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UNIVERSITY  
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SCIENCES

# Leading in the COVID-19 Crisis

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The COVID-19 pandemic presents enormous challenges for leaders at all levels of society. The pervasiveness of the pandemic, the complex features of the disease and its management, and the current and future impact on working life require considered and effective leadership.

The leadership model that is underpinned by the best research evidence is called authentic leadership<sup>1</sup> and it poses four key personal challenges for leaders:

- (1) Knowing oneself;
- (2) Doing the right thing;
- (3) Being fair-minded;
- (4) Being genuine and compassionate.

All of these are relevant in the current crisis.

### Knowing yourself

The starting point for effective leadership is self-awareness and understanding. This involves knowing one's strengths and weaknesses and, importantly, one's mindset - how one makes sense of the world. This type of knowledge can only be gained through reflection and self-analysis but finding the time or inclination to do this, when one is living a busy life, is very difficult. The German poet Rilke describes the challenge of self-awareness thus:

*“For if we think of this existence of the individual as a larger or smaller room, it becomes clear that most people get to know only one corner of their room, a window seat, a strip of floor which they pace up and down”<sup>2</sup>*

Many, but not all, leaders arrive at some degree of self-awareness through coping with adversity, through personal development training or, increasingly, by engaging in coaching. In addition to the challenges to their technical knowledge and skills, the widespread and unpredictable nature of the current crisis requires leaders to deploy emotional intelligence, to remain calm, to show humility about what they know and don't know, and to maintain a sense of hope and optimism.

It is also crucially important that leaders' self-awareness includes monitoring their own physical and psychological health. Burnout is not conducive to good leadership.

### Doing the right thing

Authentic leaders strive to regulate their behaviour by behaving ethically. This is also important for organisations. We often see a significant and disappointing gap between the aspirational values an organisation professes and its lived values as expressed in its culture and climate. Ethical leaders do the right thing rather than what is most expedient, simple or cost effective. This requires moral courage and the capacity to rely on one's own judgement especially in situations where the costs of a dissenting view or decision can be significant. The followers of ethical leaders, knowing that they have chosen to behave in this way, do not have to second guess the leader's likely response to a situation. This, in turn, generates a high levels of trust and respect.

### Being fair-minded

This involves objectively analysing all relevant data before making a decision rather than pursuing one's own exclusive agenda. For example, in leading highly skilled professional staff, the challenge is often to release the collective wisdom of the team. This is likely to result not only in better decisions but is also critical in the development of well-being, first, because followers become more confident and, second, because this enhances their sense of self-efficacy. The key needs of staff are (i) autonomy and control, (ii) belonging and (iii) competence. The greatest contribution a leader can make to helping staff meet these needs is by demonstrating fair-minded compassionate leadership<sup>5</sup>.

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### **Being genuine and compassionate**

This involves presenting one's authentic self through openly sharing information and feelings as appropriate for situations. Effective leaders show their concern, not only for the tasks in hand but also for their followers' development and physical and psychological safety. They do this by listening, caring, empathizing and being compassionate, especially during the most difficult times when their people need them most. Remarkable new research is demonstrating the significant impact of compassion on employee engagement, organisational effectiveness and even on the biological substrates of disease and suffering<sup>4,5</sup>. The important model of compassion at work proposed by Monica Worline and Jane Dutton of (i) attending, (ii) understanding, (iii) empathising and (iv) helping, is very useful here<sup>6</sup>.

Leadership has always been more difficult in challenging times, but the unique stressors facing healthcare organisations at the present time call for a renewed focus on the most appropriate type of leadership. The current crisis requires compassionate leadership which, while realistic, is also focused on maintaining confidence, hope, and optimism. We need leaders who are self-aware, lead with integrity and purpose and understand that their most important asset is the people they lead. Most of all, we need leaders who are capable of balancing their technical skills and knowledge with a deep understanding of their people. As the American writer Maya Angelou said:

*"I've learned that people will forget what you did, they will forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel".*

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