Resilient and inclusive healthcare leadership: Black Swans, COVID-19, and beyond

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‘It’s not the strongest of the species that survive, or the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change’.

(Charles Darwin)

The literature is replete with descriptions of varied leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, consensus, servant, and situational, to name just a few.1-4 The consensus leadership model enhances stakeholder inclusion within healthcare organizations and can be argued to be the preferential model for organizations that value inclusion. Consensus leadership allows the opportunity for people to be heard, to provide input and make their arguments prior to implementing a decision, strategy, or plan that directly involves them.5 People want to understand how, and especially why, a decision is made. Final decisions should be clearly explained to everyone involved.

Fostering inclusion means collaborating with, and engaging, your diverse team. Empower your team to provide opposing viewpoints so as to leverage collective knowledge, perspectives, experience, and skills.6 Do not do it alone. It is ok to say, ‘I don’t know’. After all, large groups are smarter than even an elite few, no matter how brilliant the few are. Groups are better at solving complex problems and coming to better decisions.7 The result is the best possible, aligned decision. Aligned teams may disagree on a decision but they will own it, support it, and are committed to it, as if they made the decision themselves. They agree to act, even if they do not completely agree with each other, or with the decision. Voting causes resentment and polarizes, creating winners and losers and us versus them mentality such that only those voting with the majority ‘own’ the decision. Others now have an opportunity to undermine the effort. Alignment behind a shared commitment requires more effort but strengthens the team, asking members to work toward a ‘best’ decision. Objections and alternatives are discussed until everyone is invested in the final solution. Consensus leadership has limitations. It is harder to get things done, decisions take longer, and leaders may appear indecisive.

Of course, there is no standard playbook on how to be an effective, resilient, and inclusive leader in unprecedented times during Black Swan events. In the business world, Black Swan events are used to describe rare, unexpected, and unpredictable occurrences that have severe consequences. They have come (and gone) throughout history: Black Monday in 1987, 9/11, and the global financial crisis caused by a significant rise in subprime loans in 2008, to name just a few.
All can agree on some basic desired values and traits for leaders, especially during these unique times. Most, if not all of these, are already hopefully in place. In times of upheaval, people will be seeking the comfort provided by familiarity. This would not be the time to make drastic changes in leadership style. Leaders should communicate frequently; even if they do not always have all the facts, which they will not. Frequent communication about what people want, and need to hear about builds trust, fuels engagement and helps preempt the spread of misinformation, rumors, conjecture, and fear. Limit communication regarding that which cannot be controlled. Leaders should be: calm, stable, educated (regarding the current situation), focused, trustworthy (do what you say you will do), visible, decisive (when prompt action is required, the enemy of good is better!), assertive, enthusiastic, eloquent, transparent, deliberate, confident, consistent, nimble, flexible (allow new information to refine and revise current thinking), open-minded, adaptive, strategic, authentic, available, honest, credible, optimistic, clear, creative, realistic, positive, specific, willing to ask the difficult questions, and willing to make the difficult decisions (even when they are based on incomplete and limited information).

Without a playbook, all we know is that realities will change, and tomorrow will make different demands than yesterday. Even with a playbook, situations are fluid; changes will be needed. Balance short- and long-range strategies. Long-term plans are fraught with unknown data and uncontrollable variables. They will become obsolete quickly, requiring contingencies. This may be a time to emphasize more frequent nimble actions rather than trying to turn the titanic months in advance.

This unprecedented level of disruption and uncertainty deeply impacts people. Recognize, acknowledge and address employees’ personal and emotional concerns. Priorities will appropriately significantly shift away from their ‘work family’ to their to ensuring their ‘actual family’ is feel safe and stay healthy. Empower them to be creative in how they work so as to minimize unnecessary risk. Employee loyalty to the organization’s mission and especially a commitment to persevere during challenging uncertain times requires believing a leader is competent, supportive, compassionate, empathetic, and genuinely cares about their well-being.

Acknowledging the economic impact to your employees and the organization. Decreased volumes and revenue will impact everyone’s financial bottom-line. Strategies and solutions to reduce expenses should be tempered and selective, so as to avoid the unintended consequences of over adjusting and creating greater disruption than necessary. An organization’s purpose, mission and culture, must remain steadfast despite challenging times, serving as a guide to make the best decisions under pressure. Promoting and protecting your organization’s brand in the long term must trump any potential concerns over short-term revenue loss.

The ‘new normal’, post COVID-19 future will see the breaking of long-standing traditions, many perpetuated by the (agonizing!) phrase, ‘that’s how we do things around here!’ There will be a welcome and necessary disruption of the status quo and refinement of new cultures. Local autonomy, including flexible management of work flow (how, when, and where we work) will be optimized for greater efficiency and enhanced employee wellness. New staffing models with altered workforce deployment will include acceleration of the much-needed, inevitable, and highly anticipated remote work and virtual learning. Less travel will be needed to conduct business or support excellence in education. A smaller physical footprint will reduce long-term costs. There will be greater efficiency and prioritization in utilizing our resources, both human and capital.

The necessity of change and operating differently creates potential opportunities during a time of tremendous volatility. Healthcare leaders are in a position to help shape what the landscape will look like, rather than simply adapting to it. They can help their organization move forward beyond the task of recovering and regaining the status quo. Aim to emerge even stronger than before; aim to thrive not just survive.

The personal and economic volatility significantly impacting our colleagues and our workplaces in these unprecedented times will have lasting and far reaching effects. These clearly require new ways of leading. Traditional leadership styles and strategies taught in MBA programs will not address the ambiguity and rapid-fire changes we are witnessing. No previous training, no prior strategic planning knowledge, no prior operational experience, and no former decision-making skillset has prepared anyone for the uncertainty surrounding what this complex new reality presents us with. Listen to multiple sources. Welcome opinions and viewpoints that differ from yours. In addition to
conferring with your own stakeholders, seek outside consultation for greater additional evidence and insights. These tactics will help you adapt to the rapidly changing environment, best analyze your situation, and consider the full breadth of potential strategies and solutions.

Your leadership style may evolve over time. Leadership styles also need to be dynamic, fluid and nimble, depending on the situation and the people involved. There will certainly be unique and extenuating circumstances when you will need to temporarily alter your consensus, broadly inclusive style and revert to more of an 'old-school' style of ‘leading from the front’. What will remain consistent in all circumstances is the need for leaders to remain clear on their vision. They will need to maintain laser focus on their organization's mission, culture, and core values. Optimizing strategies to navigate, recover from, and take advantage of these circumstances will require focusing on an organization's strengths (and understanding potential weaknesses).

Courage is needed to make the difficult decisions regarding bold and potentially controversial strategies. This will certainly involve some degree of risk. In addition, your decisions will not occur without a healthy dose of criticism—and plenty of 'Monday morning quarterbacking'.

Crises and 'Black Swan' events happen. When they do, they reveal a leader's character. Reframe your approach and consider the ensuing challenges as opportunities. Look at them as a window to better identify the gaps in your workforce, workflow, and work place. Challenge your team to approach these historic times as a potential to reconfigure how you work and even to change your industry for the better.

The evolution of innovative business models arising out of necessity during unprecedented times will shape future trends. They will create our new normal as a better version of what existed previously. Although it may seem counter intuitive, by all working together, Black Swan events can create even more value for our loyal patients.

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