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Building the road as we walk: Leadership through uncertain times

2. Leading the organisation

**Centre for Charity
Effectiveness**

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[Always learning]

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“Charities may be in the grip of uncertainty, but many leaders have the agency, energy and will to find a practical way through”

About this resource

This resource, exploring leading through uncertainty, is an invitation to charity leaders to celebrate the practices that support them in their leadership, as well as an encouragement to experiment with ideas, frameworks and practices that may be less familiar.

It does this by:

- capturing some of the ways that leaders in the sector lead during uncertainty;
- exploring new thinking about leading in uncertainty; and
- offering insights and practical suggestions.

The experience and wisdom of charity leaders is what forms the basis of this resource. It summarises the major themes gathered from interviews and focus groups held during 2022 with over 60 leaders, as a part of a CCE leadership research project led by [Tammy Tawadros](#) and [Lisa Barry](#), and supported by the Bayes Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund (KEIF). [Find out more about how the research was conducted here](#). The participants came from a wide variety of organisations, and represented a diverse demographic in terms of age, gender, and race. We are grateful to all those leaders who generously gave their time, and openly shared with us what they had learnt from their own experience.

The resource builds on the insights we gathered, extending the findings with evidence from leadership, psychology, and social science literature and research. It addresses the answers to some of the following key questions:

- What is the lived experience of leaders in our sector grappling with the daily realities, challenges and opportunities involved in leading through uncertainty?
- What psychological and other resources do individual leaders draw on to support them during uncertainty?
- How can charity leaders lead and implement their strategic work in challenging and uncertain times?
- What do they do to help their organisation’s stakeholders to thrive in uncertainty?

Leading the organisation

What helps you as a leader respond to dilemmas and tackle strategic choices that your organisation faces during disruption, change and uncertainty?

Learning from experience

Leading through the pandemic proved to be exhausting, but also exhilarating. For many leaders, it inspired greater self-confidence and provided the opportunity to experiment and learn.

“The pandemic showed organisations they could survive in ambiguity, and this gave us confidence.”

“This was an opportunity for leadership to get things done quickly, to be brave.”

“We had freedom to try new things. All the rules had changed.”

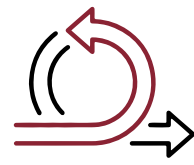
“Navigating uncertainty was a huge team building opportunity!”



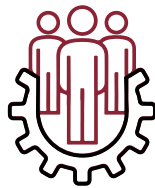
Looking back on past experiences of leading through uncertainty, leaders tended to point to four important approaches/stances that help:



Debunking heroic leadership



Being flexible



Collaborating intensively



And holding on

Debunking heroic leadership

resisting myths and unrealistic expectations about individualistic leadership

What you told us

“It’s better to lead through others than to try to be a heroic leader!”

“My job is not to know everything, but to know enough. And to know who I can go to for expertise.”

“You’ve got to share responsibilities, or you’ll go mad.”

What works

- Keep noting your own achievements – don’t be hamstrung by that human desire to compare yourself to everyone else.
- Don’t discount your achievements as a leader, or underestimate how much you accomplish through others.
- Don’t forget to keep pushing decisions out from the centre.



What the science says

The myth of heroic leadership

Although the myth of heroic or Great Man leadership wasn't often explicitly mentioned, it was often implied during the conversations we had. These myths have influenced leadership theories and leadership development. They have also unwittingly and unconsciously shaped our expectations and our thinking about leaders, and about our leadership.

Many would argue that heroism and Great Man leadership are both irrelevant and unhelpful, if not sexist and potentially toxic. Some maintain that we consistently look for and recruit for the 'wrong' leadership qualities. Although there have been numerous critics of these ideas over the years, they do seem to persist across society and in the charity sector. Perhaps this is partly because whether as individuals or collectively, we tend to want to place our faith in an ideal, transcendental leader, who can achieve the impossible! It is an ideal that will clearly always find leaders wanting.

The tyranny of should

It was Karen Horney (1950), an often-overlooked psychoanalyst, who was one of the first to explore this phenomenon. She identified the psychological tyranny we subject ourselves to when our self-talk and core belief is that: 'I should know all the answers'.

One of the themes that recurs consistently for leaders, especially as volatility and uncertainty increasingly pervade the external context, is that of not knowing enough or not being good enough. They often feel that they should have the answers, and therefore, they must be imposters or interlopers who don't know what to do in the face of unending change, disruption, and uncertainty.

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Being flexible

letting go of red tape, adapting activities and processes

What you told us

“This was a chance to throw bureaucracy out the window.”

“The ‘people people’ did the best through it all; rules and regulations just didn’t cut it.”

“Taking different roads to achievement, and being clear as an SLT that we’re okay with that ...”

“Not being afraid to change and adapt what we did to meet the circumstances. We realised we could manage risk quickly, for example.”

“Not worrying about doing everything to plan – but still having a plan.”

“The pandemic showed organisations they could survive in ambiguity, and this gave us confidence.”

“I find complexity fascinating. Chaos perhaps not so much...”

What works

- Never let excellence be the enemy of ‘good enough’.
- Don’t be too wedded to policies and procedures as long as you’re ‘safe and legal’.
- Know when to survive and when to thrive – give yourself permission not to grow if you’re in the grip of chaos or crisis.
- Find opportunities in crisis and uncertainty to do things differently.
- Seize the chance to be entrepreneurial - there are ‘small’ ways to add value by going digital, or through income generation.



What the science says – Being flexible: shaping not planning

Research suggests, as the leaders we spoke to also said, that being flexible about what the organisation does and how it does it, is key during periods of crisis, disruption and uncertainty. Building on this, we include some of the current thinking and evidence about leadership, and consequently organisational practices that enable and support flexibility. These are practices (i.e. repertoires of skills and behaviours) that are eminently doable and learnable. They include the capacity to embrace complexity, to sit with ‘not knowing’, and to nurture flexible thinking.

Embracing Complexity

Embracing complexity encompasses the capacity to adapt decisions and manage contradictions and tensions. What we do as leaders in the charity sector, is in any case, often laden with paradoxes and tensions. Uncertainty in the external context adds greater challenge to strategic planning and decision-making.

Being adaptive is about flexibility and innovative problem-solving, finding new solutions to new and unique problems that arise in the current context. However, it is also about being able to sit with not knowing, until new possibilities start to emerge and new learning can happen. us meet the challenge of uncertainty with greater equanimity and focus.

“During great uncertainty, though nothing can be planned, everything can be shaped.” Anon

Allowing not knowing, nurturing flexible thinking

The state of not knowing can feel like the antithesis of what leading should be. Yet to get through the experience successfully, leaders are often ‘forced’ to consider what resources or knowledge they have. Sometimes they recognise a skill they have, or acquire greater skills, for example managing their emotions or those of others during uncertainty. Or they may enhance their knowledge or gain a new perspective on the external world. Whatever skills or knowledge the leader develops or builds, may be applicable to future problems. It may simply be the capacity to sit with not knowing, to slow things down, and thereby allowing time for reflection. When leaders develop new capacities, new skills, and new ways of seeing and understanding, they can become more able to deal with an unpredictable world. When leaders develop new pathways to get from here to there, they are more flexible in confronting the uncertain and unknown. These flexibilities build on each other.

“Even when we can hold onto both, in managing the tension between two equally balanced options, we are faced with a different question. How on earth do we build strategy without knowing very much about what the future holds, what the future will bring?”

“I’m getting better at knowing that I don’t know. It helps.”



Flexible thinking

Our tendency as humans, when we are in the grip of uncertainty, is to look for certainties, to pursue clear lines of cause and effect, to go after the answer or the action we need to take. The bias in conventional thinking and leadership is towards known cause and effect relationships, tried and tested methods, and ‘best practice’. All of these may work better in a world that is more predictable and stable. A bias in favour of predictability militates against the flexible thinking and agile responsiveness that is needed to respond during periods of volatility and uncertainty.

See this model on complexity thinking to help you adapt to a more flexible approach and greater responsiveness as you lead through uncertainty.

Complexity thinking

The Bias	The Flexible Adaptation
Cause and effect is linear, I can simplify the story	Rehearse many different ‘what if’ scenarios
There is a good fit solution, ‘best practice’	Get multi-source perspectives and data
Agreement and consensus will help	Factor in different and dissenting views
As a leader I need to take control	Use delegated decision structure
Going it alone to solve the problem	Calling on collective experience and wisdom
Act self-sufficiently	Going wider to collaborate

See also:

The Problem with Best Practice

Shane Snow Fast Company (2015)

The Surprising Habits of Original Thinkers

TED Talk by Adam Grant, Organisational Psychologist, and Professor at Wharton School of Business in the U.S.



Collaborating intensively

What you told us

“It really helped to have a space to grapple with big decisions together. Not just rubber stamping.”

“Having a supportive board who are engaged and accessible, allowing collective responsibility for decisions and sharing accountability if things go wrong, makes all the difference.”

“It was relying on a senior team who can really critique decisions – not being precious about that if we have built trust and respect.”

“I really learnt the value of continuous feedback, not being afraid of honesty. Being a sounding board for each other in the organisation.”

What works

- Exercising discipline and communicating your intention to your team
- Being honest, open, and joined up – there’s no need to ‘air dirty laundry’ elsewhere
- Seeing trustees and the chair as being part of the solution - not leaving them waiting for an invitation
- Capitalising and building on formal and informal networks, including outside of the sector, to build and influence change
- Remember the power of creative agency!



What the science says

The literature is unequivocal that successful collaboration at times of crisis, duress, and uncertainty requires initiative, imagination and interpersonal skill. Our impression is that these are qualities which charity leaders demonstrate in droves. The evidence also points to the fact that influence and success appear to hinge on the degree of personal connection and familiarity between key actors, and not on what may be organisationally 'decreed' or expected. In other words, successful collaborations, which meet the desired outcomes, usually flow from the networks of relationships that help leaders and other stakeholders deal with situations that don't fit neatly into established processes and structures.

The research clearly supports what many charity leaders already know, and what they shared with us, that leaders who harness and balance formal and informal networks and relationships are able to respond more readily and effectively to disruptive change, volatility and uncertainty.

Here we offer two resources:

- A checklist of questions which can serve as a 'rough and ready' analysis and health check of your organisational social network
- Three practical scenarios which leaders shared with us which highlight the benefits of taking a flexible approach and using more relational and collaborative endeavours.



Social Network Health Check

- ☑ Do you have a clear picture that 'maps' the wider charity and community network within which you operate?

If not, you can simply draw a sociogram picture which depicts individuals and organisations you are connected to as a leader and/or an organisation. You can represent individuals as smaller 'dots', relative to organisations and use different colours to distinguish them. You can also represent the strength or quality of connection by representing the connecting lines between 'dots' in varying colours, thickness or shape.

See links below:

[Four Easy Ways to Create a Sociogram](#)

[Creating a sociogram](#)

[Sociogram template](#)

- ☑ Look at the sociogram you have created. What do you notice about the pattern of relationships that 'hold' you in a group with others?
- ☑ Which individuals or organisations look like the most central ones? Which may exert the greatest impact on you/the organisation about access to information for example? What about decision-making? What about other domains of activity? This information can help you get a clearer perspective on relationships and interdependencies and help inform actions and decisions.
- ☑ Where are the critical junctures in the diagram?
- ☑ Which individuals or organisations look like the most peripheral ones? Do you need to engage them more? What expertise, information, perspectives might they hold?



Scenario 1: **Using dialogue and debate when resources are tight**

One charity leader told us how she insisted on holding the space for a series of cross organisation retreats, and rather than a two-day whole organisation residential which they could not afford. She decided to have several short conversations with a different mixed, cross-section of stakeholders to talk about how they experienced the pandemic, and what their hopes for the future were. This sparked so much enthusiasm that she organised a further round of similar meetings to work on planning a flexible rolling strategy.

Scenario 2: **Using personal and practical processes rather than procedures**

In one organisation sticking to the letter of procedure would have meant a series of long management investigations into grievances raised and setting disciplinary processes in motion. The leader in question chose what she called a 'courageous experiment' in which she paused, with everyone's agreement and after taking HR/legal advice, the formal processes underway. Her hunch was that the lack of in-person contact, together with the uncertainty surrounding the future of the organisation, were contributing to the conflict that had arisen, and led to the formal grievance being made. In the meantime, she convened, an in-person meeting facilitated by an external and independent colleague for everyone involved to share their thoughts, feelings and perspectives about the issues which led to the grievances and disciplinary processes to be invoked. Meeting informally made it possible to understand one another's behaviour and intentions better and helped to restore trust between colleagues.

Scenario 3: **Repurposing a forum set up during the pandemic**

During the pandemic, the CEO of the organisation created a forum for frequent and regular dialogue between members of the executive leadership team during the pandemic. This has now been converted into a working group which is looking at the external impact of the 'cost of living crisis'.

Holding on

What you told us

“...Trying to act according to my values and principles – that kept me going – and knowing that I had made principled decisions.”

“Letting people know that decisions are being made, and not skirted.”

“Hanging on to strategy and to purpose was very important.”

What works

- Living our values.
- Communicating, communicating, communicating.
- Framing trade-offs very specifically.
- Naming the worst-case scenario, and prioritising against the worst case.



Join the conversation

We would encourage you to engage with the Building the road as we walk, resource on social media and [share your own experience](#) of leading through uncertainty. Please tag @BayesCCE in your post.

Acknowledgements and thank yous

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We would also like to thank the Bayes Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund (KEIF) for supporting this work.

About terminology

At some points throughout this resource we have used the term 'beneficiary'. We understand that this phrase carries paternalistic connotations and we use it to refer to clients, customers, members, people who benefit from the charity's activities.

Disclaimer

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