Leading through Covid-19: A Meta-Leadership Analysis

Cross-cutting trends from January 2019 through August 2021

NATIONAL PREPAREDNESS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

HARVARD T.H. CHAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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The scope of work was agreed by Eric McNulty, M.A. (Associate Director of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative --NPLI) and Chloe Demrovsky (President/CEO of Disaster Recovery Institute International--DRI). The NPLI team was headed by Eric McNulty and supported by Brian Spisak, PhD, and Jennifer O. Grimes, M.D.. DRI were represented by Lyndon Bird, MSc (Chief Knowledge Officer) and Chloe Demrovsky, M.S. A complementary version of this report[1] from DRI is also available.

[1] https://bit.ly/3yci6o4

Background

COVID-19, or Coronavirus Disease-2019, is the disease caused by the virus SARS-COV-2, or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2. It was first reported by the World Health Organization in January of 2020 in response to a suspicious cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei province, China.[1] While first cases may have appeared in early October to mid-November, 2019, [2] [3] the pathogen was recognized and reported to the WHO in December 2019. On January 13th, the first case outside China was reported in Thailand.[4] The first case in the United States was confirmed on January 21st by the CDC.[5] On January 30th, the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern; on March 11, the disease was officially declared a pandemic.[6] As of August 17, 2021, 4.38 million people worldwide have died from COVID-19, with 208 million cases. In the U.S., 37 million cases have resulted in 623,000 deaths. The figures are likely an undercount, as discrepancies in the data suggest underreporting.[7] [8] [9]

The pandemic was not only a public health crisis. Measures taken to slow the spread of the virus included mandated business and school closures, restrictions on mass transit, and other measures that also affected the economy. "Significant reductions in income, a rise in unemployment, and disruptions in the transportation, service, and manufacturing industries are among the consequences of the disease mitigation measures…"[10]

As of August 2021 in the U.S., more than 37 million cases have resulted in more than 600,000 deaths.

In addition, social unrest erupted after the killing of George Floyd by a police officer on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Protests eventually spread to all 50 states and more than 60 countries.[11] There were a record number of Atlantic tropical storms and hurricanes in 2020.[12] A wildfire record was also set in the United States with more than 10,000,000 acres reported burned.[13] A winter storm brought down large parts of the electrical grid in Texas in February 2021.[14] These multiple, sometimes overlapping crises presented significant challenges to individuals, organizations, and communities.

In spite of the devastating toll that the viral pandemic had wrought throughout 2020 and 2021, hope emerged from rapid scientific progress that produced highly effective vaccines.[15] [16] Yet as science raced to meet the demand of fighting the novel pathogen, continued spread and prolonged infections gave rise to a number of mutations.[17] [18] Though most of them were not functionally significant, a number of variants began to emerge with properties even more troubling than those of the original virus.[19] In Brazil, where herd immunity was believed to have curbed expected new infections, a variant (P.1) emerged, associated with an unexpected spike in new cases. A lineage first identified in South Africa (B.1.351) demonstrated partial immune evasion, and another lineage identified in the United Kingdom (B.1.1.7) developed increased transmissibility;[20] [21] [22] the latter also became dominant in US. In February 2021, a surge of cases in India was driven by a variant called B.1.617, or the "delta" variant, which subsequently became the dominant variant in the US[23] responsible for another COVID spike, largely among the unvaccinated.[24] [25] [26] This variant also posed a greater threat to children under 12, for whom vaccines were not yet approved, unlike other variants that resulted in severe illness in children much less frequently.[27]

As these prolonged, co-evolving crises (from pandemics to protests) introduced new challenges to the everchanging and chaotic landscape, new solutions to meet these demands were required of crisis leaders.

Purpose of this Study

The research team sought to determine if there were lessons learned during this challenging period that span economic sectors and that could inform future disaster preparedness and response efforts.

Methodology

Executives from nine organizations participated in semi-structured interviews across four 90-minute sessions using Zoom video conferencing. The firms represented the aviation, energy, higher education, healthcare, manufacturing, retail, and technology sectors. While each organization had global elements to its operations and/or supply chain, participants were asked to focus their remarks on the impact in the United States to provide consistency in phases of the crises, population experience with public health crises and responses, and the overall political climate. The participants were drawn from the contact databases of DRI and the NPLI.

An interview guide was developed and shared with participants in advance of each session. Not all questions from the interview guide were asked in every session, as the interview followed relevant concerns and findings of participants.[28] There were one-to-three interview participants and five-to-six members of the research team in each interview. The sessions were alternately led by a member of the research team from the NPLI and DRI. Each session was recorded using the Zoom transcription function. Members of the research team also took handwritten notes. All interviews were conducted under the Chatham House rule for non-attribution.

The dimensions of the meta-leadership framework and practice method [29] are used for the analysis of the interviews that follows.

The Person of the Meta-Leader

The enormity and universality of the threat of COVID-19 seemed to bring out the best in senior executive leaders. Across the board, interviewees noted that executives led with empathy and set a clear tone of "people first." One said, "Our initial concerns were for our associates, their families, and

everyone's safety from a disease we knew little about." Another noted that their priorities were clear, "firstly, protecting the health of our employees, limiting exposure of our employees to infection, and secondly, business continuity…" A third noted that "the company had made it clear that the priority was its people and having policies to support them."

The importance of human welfare in the response was clear. "The key decision I feel [we made] was when the CEO stated unequivocally that the company would do everything necessary to protect our people even though that will inevitably damage our financial position – 'I don't care what it costs – just get it done – we must do the right thing.' For us we saw it as a social crisis caused by a public health issue. Finance at this point was secondary. This gave confidence across the organization that the decision-making process was based on the correct values," one participant said. If ever there was a time to walk the talk, this was it.

Fully supporting employees required creativity, expansive consideration of the problem set and its contingencies, and innovative thinking. One respondent said, their best decision was "to support employees in whatever way was possible – financially, socially, and medically. To provide help in difficult times and not cut back the cultural component of employment. We provided many benefits that would never be in a crisis management plan – such as free baby-sitting for those who had to work from home but with schools/nurseries closed also had to care for young children." Another echoed this, noting, "As school and childcare facilities were closed, home-workers needed childcare support, so we tried to help with employee and also local community support activities." Organizations should consider addressing these secondary and tertiary considerations for employee support as they may affect worker availability, engagement, and resilience.

"The key decision I feel [we made] was when the CEO stated unequivocally that the company would do everything necessary to protect our people..."

Another participant noted, "Sometimes, as a large corporation, we drift away from people, and we focus on profits and technology and R&D, and all the other good stuff in the organization. It's been an exceptional reminder to us just how critical people are. It's brought people together at all levels, and it's certainly given the executive leadership team new focus that you look after your people, you look after your organization."

The exceptional contingencies of the pandemic, however, tested the emotional resilience of leaders and their organizations. While one participant noted that the company's best decision had been a combination of work-from-home and furloughing workers based on roles—it "seemed to fit the 'pulse of the people' who were fearful for both their health and job security" and "gave confidence in management's intentions to do the right things"—another noted tension over these decisions as some who would otherwise have been furloughed were assigned to crisis roles. In such cases, transparency over why certain choices were made may boost trust while helping alleviate confusion and ill-will.

In yet another organization, "old school" managers resisted closing offices while most of the workforce enthusiastically embraced working remotely. Leaders needed to consider variation in their employee's

personal perspectives and exhibit flexibility and empathy in bringing about changes within the organization.

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These good and bad decisions, coupled with difficulty in finding the balance between over- and under-communicating and exhibiting transparency versus "old school" management, represent leaders' ability to either fluidly adopt new and effective solutions in the face of change or sink into the detrimental practice of using old solutions for new problems.

Crises can take leaders, and entire organizations, to the "emotional basement" where one is reacting rather than responding thoughtfully. "When it became obvious that [the pandemic] was more severe, some leaders 'froze' and didn't know what to do. Others were very pro-active but not in a coordinated way. Everybody was trying to manage it but the organizational response was all over the place."

On a related note, one participant said that the company had been slow to fully appreciate the mental health impact of the crisis. This seemed to be a capability that evolved over time, with another participant noting that, "We have learned to take the pulse of the organization." There was a strong sentiment among the participants that fatigue was a key factor and many of the organizations quickly learned they needed to rotate through staff to ensure wellbeing and effectiveness. For example, one interviewee stated that, "You've got to keep changing the members of the crisis management teams. Fatigue sets in pretty early." Here, again, we noticed that effective "out of the basement" responses stemmed from fluid and adaptive mental models of the emerging people problems and how to solve them.

There was sentiment that the emphasis on mental health will endure. One participant said that their company's new wellness program is "60% mental health and 40% physical health," a significant shift from past efforts. Another noted the need to have people realize the need to "take time and show grace" as they differentiate between "have to do from nice to do."

The Situation

The pandemic was the most extraordinary event faced by the professionals in our interviews. The scope, scale, duration, and impact all exceeded that of other incidents. However, those factors also presented numerous opportunities for learning.

Deep Visibility Provides Early Warnings

Routine operations and supply chain connections in China gave most participants the first warning that something was afoot, a significant advantage for global organizations where those operations are connected to a robust business continuity global event monitoring function. Consistently, it was the appearance of cases outside of China that triggered preparations for a global event. For some the pivot in operations came in January and for others, the shift came as late as March.

However, initial perceptions varied in that some saw potential supply chain disruptions while others were already considering the implications of a public health crisis. None fully grasped the potential for the duration of the event. Some thought that it would last a few months; another saw it as a more loosely defined "long haul." One noted that it was a real challenge to provide an estimate of the disruption to senior executives. Another said, "We knew it was going to be serious, but we had no idea that we would be shutting factories and requiring many people to work from home." It takes time for a major event to unfold, and it is difficult at the beginning to gauge how long an event will last and how bad conditions will become. Thus, ongoing consideration of how to evolve response efforts is essential. One respondent reported, "It was impossible to predict what was going to happen, but the company responded well with everyone at all levels focusing on dealing with the issues as they arose." Said another, "We had no initial idea about how long to plan for disruption and as more data emerged dates got pushed out further and further. We accepted that potentially we might have to operate in pandemic mode for several years. We also recognized that peaks might be cyclical, and this was confirmed by the arrival of the Delta variant."

Whenever the realization arose and no matter the initial assessment, it was the shift from reactive survival mode to an agile, adaptive mindset embracing the potential scale and scope of the pandemic that prompted a productive response. Understanding each crisis, its contingencies and unique timeline, requires framing to organize thinking and activity. With such a fundamental structure in place, patterns can be better derived from the chaotic milieu of overlapping crises (see the Arcs of Time on p. 21).

Finding and Providing a Single Source of Truth

Respondents consistently reported that they were challenged in finding verified, reliable information — what in meta-leadership terms is "driving to the knowns." One respondent said, "From business continuity perspective, there were a lot of knee jerk reactions to these localized, not validated or vetted reports, and we were trying to accommodate every one of those. But then quickly, we learned that we need to find a single reliable source and we used CDC data."

Another noted, "Many activities related to our response and recovery were influenced by social media's impact. Since this played out in a US election year, there were opposing opinions on a variety of topics. If you sought to find something to support your opinion, you could find it. Quite often this resulted in referencing statements that needed to be verified for accuracy multiple ways prior to relying on them. For those of us who grew up with a trust in media reporting years ago this was very frustrating. It got us to realize the impact of social media with many individuals having short attention spans. It is an important lesson learned moving forward."

Another said, “We found it chaotic at first as even leading authorities like CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and WHO (World Health Organization) were promoting different views.” Yet another noted, “We looked to CDC for guidance, but the messaging was not great.” Eventually, most respondents settled on the CDC as the “gold standard.” That was not without issues, though, as one participant said, “We tried to stick to CDC guidance but that also tended to vary somewhat as they were challenged by politicians and media.”

However, one participant noted that they wanted multiple sources of information: “From a data perspective, we tried to use several sources. It was CDC, it was Johns Hopkins University, there's a Virginia university that also had a very, very solid data set. But not, you know, siding with a single data set, just in case that became tainted or colored in some way.”

Providing a single source of truth was also important. Beyond the specifics of the medical and public health information, a clear vision for the response was essential to guide action when new contingencies arose because plans alone couldn’t cover all of them—leaders had to act toward the right goal when prescribed steps weren’t planned out.

As in many areas of contemporary organizational activity, data sophistication is increasingly important. Emergency management and business continuity teams should look to bolster their capacity and capability in this area as it will be critical in everything from leading up to senior executives to answering queries from staff. While finding consistent information to guide decisions was elusive, leaders found that providing a consistent message throughout their organizations was critical. Confusion results from conflicting public health messages and directives, and large organizations needed clear, consistent messages that would serve as a trustworthy source of reliable information.

An Opportunity for Learning

Here, a significant difference arose among the participating organizations in “single-loop” versus “double-loop” learning[30] [31]. All reported some version of “single-loop learning”—seeing gaps between expected and actual outcomes, and then making adjustments to close those gaps. This method of learning relates to the “old school” management mentioned above where an old mental model of decision-making is used to solve new problems. During times of “business as usual” this is typically good enough. However, if “usual” abruptly shifts, then the organization can experience prolonged instability or worse.

Some of our respondents, though, also evidenced double-loop learning—“questioning the assumptions about [the] objective, the ways of discovering and inventing new alternatives, objectives, and

perceptions, as well as ways of approaching problems."[32] Here, organizations effectively incorporate new streams of information and feedback to update their decision-making rules in the face of change. This latter approach to learning increases an organization's resilience through understanding changes in the "usual" and developing new solutions to new problems. This creates adaptive stability.

Leaders, regardless of being single-loop or double-loop learners, fundamentally want a "stable equilibrium" situation where things are "business as usual." Abstractly, think of a ball on a flat surface as opposed to sitting at the top of a hill where the ball is unstable and wants to roll down the hill and off a cliff. Being on the stable plane breeds confidence in shareholders, partners, constituents, clients, customers, and so on, whereas being on the top of an unstable hill invites doubt and mistrust.

The latter, unstable environment represents tipping-point events, such as pandemics, which shift the plane, and the stable equilibrium point is no longer where it once was. This is when organizations either attempt to create an unstable equilibrium via static, single-loop learning—i.e., the stable plane has eroded around them, creating a hill rather than a flat surface, and they are buttressing an ineffective way of doing—or they recognize a shift has occurred via dynamic, double-loop learning and subsequently adopt a new mindset to effectively manage the organization's shift to a new plane.

This is the main difference between single-loop learning—refining existing practices to keep business as usual no matter what—and double-loop learning—a core shift in thinking and doing. Some readers may also know this as the more recent exploitation-exploration tradeoff in organizational learning made popular by March[33].

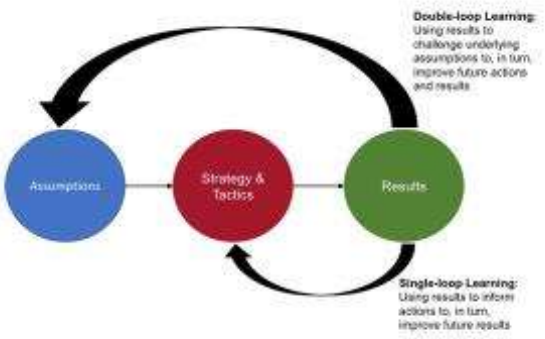
This shift from single-loop to double-loop learning arose, in part, because of the existential nature of the pandemic. Said one participant, "How do we keep the business going through this pandemic that potentially had the ability to shut the business down entirely?" For others, it was the result of the demands of business growth during the pandemic, "They [senior leaders] are expecting the teams to show some form of intuition, other than purely a standard crisis management response."

Upon interviewing the organizations, we noticed a clear pattern in this shift from single- to double-loop learning. For example, "Initially all issues had to be resolved as they occurred and treated as 'one-offs'. However, as time moved on patterns did emerge that allowed us to act more strategically and pro-actively." Said another, "We learned a lot from what happened in in the Far East. We share a lot of those learnings through our global crisis management team." And yet another added, "We were, when we started, first looking at this from an Asia Pacific perspective. There were definitely some immediate learnings, but we quickly saw it going around the world. And when we saw that this truly was a global crisis for all of our different regions, we not only had sharing of that of the information from one region to another, but that was then pulled up into a mid-review with senior leaders and then communicated to the executive team."

Another example came from a participant who said, "We have extended the knowledge and expertise of middle managers and subject matter experts, so they are more ready and willing to deal with a future crisis." In sharing enduring lessons from the pandemic, this repeating message of learning was explicitly articulated when a participant reported that, "We have improved our formal process on how we learn lessons, communicate these and unify the organization as a whole." This represents a clear shift in mindset. Decision-making is fundamentally changed, and the organization is consequently more resilient when future crises arise. Simply put, this organization is double-loop learning.

Other examples of transitions in learning were seen in the evolving perception of the pandemic. One participant said, "The nature of the problem was improperly identified as a security issue rather than a crisis management one. As such, safety management teams were designated to run it. Meanwhile many experienced and qualified employees were being paid by the government and stayed at home with nothing really to do." A related issue arose at another of the organizations interviewed, "Because people were so focused on it [the pandemic] being unprecedented, business continuity wasn't immediately at the table for some senior [team] conversations. It seemed to be new, and it did not seem to be something that traditional means could assist. So initially they didn't look at business continuity, they looked everywhere else for help." In both cases, however, the misperception was recognized, and business continuity became a central player in the response.

Finally, it is important to note that double-loop learning can go in several directions. In one case, a participant noted the benefits of business continuity stepping back. "One of the best decisions, I would say, was for the Business Continuity people to take a back seat in the actual activation process of the business continuity plans. It allowed plan owners to take control, while BC could provide a consultative role and provide a support service, rather than actually driving the activation and recovery process."



*1 - **Double-loop Learning**: Using results to challenge underlying assumptions to, in turn, improve future actions and results*

***Single-loop Learning**: Using results to inform actions to, in turn, improve future results*

"We have improved our formal process on how we learn lessons, communicate these, and unify the organization as a whole."

Obstacles to Learning

Yet learning was not automatic. Significant impediments to learning, and operations, within the U.S. arose from the decentralized structure of the U.S. government response system, with significant authority relegated to states and localities. This structure, which can work well in a local or regional incident, became problematic during a global event with rapid, fragmented regulation. It seems that double-loop learning was not automatic because as operations faced impediments from these external challenges of decentralized response, the temptation to increase stability more immediately with single-loop learning outweighed the additional short-term instability of double-loop learning and new policy

implementation. Said one participant, “As a retailer… our approach has been to provide the same experience in all our stores. This was impossible as different regulations emerged in different states and we had to understand them all and comply. We would have liked a common approach, but this was made impossible as information overload took hold. We couldn’t align with a consistent framework and had to really deal with issues on a store-by-store basis to a large degree.”

One interviewee’s organization found this fragmentation particularly problematic as they are headquartered in a highly restrictive state while their competitors are based in states that pursued laxer requirements. They had to pivot to work-from-home arrangements more quickly and faced greater difficulties maintaining operations.

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment on a global scale, “With external stakeholders like governments, their rules could be very restrictive. Of course, being stringent wasn't too bad a thing, but we did find that there were a couple of situations where things that we had put out there were a little bit different from government requirements.”

Another participant noted that it was a challenge when the federal or state government issued sector-specific requirements without considering the wide variety of situations, capabilities, and capacity of individual organizations in the sector. “Higher education,” for example, includes large universities with medical facilities, public health expertise, and students from around the world as well as small community colleges that serve a primarily local population. It took time and effort to negotiate exceptions from blanket requirements where other approaches were more appropriate.”

Unexpected Contingencies

No incident unfolds precisely as expected. Nor is any plan perfect. Unexpected contingencies are to be expected, requiring attunement to anomalies and readiness to pivot. The pandemic has been no exception. These unexpected contingencies highlight the benefits of adopting a learning mindset to foster agility and resilience.

The interviewees reported that robust planning and protocols helped get them to pivot out of the “basement” and into productive action. One said, “We set up groups with specialist roles and assigned people... Examples were setting up a warehouse for PPE (personal protective equipment), quarantining for students from specific high-risk states, contact tracing, and many other public health tasks.” Another set up eight work streams to address specific challenges.[1] A third noted that the CEO and his direct reports were “immediately engaged” in issues from taking care of people to onboarding new employees to setting up isolated areas to provide critical services.

[1] 1. Staffing and people policies. 2. Future of work, spacing, masks, cleaning. 3. Health and safety issues. 4. Demand and customer recovery. 5. Capacity and future scheduling. 6. Employees, support whilst inactive. 7. Training, hiring and re-deployment. 8. Funding and revenue generation.

Political Dimensions

Among the most significant deviations from assumptions about the incident was the politicization of the response. One participant noted, "One thing we did struggle with, specifically in the US, was the politicization of the pandemic. Not so much on the data side, which remained relatively clean - but on the people side, with people within our organization saying this is a hoax … why are we getting excited? Alternatively, we had the other end of the scale, people were packing up their homes, getting ready to move to another country because pandemic was coming for them." Another said, "We had to think carefully about the political implications in what we did and said to the media." A third added simply, "there was too much politics around."

Given that there are political aspects to any major incident and that polarization preceded the pandemic, it is advisable that crisis leadership professionals prepare for their emergence. This is what Juliette Kayyem of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government calls, "becoming political without being politicized." That is, one must understand the political system and how to navigate within it without becoming an instrument for any elected official or party's political agenda.

Work from Home

Perhaps the most dramatic shift in organizational activity during the pandemic was the shift of workers from offices to home. This was possible because of widespread internet access, availability of mobile devices, and at least partially digitalized, cloud-based file storage and workflow resources. The speed of the shift, however, surprised all of the respondents. One participant noted that widespread work-from-home arrangements had never been considered in their planning, and thus had never been tested.

"By March 15th we had rapidly pivoted to telling many staff members to work from home," said one respondent. "It was a rapid change in our thinking. The nature of our business means that field staff cannot work from home but the 50% of office workers were working remotely very quickly. We almost

had two totally different plans and expectations." Another noted the challenges for the Information Technology (IT) group to support "25,000 people working remotely." A third shared that while the company's response plan called for obtaining more laptops, it did not account for the complexities of procurement and readying the devices for inclusion on the corporate network, a process of weeks, not days. There were also the complications in the logistics of setting up home offices for those who did not have one.

Almost all of the participants in our interviews worked for organizations deemed essential and, for most, continuing operations meant maintaining some facility-based activities in addition to work-from-home arrangements. These ranged from retail stores to warehouses to dormitories, laboratories, and factories. For each of these, the novel nature of the threat and conflicting local, state, and federal guidance posed challenges to establishing criteria for "safe" operating environments. This is a contingency that should be incorporated into future planning.

Related to this, several interviewees noted that their "essential" status and cascading effects of the pandemic led to an upturn in business just as they were struggling to keep associates, customers, and others safe. One said, "we're scrambling to hire more people to get more jobs done and we've got to manage that, in parallel with the pandemic." Business continuity planners should consider that certain disruptions will increase demand, and not assume a contraction.

"...while the company's response plan called for obtaining more laptops, it did not account for the complexities of procurement and readying the devices for inclusion on the corporate network, a process of weeks, not days."

It is also often harder to turn things back on than it was to turn them off. Though the return to offices is far from complete (or assured), it was already on participants' minds. One noted the challenge of, "...trying to fix dates for return to offices when people were simply trying to protect themselves by staying at home. Naturally these had to be constantly changed which caused some staff issues." Another echoed this, noting the problems of, "...setting false expectations, stating when we would return to the office and then changing the dates too often."

The inescapable reality is that some of the flexible work arrangements arising from the pandemic will endure in some form. So, too, will the variability of sophistication of digital work and workflows throughout an enterprise. An emerging area for the attention of business continuity leaders is to understand how to incorporate this into their planning. At its best, this is an opportunity for business continuity and line of business managers to work together to forge a solution, as day-to-day use of digital tools and techniques is likely the best way to ensure that they are ready and accepted in a crisis.

Social Justice Issues

The protests that erupted in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 2020 injected yet more complexity to the overall response. Some participants reported that they had facilities in protest areas. Others noted that they had general safety concerns about customers and staff.

The issues raised by the protesters presented executives with questions about whether to respond and, if so, how and when to engage. One participant shared the CEOs firm stance in favor of the prote sters: "There are customers we are willing to lose." Another CEO took a similarly strong stand, noting that these issues "were personal" to a lot of people. A third shared that the company considered this an opportunity to have "our actions match our values and our words."

Another participant shared that the protests, along with extreme weather and other compounding events, have caused them to integrate the potential for multiple, concurrent events.

Connectivity

Robust connections between individuals and organizations are essential during any complex crisis where no single entity has sufficient authority, capacity, or capability to meet the challenge alone. Communication, cooperation, and collaboration across intra- and inter-organizational boundaries are necessary to meet identified and emerging threats and opportunities.

Vertical Connectivity (leading up and down)

Connecting with the Senior Team

As noted above, it was connectivity through the supply chain that fi rst alerted organizations to the emerging coronavirus. Information flow was critical to recognizing the patterns in the data emerging from China.

The initial connectivity required was with business continuity teams and executive management. This was a two-way street. Typical of one set of responses were these, "The executive team as soon as we notified them, they were on board. We had daily meetings with them," and "Once the Crisis Management Team (CMT) is activated you automatically get attention. The CEO and the Executive Vice Presidents were very engaged from early on." Alternatively, the connection came from above: "By January/February there was enough media coverage, that our senior leadership already were very much aware of what was happening, and this is becoming a global threat… our senior leadership was coming to us saying, 'Have you heard the latest on Covid, are you monitoring this, do we have a plan?'"

However, the shift into crisis mode was not always seamless. One participant noted that because this was a novel event, "business continuity wasn't immediately at the table for some of those senior [management] conversations." That person continued, "Getting top management to understand right at the beginning that although Covid was a new disruptive issue, it was not 'unprecedented.' Faster involvement of existing business continuity plans and processes would have reduced confusion in early stages." Another noted that while a crisis structure was in place by mid-March, there were "still disagreements about priorities and emergency practices."

Another participant suggested that subject matter experts needed to be part of the crisis team and given direct access to levels of management much higher than they are, and with whom they would normally not communicate. This indicates that briefing skills could be valuable training for a wider range of employees.

Internal Communications

As indicated in the Person section above, the health and safety of associates was a primary concern among participating companies. This required robust, consistent communications—an area in which some organizations struggled initially.

One participant noted, "The best decision was that from day one, we went totally digital. We have a very large workforce, and it was really important to reach everyone. Everything went digital, everything related to COVID was digital. We created a central app that housed everything under the sun. It had all the links needed, it had the latest news, the data for every location. Everything within the company can be accessed on this app. That worked extremely well for us. We got information quickly from the employees from the field wherever they were. We had that kind of connectivity, an intimacy with employees. Everyone has a smartphone – whether in Delhi or Houston."

Another participant said that the pandemic accelerated the company's digital workflow transformation. For the first time, they had a platform on which they could engage the entire organization. "This was very positive," the interviewee said, adding, "Our leadership communication was very good early on as we held 'Town Hall' calls for everyone. The CEO and senior executives were always present on all calls and their input was well received. More than 10% of our employees attended some calls on a voluntary basis." A third respondent noted the importance of having a single, consistent voice for communicating with associates. It helped create calm and clarity. They had the same executive involved wherever possible.

As a counterpoint, a participant said, "…initial communications with our associates and other stakeholders could have been better. Faster, more consistent and more regular would have helped build confidence and avoided message confusion." Echoing this, another interviewee said that "Getting better control of communications in the early stages" was something that the company could have done better.

Internal communications are essential to maintain alignment amidst the turbulence of a crisis. A communications plan should be activated as soon as possible and it should be honest, transparent, and two-way. Consistency of voice is also a benefit.

Leading Across and Beyond

In meta-leadership terms, leading across refers to achieving synchrony between different units of a single organization while leading beyond refers to exerting influence on external stakeholders. Both were important in the response efforts of these companies.

Across

Each of the participating organizations is a large, complex enterprise with multiple locations and numerous functions. Understanding second-, third-, and even fourth-level effects was essential to avoid unintended consequences. One participant noted, "As a global company this impacted us everywhere. This was the first time a disaster or crisis had involved the whole company, so it involved strong leadership at all levels." Another noted, "We knew that we couldn't shut down everything. Not every type of work can be done from home, obviously, so we knew, some people still had to come in."

The pandemic response presented opportunities to find new modes of collaboration. Several participants noted the value of bringing project management expertise into the crisis team. Another said that they "flattened the organization to get the right people at the table." One person reported that the response integrated many teams, including business continuity, security, intelligence, travel, and more. This required learning to understand the processes and language of each. These adaptations are further evidence of the rapid learning and adaptation noted above.

Technology was an obvious issue given the move from on-site to work from home for many workers. One participant said, "From a technology perspective, how do we set up isolated areas where we can have the critical services available for the variety of [internal] organizations?" This suggests the importance of involving departments beyond business continuity, such as IT and HR, in planning and exercises.

""“The best decision was that from day one, we went totally digital. We have a very large workforce, and it was really important to reach everyone."

Beyond

Coordination between the public and private sectors is critical in any disaster, none more so than a pandemic. Guidance and regulations issued by government entities affects all people including employees, customers, suppliers, and others. One participant said, “Every crisis management team has stakeholder management responsibilities within the team and their role is to speak with local leaders, speak with government, etc.”

However, such coordination was not always easy. This was in part because guidance evolved as more was learned about the virus, its spread, and the most effective countermeasures. Another significant factor was the bottom-up structure of U.S. response authorities. There were frequent conflicts and contradictions between the guidance and mandates from local, state, and federal authorities, making it difficult to craft corporate policies and protocols that conformed with all of the requirements. One participant said, “When state governments started to get involved it was a bit more difficult. We had common safety protocols that we applied as a company, but different states had different views about what was appropriate.”

Another participant, speaking of both U.S. and non-U.S. governments globally, captured the challenges this way: “I would say that there was definitely some disparity between what the government was saying and what our existing process was. I think that happens with catastrophic events as governments feel that need to get involved and try and pull things together. Sometimes they don’t have as good a disaster or continuity perspective. They are not really sure what is necessarily going on and some of their advice might be a bit inappropriate.”

Other comments reflected similar challenges: “We found it chaotic at first as even leading authorities like CDC and WHO were promoting different views. There were also big differences with respect to things like masks, social distancing, and signage requirements.” “FEMA did not really have [our sector] on their radar, so their advice seemed confused and lacked any coordination.” “We found [the] lack of direction, consistency and clarity very challenging.”

Particularly challenging were situations where a company had a facility in one state and employees working there from neighboring states. Public sector officials define their domains by jurisdictional boundaries and see their constituencies as residents residing within those boundaries. Corporations and their customers, by contrast, are not constrained by those boundaries. One participant noted that “It was difficult to get answers to basic questions” about boundary-crossing issues. This suggests that there would be benefits to encouraging regional approaches to be developed by the public sector.

The frustration with government entities also led to independent action. One participant noted that they would follow their own protocols when they felt that government directives were not stringent enough: “we had to get really clear on what were the must-haves to our organization.” Another said, “Ultimately, our decisions had to be taken by our public health expert at [our organization] rather than government agencies.”

Despite the difficulties, it is important to mention that persistent engagement with government officials can pay off. One interviewee reported, "We were able to have a conversation with the governor's office and we showed them our numbers, our case rates were low, and we've got all medications in place. They then did allow us to keep going."

One participant also noted the necessity of leading beyond to suppliers: "We have identified the need to help our suppliers become more resilient – their failure could become our failure." With a global disaster, consideration of contingencies beyond the organization became critical.

The concern over supply chain issues continues. One participant said, "The impact of supply chain on our daily lives has become a major challenge to manage the rest of 2021 and into 2022. Issues with ocean freight bookings, cargo issues, container shortages, lack of personnel at ports, etc. will continue. It has become more important to be agile versus being accurate. The complexity in material sourcing, logistics and transportation will take as long to subside as it did to develop. It may take well into 2023 for these complex supply chain challenges to be resolved and for it to not be a top trending risk for all next year."

Among the subject matter experts who proved most valuable during the response was someone with knowledge of infectious diseases. For some respondents, this was the chief medical officer. Others brought in outside expertise. One participant noted, "It was also essential to work with a specialist infectious disease doctor very closely throughout the pandemic." Another said, "The best decision [we made] was probably to engage the doctor that we had on retainer very early on in the process to make sure that we could get some of that immediate insight."

These and other responses reflected the necessity of open communication and trust between senior executives and the team handling the details of the response. See also the Power of Preparation section that follows.

Other Topics: The Power of Preparation

Themes that transcend the three individual dimensions of people, situation, and connectivity are the values of building (a) business continuity and (b) health and safety capabilities in *advance* of the pandemic. These include the capabilities to both lead and manage the various aspects of the event. Participants consistently noted the benefits of looking at these areas as investments rather than cost centers. For those that did, the return on that investment was evident throughout the pandemic. While none of the responses was seamless, the people, training, structures, and protocols in place accelerated crisis recognition and response efforts, and facilitated the various pivots required in a long duration event.

One participant's thoughts were typical, "At a company level we had strong global protocols on health and safety which we applied and had exercised business continuity with our China associates for many years. We benefited very much from the long-term commitment we had made to business continuity across all parts of our global operations. Although we had not planned for such an extensive event, we had undertaken multiple scenario exercises and people understood the concepts involved in managing a crisis."

Another said, "We have two global teams - one in Europe, one in North America, so basically an East and a West. If we have a global crisis, we can manage that 24/7 without having to keep people up at night on one side of the world." A third noted, "We have a campus in Shanghai and felt we were quite prepared as we undertaken successful exercises based on a pandemic in the region during 2019."

Another participant shared that the scope and scale of the pandemic required integrating a wide range of managers into the effort. "Some had never worked with the business continuity team before, whereas others were very experienced in BC through exercise participation and planning. Generally, there was strong leadership which stopped too much nitpicking." Another said, "[Our team] is not so experienced in dealing with an organization-wide crisis situation. To some extent the crisis team had to learn as they went. They had to start making decisions and couldn't guarantee they always got it right." Another said that they learned to "truly operate globally" whereas they had previously geared their efforts for regional events.

The duration of the event required onboarding and offboarding crisis team members. "It was difficult because this crisis had no specific endpoint and fatigue set in amongst those trying to manage the crisis," said one. "Other managers stepped up and took over crisis roles as time when on." Managing such transitions in ways that minimize disruptions to the operating rhythm of the crisis team should be a consideration for future planning.

Others said, "We have learned that more investment is needed in testing, training and staff development to deal with a major crisis" and "We have seen the advantage of bringing all levels into the decision process and Covid-19 has forced us to put a more formal response structure in place."

"We have learned that more investment is needed in testing, training and staff development to deal with a major crisis."

A similar sentiment was shared by a participant who said that the Covid response team had made more than 100 recommendations for changes to their plans. They were distilled into key take-aways in four areas: training (particularly onboarding, transitions, and furloughs); tools (more and better playbooks and action lists); timing; and teams (more bench strength). This person said that the goal is always to have processes and protocols that are "highly reliable and low maintenance."

There were multiple calls to be more imaginative in crafting future plans. As one participant said, "I would venture to say that many, many companies do not write … a multi-crisis …type of a plan, but that's the environment that we're in right now… Multiple major crises can… happen at the same time and we need to be prepared to deal with them…"

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has been the first, but likely not the last, crisis in our times to affect everyone on the planet, either medically, economically, or socially. It has tested individuals, organizations, and communities. The interviews analyzed above suggest that the horrific losses also had some positive notes: executives leaned into the human aspects of the crisis, consistently putting people first. This sentiment permeated decisions large and small and was reflected in tangible actions. Those companies that had invested in preparedness saw a return on that investment in their ability to respond quickly, unify efforts, and adapt as necessary to unexpected contingencies. The re was a growing appreciation for connectivity—with associates, customers, suppliers, government officials, response partners, and more.

Perhaps most significant is the evidence that the most resilient organizations are those that are committed to shifts in their mindset and double-loop learning. In these interviews, there is ample evidence of an appreciation for what was going right—and the lessons that could be derived from stumbles and miscalculations along the way. Such difficulties are inevitable in a complex crisis, particularly with a novel virus whose behavior and impact only emerged over time.

The challenge now is to make these lessons endure. The imperative is, as one participant said, "bake these lessons into our culture."

Tools for Future Planning

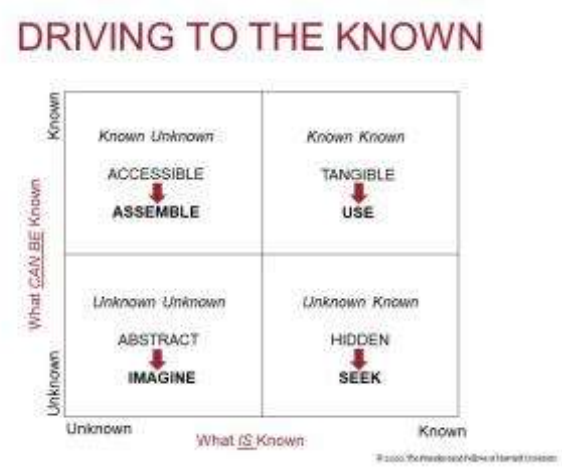
Three meta-leadership practice tools may help inform planning and preparation for complex crises: Driving to the Known, the POP-DOC Loop, and the Arcs of Time. Each of these tools addresses a specific aspect of the challenges of these incidents.

Driving to the Known

In the pandemic, tracking what was known and what was still uncertain about the virus, vaccine development, public health requirements, supply chain disruptions, and other factors affected decision making. Given the changing, sometimes contradictory, information in a complex crisis, a disciplined knowledge acquisition, analysis, and action process benefits leaders and their organizations. Establishing knowledge discipline helps in aligning the crisis team, briefing stakeholders, and setting priorities.

The process of driving to the knowns delineates between what is known and what can be known, and systematically closes the gap between the two. The known-knowns are verified and usable information. Intentional inquiry unearths answers to the known-unknowns, expanding situational awareness. Actively seeking less obvious expertise and experience helps reveal the unknown-knowns, since the leader may be oblivious to what is discoverable. The unknown-unknowns are contingencies that are truly unpredictable, often explored through imaginative brainstorming and scenario development.

Within these distinctions, the meta-leader purposefully drives to the knowns to gain deeper understanding. Continually s these categories of data and knowledge help establish a common operating picture and stimulates curiosity that fosters situational insight beyond mere awareness.



The POP-DOC Loop

There were numerous incidences in these interviews of participants noting the challenges of grasping what was happening, knowing what to do about it, and then turning that knowledge into tangible steps forward. The POP-DOC Loop provides a structure and process to move through cycles of analysis and action, continually calibrating strategy and tactics to most effectively meet evolving challenges.

Crises evolve, requiring a fluid process to integrate new "knowns" and queries, make timely decisions, and adapt operations to changing conditions. The POP-DOC Loop systemizes and disciplines this process through six distinct steps. Step one – Perceive - requires intentional, broadly scoped information collection. In the second step –Orient – information is organized to help identify patterns to inform sense- and meaning-making. Step three – Predict – projects those patterns into the future with relative probabilities to inform options, anticipate contingencies, and identify potential obstacles. The fourth step – Decide – applies the analysis on the POP side of the loop to making concrete decisions. Step five - Operationalize – is the implementation of those decisions. Information on decisions and operations and about the effect of those decisions and actions is disseminated and collected in the step six --

Communicate. The process starts again, perceiving the impact of prior work and applying that information to an adaptive response.

As the situation progresses, the POP-DOC framework provides structure for achieving and maintaining accurate, relevant, and progressing situational awareness and insight. Regularly traversing the Loop can help establish a cadence for the crisis team, mitigate "paralysis by analysis," and facilitate information flow. Each completed cycle can form the basis for a briefing for stakeholders, creating shared expectations around the format and process. In a complex crisis, the frequency of changes itself may create new problems. When they are noted as an emergent pattern, appropriate changes to the cadence of meetings, updates, decisions, and implementation can be made in a responsive rather a reactive manner.

The Arcs of Time

In the coronavirus pandemic, knowing *when* to do something was as vexing as understanding *what* to do because of the many variables, conflicting guidance from public officials, and understanding of the virus that accumulated over time. The Arcs of Time help create focus on the primary challenge as well as how the response will need to evolve to resolve it.

All crises unfold over time: They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. No matter the incident, it is an inherent interest of the crisis leader to achieve the best possible conclusion in the shortest period of time and with the fewest possible negative consequences. The Arcs of Time is a framework for visually representing the time-based phases of a crisis and identifying and anticipating the evolution of incident-related challenges over time. It is useful for achieving consensus on the current situation as well as on the pathway from an undesirable current state to a desired future state.

By representing the flow of activities over time visually, the Arcs can stimulate fresh perspectives and anticipation of future needs.

Each arc begins with a precipitating event that creates an unacceptable present state. The first step is to identify the apex of the arc—the threat to be addressed. The leader seeks to create unity of purpose among stakeholders to "flatten the curve," i.e. lessen the severity of the impact of the threat. The Arcs assist the leader in plotting moves through specific activities to: 1) address immediate transactional needs; 2) vision the desired future state and the transformation required to get there; 3) guide the actions required for the organization or community to reach and sustain the positive outcome.

By representing the flow of activities over time visually, the Arcs can stimulate fresh perspectives and anticipation of future needs. As with the other tools, the Arcs can be useful in briefing stakeholders so as to foster a common understanding of the problem set and the steps needed to address it.

About the NPLI and DRI

The NPLI, a joint program of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, was established in 2003 at the request of the federal government. The program conducts research on homeland security, emergency preparedness, public health, and public safety leaders in times of crisis and change, turning lessons learned into an executive education curriculum, case studies, and scholarship that highlight best practices.

Disaster Recovery Institute International (DRI), founded in 1988, is the oldest and largest nonprofit that helps organizations around the world prepare for and recover from disasters by providing education, accreditation, and thought leadership in business continuity, disaster recovery, cyber resilience and related fields. DRI has certified 15,000+ resilience professionals in 100+ countries and at 95 percent of Fortune 100 companies. A complementary report on these findings[2] written by DRI is also available.

About Meta-Leadership

The Meta-leadership framework and practice method is core to the NPLI's curriculum. The methodology has been developed and tested through years of field research, academic inquiry, and real-time feedback from practitioners. It continues to evolve. "Graduates of the NPLI executive education program report that this framework has made a significant difference when applied in their real-world problem solving and crisis response," said NPLI Founding Co-director Leonard Marcus. "They reach out to one another and coordinate their actions more pro-actively than they otherwise would have. This sort of Meta-leadership in a crisis or other major event has important public health impact, insofar as agencies are better able to serve the population and reduce the loss of life."

The Meta-leadership framework has three dimensions to teach leadership skills:

1. The Person of the Meta-Leader: self-knowledge, awareness, and discipline;
2. The Situation: discerning the context for leadership, what is happening, and what to do about it;

[2] https://bit.ly/3yci6o4

3. Connectivity: fostering positive, productive relationships. Connectivity includes four key directions:

    a. leading down the formal chain of command to subordinates — within one's chain of command — creating a cohesive high-performance team with a unified mission;

    b. leading up to superiors, inspiring confidence, and delivering on expectations; enabling and supporting good decisions and priority setting;

    c. leading across to peers and intra-organizational units to foster collaboration and coordination within the same chain of command, which includes other departments, offices, or professional groups within the same organization.

    d. leading beyond to engage external entities, including affected agencies, the general public, and the media to create unity of purpose and effort in large-scale response to complex events.

The Meta-leadership framework and vocabulary are commonly used across many homeland security, preparedness, and response organizations. Faculty have conducted hundreds of training sessions, including executive education programs at Harvard, as well as on site programs at the White House, Departments of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Defense, Veterans Affairs, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Secret Service, FEMA, the Transportation Security Administration, and numerous private sector organizations.

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