (2020) states that 'people are attracted to business because they want to build a better life for themselves and their families.' I believe that this translates to working in the NHS and the contributions that we make to the health of the population. This is where our leadership needs to be strong and decisive with focus on leading our teams through this difficult time towards recovery. Stories from China are now being shared that life is slowly beginning to start again, with reports that restaurants are opening»—this gives us the green shoots that it will be relatively short-lived and we will get over this.

Empathy

Hall (2020) states 'great leaders have empathy. They realize that going through hard times makes people stronger, and they encourage those people to push on.' We leaders must listen, trust and act to ensure that our staff feel that we understand others' emotions. Support is critical at this time and we need to constantly consider how our colleagues are feeling whatever their role and display empathy.

A sense of opportunity

Hall (2020) reflects that 'the Chinese symbol for "crisis" has two parts: one means "danger," but the other means "opportunity".' The lesson is this: leaders should respect the risk of the virus to their business (and health), but they shouldn't forget that also it is a chance to grow. There are countless opportunities that we are realising both personally and professionally, an early example if this has been progressing the digital transformation that is planned in most organisations. We have used digital platforms for meetings and outpatient consultations, it has progressed so quickly in my Trust, way beyond our original plans.

During this uncertain time, we will continue to learn, to respond and to act together and most importantly we will continue to care for our patients and each other. **BJN**

Hall J. Focus on trust: successful leadership in times of crisis. 2020. https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2020/03/22/focus-on-trust-successful-leadership-in-times-of-crisis/#69c4e35667b0 (accessed 23 March 2020)

Gov.co.uk High consequence infectious diseases (HCID). 2020. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/high-consequence-infectious-diseases-hcid#status-of-covid-19 (accessed 23 March 2020)