Leading in Challenging Times

VUCA stands for **volatility**, **uncertainty**, **complexity**, and **ambiguity**. It's hard to lead during VUCA challenges, but it's not impossible. The Society of Behavioral Medicine Board of Directors met in November of 2022 to share best practices for leading in VUCA times. A summary of the lessons shared is presented below.

Leading through Volatility

Characteristics* of the Challenge: Unexpected, unstable, and/or of unknown duration, but not hard to understand.

Examples: Lab equipment shortages, stay-at-home orders, stock market fluctuations

Actions to Take: Invest in and mobilize resources. Relax "red tape" and usual processes.

Leadership Skills Needed: Listening, using your network (who has faced this before, what did they do/learn), clear communication, honesty

Before the Challenge: Pre-cultivate relationships so your network is there when you need it.

Remember: This change is going to happen, so just work through it as best you can.

Leading through Uncertainty

Characteristics* of the Challenge: Basic cause and effect are known, but other information is lacking.

Examples: NIH extensions with unknown expiration, changing rules from funders

Actions to Take: Mitigate risks, assess abilities of those impacted to adapt, and identify what you are certain about (find other areas of stability).

Leadership Skills Needed: Self-awareness/humility (let your team know you are aware, even if you don't have a solution), acknowledgement that everyone has different tolerances for uncertainty (empathy)

Before the Challenge: Create consistent guiding principles to ease decision-making in uncertain times.

Remember: We can't control this, but we can manage it.

Leading through Complexity

Characteristics* of the Challenge: Many interconnected parts. Information is available, but the volume or nature of it can be overwhelming to process.

Examples: Starting a new position with new required skills, working with international collaborators

Actions to Take: Simplify (what is a perceived complexity and what is actually complex – cut out the noise and consider the shortest path). Avoid relying on "the way we've always done things" or thinking that complexity = sophistication.

Leadership Skills Needed: Delegating, breaking tasks into manageable steps, bringing in the experts/voices you need but that are lacking (ex: landscape analysis)

Before the Challenge: Continuously reassess procedures and streamline where possible.

Remember: Have patience and perseverance. You may need to stretch out timelines and/or have new people ready to jump in when existing ones get burned out (or a separate implementation team who is fresh and ready).

Leading through Ambiguity

Characteristics* of the Challenge: Causal relationships are unclear. No precedents. "High unexplained variance."

Examples: Creating a new program, having a new department leader, using a new social media platform

Actions to Take: Experiment. Add intermediary goals and define additional outcomes. Be prepared for failure. Solicit feedback from impacted parties. Identify what is "mission critical."

Leadership Skills Needed: Expectation-setting, open communication, transparency

Before the Challenge: Create a culture that expects, accepts, and values "failure" (null results, continuous learning).

Remember: Live and learn – focus on the process, not just the outcome.

Across All Areas

- Leaders must be flexible and willing to pivot!
- Accept the ambiguity, uncertainty, etc. *first*, so it's not paralyzing.
- Have a crisis management plan BUT avoid a level of over-preparedness that decreases your ability to be nimble.
- Challenges are also opportunities. They can be exciting and can lead to new processes/breakthroughs/gains/innovations.

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