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**Building the road as we walk:
Leadership through uncertain times**
3. Leading stakeholders

**Centre for Charity
Effectiveness**

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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 stakeholders

What helps you help stakeholders to thrive in and through uncertain times?

Relationships and trust

Charity leaders have learned much from their experiences during the COVID 19 crisis. The demands of that time, in circumstances which were deeply unsettling and unfamiliar, far from derailing many leaders, their organisations and their people, offered extraordinary opportunities for experimentation and valuable learning. Demonstrating to stakeholders that they are actively engaged in responding to challenges and making decisions is important for leaders to build confidence and trust. At the same time listening, talking, and communicating honestly and often are also key.



What you told us

Listening and dialogue build understanding

The importance of investing in relationships with all stakeholders and building trust during uncertainty was highlighted as paramount by all those who participated in our research. Leaders also emphasised the need for continuous listening and dialogue to develop understanding of stakeholders' own unique experience, their context and their particular or individual needs. For example, understanding that volunteers' motivations may be closer to those of beneficiaries, leading them to worry more about the impact of uncertainty. Or recognising individual differences in the need for support through uncertainty in that some may find it much harder to cope with than others.

Transparency and clarity are essential

Meeting, preferably in person, and being clear on what is wanted from those meetings was seen as a foundation for reinforcing positive relationships and a collegiate culture. This posed some conundrums for leaders about 'return' and hybrid and virtual

working. One of the overarching messages, however, was that offering up-to-date information, in a climate of transparency, where all stakeholders hear answers together, was critical to building trust.

We touch on the theme of bringing people together in the what the science says section on collaboration In Part 2: Leading the organisation. In the sections that follow below, we also make connections between the themes that emerged about leading stakeholders with the research findings on compassionate leadership.

What works

- Talking with others through the challenges and changes that happen.
- Even when feeling anxious and burdened, leaders can offer opportunities for stakeholders to express their concerns and share suggestions.
- Listening settles people and makes them feel less powerless.



What the science says

Coming together to build relationships and trust

During times of intense or rapid change, and in uncertainty, our sense of connection and shared purpose may be disrupted. The opportunities we have to come together collectively may be reduced. Moreover, our psychological capacity to make sense of our emotions and of what is happening around us may be eroded, particularly if our threat response (fight, flight, freeze) has been activated. This impairs our working memory, our problem-solving ability, and it diminishes our capacity for insight and compassion. People are 'reduced' to operating in survival mode, which in turn limits the potential to deal with uncertainty and complexity.

Collective activities that enable groups of people to share and make sense of their experiences and express their feelings can have far reaching positive consequences. Sharing experiences, feelings, perspectives, and stories can engender a sense of connection and shared purpose. Moreover, taking part in dialogue, in shared endeavours and in activities that include narratives and storytelling, have been shown to reduce stress and boost well-being for leaders and organisation members alike.

Valuing people, and making people feel valued

One consistent theme that came through, was about coming together to build trust, through regular touch points and check ins, to share successes, but ultimately to ensure that people feel valued in the midst of disruption and uncertainty.

Many charity leaders were conscious of the stress and suffering that many of their stakeholders experienced during the COVID 19 pandemic. Many told us how during and indeed, since the pandemic was at its height, they witnessed organisation members and stakeholders experience distress and hardship. They empathised greatly with these experiences of pain and struggle and offered practical support wherever possible. Many leaders pointed to the solidarity and trust this created within the organisation, and across different groups of stakeholders.



Compassion and compassionate leadership

Although empathy and compassion were seldom directly referred to by respondents in our research, they were occasionally implied. Given their acknowledgement in our sector and their importance in the organisational and leadership literature, we felt it was important to signpost key messages from the science.

“It takes courage and strength to be empathic, and I’m proudly an empathic compassionate leader.”

Jacinda Ardern, 2018

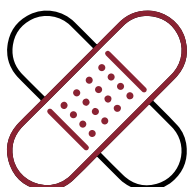
What the science says

Leadership research shows that compassionate leadership brings many benefits to individual stakeholders and to the organisation. When leaders respond to difficult events with compassion, they foster individual and organisational well-being and resilience.

Compassion is contagious – in the sense that being at the receiving end of compassion from self and others, means we are more likely to offer compassion, thereby creating a virtuous cycle. Ultimately, compassion creates a sense of safety and connectedness in teams and organisations. This provides a strong buffer to fear and threat, which in turn encourages greater trust and collaboration.



The seven benefits of compassionate leadership are



Healing



Trust



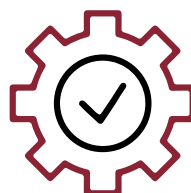
Commitment



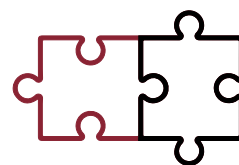
Engagement



Positive emotions



Performance



Belonging

Three ways you can build compassionate leadership

1 Practice self-compassion

Do you show yourself the same consideration and kindness that you might offer to those you lead?

2 Balance your attention

Do you focus on the well-being and contribution of your people, as much as you do on other aspects and tasks of leadership?

3 Create a forum to talk

Do you (or does your organisation) offer regular opportunities or a forum for people to notice the emotional impacts of their work, including feelings about change and uncertainty?

Twelve questions to ask yourself about fostering compassion in your organisation

Questions to help leaders identify some of the activities that foster compassion in their team and wider organisation:

1. Do I actively promote a culture in which people trust each other?
2. Do I encourage a climate of caring and non-judgement? So that people know that if they talk about their problems, other team members will not judge them, and they will listen and try to help?
3. Do I actively encourage and empower others to respond to a colleague's suffering?
4. Do I show care and concern towards people in my team/organisation?
5. Do I understand the value of sharing problems with others?
6. Do people in my team know that I will try to help and support them if they have a problem?
7. Are people in my team/organisation in regular close contact (e.g. through face to face daily or weekly meetings)?
8. Is there a strong relationship between people in my team/teams elsewhere in the organisation, which makes them feel joined up as a team, connected, seen, felt, known and not alone?
9. When people in my team/in teams elsewhere in the organisation, notice a change in the condition of a colleague, do they feel comfortable about inquiring further?
10. Is it a norm in my team/ teams elsewhere in the organisation, to know about each other's lives and pay attention to any distress and suffering that a colleague might be experiencing?
11. Do people in my team/ teams elsewhere in the organisation, feel safe in sharing their personal problems, issues, and challenges with each other?
12. Do people in my team feel they can openly express their emotional distress?



Beating burn out

We know that charity leaders work long hours and must deal with overflowing workloads. They find themselves absorbing the many demands of stakeholders. At the same time, they have to take care of their own needs, in an 'always on' and increasingly hybrid workplace.

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation...”

Audre Lorde, 1988

What you told us

Many underlined the need to conserve and replenish their own personal resources for psychological and physical well-being.

“...Reminding myself that owning everyone’s problems is too much for anyone; support people as much as possible, but recognise your limits.”

They were also conscious of their responsibilities as leaders and the need to support their people’s well-being.

“When the leader gets a cold, the organisation gets a cold.”

“I think a lot about role modelling healthy behaviours, and consciously reflecting on organisational routines and rituals such as going for a drink after work: is this helping us?”

“One of the challenging things I find as a leader is balancing the tension between instilling optimism re the future but being real about the challenges ahead.”

“[One of the] questions I ask myself is how can I be less hard on myself when things don’t go according to plan. As a leader I feel accountable to others and myself and sometimes it’s being courageous to say you’ve done all you can or you now need to stop what you’re doing. That’s incredibly hard when things around you are up in the air and you want to deliver/achieve an outcome”

What the science says

Burn out comes from empathy fatigue, not compassion fatigue!

We know that empathic distress, as distinct from compassion, leads to burn out. Empathic distress is not so much concern, but rather too much empathy, combined with prolonged feelings of distress, of feeling with, as opposed to feeling for others. Burn out results from the need to protect oneself from empathic distress, and which leads us to turn away/shutting down.

When someone feels compassionate, the feeling is other-focused, positive, and protects against burnout whereas empathy involves taking on the negative feelings of others, compassion invites feelings of love and warmth toward others. The antidote therefore, is to turn empathy into compassion.

See links below:

[Compassion meditation](#)

[The surprising downsides of empathy](#)

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Hope

The topic of hope was highlighted as profoundly important by several of the leaders we interviewed. It was highlighted particularly during the forum discussion groups we held. Many believe that charity leaders play a critical role in giving hope to their stakeholders during uncertainty.

Although this proved to be a less well elaborated theme, when we returned to reading what respondents told us through the lens of the literature evidence, we identified two sets of practices referred to throughout by respondents. It seems that with regard to hope, the leaders we spoke to were doing much to give and sustain hope without making an explicit link to this, and perhaps without having articulated or crystallised how these practices benefited stakeholders. There were three sets of recurring themes which we identified in terms of:

- Listening, empathising, acting, and communicating in a genuine and transparent way.
- Taking the opportunity to reinforce purpose, and to enact values; staying focused on the impact that the organisation is making.

All of which link back to the all-important theme of leaders offering hope.



What the science says

Overall, the research points to two key areas:

Securing a relational baseline for hope

The first is concerned with helping stakeholders to secure the greatest level of certainty and well-being now, in the present, by boosting **psychological well-being** and engendering **trust** (see for example Xu et al, 2016).

- **Psychological well-being.** Helping people to have more agency, autonomy and feel that they belong can give them a secure base from which to view the future and to act. In this, certainty seems to come from extending and supporting caring relationships (including with the leader), and ensuring that stakeholders look after their own well-being.
- **Trust.** There can be no hope without trust. As we have noted above, charity leaders underline the importance of relationships, dialogue, transparency, and communication, as well as the need to give confidence in their response to and decision-making in uncertainty. In other words, how the leader makes sense of uncertainty and makes decisions seem to be particularly important.

The future

Hope by its very nature is a belief in a better future.

Hope that the future can and will be better can energise and mobilise stakeholders even during times of extreme stress and uncertainty (see for example, Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014).

Overall, leaders can give hope by articulating a clear purpose and vision, by showing that they are optimistic and resilient, and by supporting and involving their stakeholders. (see for example, Shahid & Muchiri, 2019) This touches on an inherent contradiction – that leaders in uncertainty exercise control in some respects and empowerment in others.

Conclusion and summary

Overall, the canvas of experiences and perspectives from our research are complex and nuanced. Nonetheless it may be possible to discern some overarching messages. Firstly, that it is the person of the leader, and not their personality or traits, nor their heroic leadership acts that help during crisis and uncertainty. Rather it may be more about how they manage their energy and empathy and their own uncertainties.

Connecting with peers, colleagues, boards, other organisation members, and beneficiaries all make a huge contribution too, not only to personal resilience, but also to the resilience of the organisation and its stakeholders. It is about balancing confident sense-making with adaptability, with enhancing trusting relationships through communication and clarity, and inviting stakeholders to participate, collaborate and take collective action. Many of the practices we heard about contribute to a charity leader's capacity to give hope to their stakeholders in uncertain times, particularly those which support psychological well-being in the present and a belief in a better future.





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

We would like to thank all of the charity leaders and colleagues who helped to input into the 'Building the road as we walk' research. In particular Caroline Copeman, Christine Fogg, Alex Skailes, and all the CCE consultants for sharing their experience and for their invaluable support.

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.

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