10 Leadership Strategies for Navigating COVID-19

The unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic require strong leadership skills. Leadership is the ability to influence others through character and competence. Nothing exposes our values and character traits like adversity. During these challenging and fast changing times, our communities, teams, and other stakeholders and collaborators are all looking for strong leadership to guide us through this crisis. Our communities, families and loved ones need our common vision to overcome this health pandemic and return society to normal.

Identify goals.

First, leaders must identify goals and needs that are critical to the organization's mission. For example, if a lack of personal protective equipment prevents the organization from fulfilling its mission, that needs to be the overarching goal because it affects all other aspects of operation. Prioritization is critical in a pandemic. Additionally, times of crisis may cause conflict among teams and leaders must effectively manage disputes. Crises present natural opportunities for teams to put aside differences and work collaboratively toward common goals, but they can also exacerbate existing issues. To mitigate such issues, introduce and prioritize essential goals for your teams that promote cohesion and can only be accomplished through collaboration. Remember to reinforce successes through timely feedback.

Identify the path to success with open lines of communication.

A leader cannot overcommunicate during a crisis. All organizational members are facing daily challenges outside of the norm and their comfort zones. It is important for your employees to have an understanding of the current organizational status and a clear vision of what success looks like, particularly as it pertains to new tasks and responsibilities. Leaders must communicate effectively. Communications should be relevant and timely. Focus on inclusion to ensure everyone is seen and heard, but do not unnecessarily take people away from mission-critical tasks. A few important considerations for these concepts include:
- What are the decision-making parameters and at what levels should those be instituted?
- How much is too much communication?
- Is this message a repeat of information already disseminated?
- What does your team need to know and what would they like to know?

Engage in crucial conversations.

Conversations can go poorly during an emotionally charged crisis that causes fear and anxiety. We are in unprecedented times and everyone is under pressure. Difficult conversations may not be planned, and the leader may not be able to prepare for the conversation. With problems

and needs constantly evolving, it is critical to engage in crucial conversations, rather than avoiding them. Strategies for navigating such conversations include:
- Meaningful preparation
- Anticipate of the other person's viewpoint
- Practice empathy
- Validate feelings (without condoning inappropriate or unproductive behavior)
- Employ physiological techniques (take an intervening pause, take deep breaths, take a break from the conversation and return to it later if necessary)

Followers expect and desire honesty and transparency and avoiding difficult conversations can erode trust more than it can preserve faith in the organization and leadership. For many, the normal day to day hustle has slowed considerably. If face-to-face meetings are not a possibility, use technology to come together and develop more cohesive relationships.

Be cognizant of everyone's needs and how this may affect them differently.

Every member of your team will have their own set of needs, motives and values, and will respond to crisis accordingly. Leaders must be sensitive to the needs and perceptions of their officers, as this will affect their ability to put forth their best efforts. Past experiences and current situations strongly influence behaviors. Consider the following when assigning responsibilities and engaging in crucial conversations:
- Is the individual in a stable relationship?
- Is the individual or someone in their household immune compromised?
- Does the person have aging parents or other relatives who are considered vulnerable to the circumstances?
- Is the individual or his/her spouse at risk of losing employment?

Use emotional intelligence.

A leader's attitude during challenging situations can be contagious. It is important for leaders to remember that both verbal and non-verbal communications transmit emotions. Your team members will act as you act. When a leader demonstrates care, compassion and concern for the health of every member of their team, their followers will provide those same values to the communities they serve. During times of crisis, leaders must actively reflect on their emotions (self-awareness) and manage their emotions as the situation evolves. Beyond personal emotional mastery, a leader must also understand, accept, and empathize with the emotions of their people.

Minimize perceptions of inequity.

Fairness will constantly be evaluated by personnel during crises. For example, assignments, equipment issues, and leave policies, will be sources of equity comparison, especially among rank and file employees. During the COVID19 pandemic, police departments are creating emergency shift rotations, asking personnel to work from home and asking officers to remain on call. To maintain a perception of equity, communicate decisions to employees proactively and offer them the opportunity to provide input as much as the situation allows. For example, be mindful of the perception of inequity officers may have if some are working the front line while others are in a more protected status. A leader could communicate that this decision is not predicated on favoritism or other biases towards those working in a more protected status.

Rather, the decision meets the operational need to have a core group of officers remain healthy as reinforcements for future absenteeism. This will allow you to more effectively manage expectations.

Collaborate with key stakeholders and establish liaison groups.

When various internal and external groups are working to navigate the same issues, it is important to take a coordinated approach and operate harmoniously. Empower your team members by assigning individual points of contact to collaborate and communicate effective action plans with other key stakeholders. As an example, assign command level representatives to local or state entities, such as your state emergency management agency, for improved coordination, communication, and execution of responsibilities.

Empower team members to complete organizational objectives.

During times of crisis, there should be an expectation for exemplary followership. The message to team members should be clear. Everyone has value, and the expression of needs and concerns is welcomed. The organization is a service-oriented entity and community members are reliant upon its efforts. Remind your followers that they, too, are leaders. Equally as important is the need for your staff to know that once a decision has been made, it must be carried out with support. There is always time for after action critiques after the storm has passed, but there are times when orders must be given and followed without question.

Be agile when leading change.

COVID19 has caused many changes in our society. Law enforcement agencies have deprioritized proactive policing strategies, cancelled community events, and taken citizen complaints by phone. Crisis can inspire needed organizational changes if leaders have the knowledge, skills, and ability to effectively manage the situation. Adaptation is necessary in response to crises, but there may be changes initiated that you choose to implement following crises as well. In both cases, leaders need to follow key change management recommendations and apply them all concurrently. Removing barriers and generating short term wins will be critical to build momentum toward positive change. Keep in mind that while these opportunities for future change may be created during crisis, a leader must first effectively implement changes to navigate the crisis. These steps involve many individuals throughout the organization and require the flexibility and agility of a network of identified change agents.

Constantly assess your environment and prepare for the future.

It is hard to predict the future implications of a crisis. Scan the environment. If another city or state is navigating the crisis more effectively, model its behaviors and implement its tactics. Ensure open lines of communication with all stakeholders to begin anticipating future needs and concerns. Have conversations regarding potential outcomes of this crisis. Actively discuss its impact on your agency and community. Consider additional strategies needed in preparation for that impact. For example, needs for personal protective equipment can be forecast based on available data concerning the infection rate of the virus and the rate of use by our personnel.

In conclusion, we are leading in volatile, uncertain and complex times. To embrace transformational leadership, leaders must articulate a compelling vision that is appealing and inspiring. This vision should remind followers of their purpose and collective mission while listening to employee's perspectives to solve problems. Leaders must simultaneously attend to the individual needs of their followers and communities. The current pandemic places leaders in a position to transform and build trust within their organizations and teams. Remember to lead by example.

For more information, contact LeadershipServices@theIACP.org.