Grounding Principles: People-First Leadership When Uncertainty Rules the Day

At its simplest, resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back from hardship, shock or failure. We see leadership as something even greater - it is a calling to create a more human, more vibrant and more equitable future through our response to crisis.

In times of uncertainty and rapid change, we may be called to solve challenges with a sense of urgency and lead with values and with equity at the center; to deliver on goals and show our people we care; to ask more of our teams than ever before and give them grace and space. Given the magnitude of our tasks, we may not always achieve all that we set out to do. But when we *do* succeed, we find that we have accomplished something that we never thought was possible, created new ways of doing things, and found hidden capabilities in ourselves and our teams.

Principle 1: Put Humans at the Foundation

Prioritize Care and Connection: In unprecedented times, leaders work tirelessly to stay true to their mission while the ground under them shifts. It can be easy for our leadership to become transactional as we focus on the many problems to solve. Set your intention - above all else - to ensure that humans feel connected and cared for. It takes conscious effort to put ourselves in the shoes of a confused parent, an overwhelmed staff member, or a teammate fearing for their future, And it takes intentionality to show that in the way we relate, communicate, and prioritize our work every day.

Continue to Tune in on Self-Care: An empty vessel cannot provide nourishment for the masses. This lesson was taught over and again in the pandemic. There is a balance of continuing to show up in hard times, while also acknowledging that humans need spaces to renew and be refueled. (This includes you!)

Principle 2: Set Your Compass

Humans need to know that their work has purpose and meaning. At these times, you have four roles:

Start with Equity: When moving quickly, it takes intentionality to see who may be disproportionately impacted by a decision and who might have wisdom to contribute. Prioritize inclusive decision-making, ensuring diverse representation at the table to mitigate uneven impacts and ensure meaningful solutions.

Define Your True North: Remind people what you always stood for and why it matters now more than ever. One Chief Academic Officer we knew began team communications with "our promise to stand alongside our families is a promise that we hold sacred." Use this template to start drafting

your True North.

Set Values-Based Guidance: Challenging times mean tough choices with no easy answers. Spend time as a leadership team articulating how your values will guide you in your decisions and your day to day interactions. This will help you so you don't relitigate your direction every time something new unfolds.

Say It Over and Over, Early and Often: Communicate what's important. Create a shared, inspiring narrative. Set up easy ways to frame your True North in emails, start Zoom calls with a core value and refer to your compass when sharing decisions.

Principle 3: Transform Ambiguity Into Clarity

Ambiguity can be crippling for teams. During times of high stress and changing priorities, teams rally best when they know where to focus their energy and what success looks like. To create clarity for your teams:

Articulate working assumptions and resulting priorities as a leadership team: Your guiding principles from your values discussions above need further concreteness for people to take aligned action. Name the assumptions that are guiding your thinking and the key strategies you are pursuing. These assumptions may evolve later, but this helps people to follow your thinking.

Operationalize priorities and provide guardrails: Work with your direct reports to have a regular rhythm of translating evolving priorities into projects, tasks and roles. Your goal is to create enough definition and clear rationale so you can distribute the leadership and tap the creativity of your people. This dance between creating a sense of stability while enabling agility is key to leading through crisis.

Get it out of your head: In times of crisis, an absence of information leaves people anxious and reactive. Agree with your leadership team on a regular cadence of communication with all your key stakeholders - from families to Board members. Identify ways to make the *lift* of communication light for you, while still ensuring that the *experience* is warm for whoever is the receiver of your message.

Principle 4: Create New Agile Ways of Working Together to Support Rapid Shifts

Old collaboration structures don't support the pace of decision-making and learning in a rapidly evolving world. At times like this, it can help to take a cue from agile methodologies. These methods work when the perfect answer (the end-product) cannot yet be defined, being responsive to change matters more than a perfect plan, and collaboration and transparency is more important than documentation.

(Note: This principle applies most acutely in a volatile world, but it's important for you to assess how and whether your collaboration patterns need to adjust. Many leaders facing change try to use old

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collaboration patterns when the circumstances need new ways of working.)

Here are a few lessons for agile leadership:

Shift to an innovative, iterative mindset: In this context, rapid iteration is the healthy new normal and change is a sign you are getting closer to the right answer for those you serve. Narrate this new definition of success. Staff who have thrived on planning and structures may need support adapting to the needed flexibility.

Shift your horizon to work in short-term sprints: Leadership can seem chaotic when some people are shifting course daily and others are trying to plan for a long term horizon that is too hazy to bet on. In these cases, take the haphazardness out of change by defining short-term improvement cycles where you execute, reflect and update. Help people see what to expect and when you will lengthen the horizon focus.

Re-organize to work "hand in hand": With the external reality shifting frequently, it can be hard to see the forest for the trees (or at least the same forest as your colleague). Consider cross-functional teams that can contribute different forms of expertise and set up ways to confer frequently. Don't forget to bring diverse voices to the table to expand your perspective and help you see blind spots.

Principle 5: Pull Up and Place Your Bets

You can get a team in motion with short-term clarity and agile-focused improvement cycles - but big unanswered questions still loom. Resilient leaders don't get seduced by waiting for perfect clarity. Instead, they make informed bets on where to place their energy and create a schema for how they will navigate a changing landscape:

For the big unknowns, create working hypotheses and name how you will refine them: Doing so helps you be prepared to move on new data when ready, and focus on what is in your locus of control now. Remember transparency builds trust. Telling people what you know, don't know and when you'll know more helps staff, boards and families believe leaders have their eye on the big picture and will keep them informed.

Do your strategic homework: Wise leaders also assess their biggest risks and get creative with capturing data to inform their thinking. They test "what ifs," do contingency planning and run scenarios to make clear bets and be ready to shift if needed.

Look for opportunities and challenge old assumptions: The ways we have led, worked, or taught are shifting, and with that brings opportunities to revisit what is possible. As you navigate this unprecedented time, be bold in questioning your old ways of working. Look for new opportunities for approaching the work, and use this as a chance to say: "What have we learned about our

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students, our families and ourselves?" "What do we see more clearly now that requires our attention?" "Where have evolving constraints changed what is possible?" And most importantly, "What is the future we now want to create together?"

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