Leadership in 2020: Navigating Relentless Storms

Trace Haythorn

Several words and phrases have dominated the news during 2020: unprecedented, polarized, isolated, out of an abundance of caution, quarantine, protest, demonstrations, riots, fires, windstorms, hurricanes, anxious, exhausted, enough. Some leaders summarize all of this in an acronym, VUCA, which stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and anxiety. This has been a VUCA time.

Back in 1994, Ronald Heifetz first published *Leadership without Easy Answers,* in which he describes two types of challenges that present in the face of change: technical and adaptive. Eight years later, he and Marty Linsky wrote, "Technical problems, while often challenging, can be solved applying existing know-how and the organization's current problem-solving processes. Adaptive problems resist these kinds of solutions because they require individuals throughout the organization to alter their ways; as the people themselves are the problem, the solution lies with them." Adaptive problems are fueled by VUCA, and it is the responsibility of effective leaders to resist simple

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problem-solving and instead help the people whom they serve imagine news ways of advancing their shared mission with integrity and authenticity.

Over the course of 2020, I have had the privilege of observing many clinical pastoral educators and spiritually integrated psychotherapists engage in just such adaptation. Although the COVID-19 pandemic and our disjointed national response to it was in many ways the presenting challenge, the long overdue awakening to racial injustice and White supremacy added another dimension, demanding powerful new learning and engagement. Within a context of pathological political divisions and deep economic uncertainty, leading in a time such as this must be adaptive as there are no experts who can guide us with technical responses. No one knows how to do this well, so we must engage this time with an openness to learning, an attention to the rapidly changing conditions, and an internal and external awareness of the VUCA forces shaping every decision.

In many ways, clinical pastoral education is an ideal pedagogical framework for engaging a moment like this. The action-reflection-action model avoids the kind of reactivity that can lead to the tyranny of the immediate, a condition that often leads to many unintended consequences. There is also a Deweyan sense of experimentation in the clinical practices of spiritual care, where new ideas can be explored and integrated based on their usefulness and efficacy. Of course, that has also created a demand for more research and more sophisticated research design to effectively and thoroughly assess these emerging practices, deciding what to keep and what to let go.

As an administrator working with a national organization, I and my team have faced both technical and adaptive change issues over the last twelve months. On the technical side, we learned that the cost of our current database was going to rise with a new upgrade, making it simply unsustainable. In the summer of 2019, we asked for bids from several teams and worked to find a solution that would meet three goals: more effective support for the work of the membership (especially certification and accreditation), less dependence on outside consultants to get the database to do the things we needed it to do, and overall affordability. We signed a contract late in 2019 and began the implementation process in early 2020. When the pandemic hit, we had to decide whether we would continue with the implementation process. On one level, our commitment to affordability made the decision for us; we could not operate two systems simultaneously. We

worried whether we could do all that was needed as a team while working from home. We dreaded long training sessions via Zoom. And we worried that members would be so exhausted from their day jobs that such a change would breed mostly resentment.

While the decision was not easy, we chose to proceed, trusting that the result would ultimately win over members while also saving the association thousands of dollars a year. Within the first two months, the staff has come to appreciate the new system, though we still have kinks and quirks to iron out. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to Stuart Harrell, ACPE certified educator, who consulted with the team in the building of the SharePoint architecture that houses our accreditation and certification files. Not only were we fortunate to have a certified educator working with us on the design and processes for the build, but Stuart has spent significant time learning SharePoint within his own work, which proved valuable as we moved towards a product to support members and our work.

One moment stands out as perhaps the most powerful for our team in terms of adaptive leadership. In June 2020, we gathered via Zoom for our weekly staff meeting the weekend after George Floyd's violent death at the hands of police. As a team based primarily in Georgia, we were still reeling from the news of Ahmaud Arbury's death. We had developed a practice since we moved to working from home (in mid-March) of opening each meeting with a check-in, sometimes around a playful question and sometimes a more serious one. As we gathered, I realized I was on the edge of tears just naming the pain of the moment. Demonstrations had turned violent the previous weekend, including damage to the building adjacent to our office. I began the meeting saying that I didn't know quite where to go, but I offered a lighter question for us to address. Katherine Higgins, ACPE certified educator and director of Communities of Practice, wisely and kindly said, "Trace, I'm just not feeling it." I knew then we needed to enter the pain, to hold space to hear from one another, especially from the Black members of our team. One by one, the African American members of the team shared their experience, their fears, their anger. We will never be the same as a team because of how willing our Black colleagues were to be real with the rest of us. I'm grateful our White and Latinx colleagues did not try to speak, fix, or placate but held that sacred space. This was not an example of a voyeuristic moment; it was a benchmark, a place from which we cannot go back, and it will serve as an important narrative moment in

our team's story when we as a group participate in antiracism training in the coming months.

This adaptive moment is not sufficient for the longer-term transformative work we need to do together around racial equity and deconstructing White supremacy. But it is a start. And I have no doubt that if I had not participated in clinical pastoral education, and if I had not engaged in years of therapy, I would have handled Katherine's comment very differently. Instead, we created a moment for our team that was authentic, that was real, and that will inform how we are together as we continue to make our way through the dual pandemics of this time.

NOTES

1   Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

2   Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, "A Survival Guide for Leaders," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2002, accessed 9 October 2020, https://hbr.org/2002/06/a-survival-guide-for-leaders.