

Reflections from the Field: Leading Through the Pandemic



Introduction

On March 23, 2020, Connecticut's Governor signed an order for a shelter-in-place mandate. For most of us, this was the first time we experienced such a thing. Not knowing what would happen to service delivery, or to their staff, leaders were forced to make quick decisions to ensure everyone would be safe. What we probably did not know that day is that the workplace would be changed forever.

This time in our history will be used as an example of leading through a vast crisis. Although nonprofit leaders are no stranger to crisis, the COVID-19 global pandemic presented unique challenges. For example, the pandemic was one of the few events that impacted every system and individuals of all levels of an organization. Leaders needed to act quickly, make fast decisions, and ensure that their much-needed services were available especially as demand began to grow. This time was filled with a lot of unknowns, but two years later, leaders find themselves in a new normal, reflecting on all that has happened and has forever changed.

→ *This report is the result of 17 interviews with leaders of nonprofit organizations conducted in February 2022 by Fio Partners, LLC. Four respondents lead agencies with budgets under \$1M, 13 lead organizations with budgets over \$1M, and one identifies as BIPOC.*

THE ONSET OF THE PANDEMIC



"By June 2020, I brought everyone back into the office because I could see the tension; it was taking a toll on the staff."

"We stopped hard-planning in its tracks and just waited things out, but the pandemic continued for months."

GOING VIRTUAL

Many organizations moved their services to a virtual platform. For just a handful, this pivot was seamless, but for others, it came with challenges. Staff, board, and clients had to be trained on using technology. Then there were wi-fi, issues or for some, it was the first time they had used a computer. Organizations were forced to shift the prevailing belief that services could only be done face to face.

SERVICE ADAPTATIONS

Examples of adaptations included providing medical and behavioral health services via telemedicine. Case managers worked with clients by phone and shelter and residential programs quarantined clients before working with them (this was done before rapid testing became available). Some organizations took their programming outside and met with clients in an open space. Those who serve children with autism found that conducting services virtually was not optimal given that children were not able to maintain their focus; other autism programs reduced the number of activities prescribed to their clients and found that they fared better.

WORKING THROUGH COMPLEXITY

Some leaders expressed additional complexities during the onset of the pandemic such as mergers and implementing new technological software. Safety was a constant concern at the onset of the pandemic as personal protection equipment (PPE) was not easy to access during the initial phase. Nonprofit organizations had to find new ways to obtain essential supplies, because supply changes were also in crisis. Some of the complexity was the result of dealing with an increase in demand and staffing shortages, in addition to canceled fundraisers and losing revenue streams.

LEADING THROUGH A WORKFORCE CRISIS

Staff were burdened professionally and personally. Staff did not have the proper equipment to work effectively from home (e.g., printers, scanners, work phones). Staff were also dealing with school and daycare closings or caring for sick loved ones. Initial changes were done with the thought that the pandemic would last just a few weeks; however, once it was apparent that the pandemic would stay awhile, more permanent, or long-term planning had to occur.

Leaders also had to make tough decisions, grappling with who worked remotely, who remained in the office, and who was laid-off or furloughed. Many of these decisions resulted in tension between staff. Zoom meetings gave leaders a front-row seat to the degree of pressure staff were managing. Organizations who lost colleagues or volunteers to the virus were grieving and yet had to continue working and serving others in crisis. For those experiencing high turnover, workloads had to be shifted with little time for adequate training. Some leaders did not have the support of their board members given they too were dealing with work and family issues.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

There is no doubt that the pandemic created significant leadership challenges. For some, their work doubled, especially those who lost staff or board support. Another challenge was having to balance grief while focusing on staff safety and raising money. Others described going from a highly collaborative, creative, and synergistic staff to having utilitarian conversations. One leader expressed that the greatest adaptation for her was "feeling ok with [her decisions]." Organizations that needed to remain in the office had to physically build protective barriers because access to such supplies were limited.

THE PANDEMIC SHIFTED LEADERSHIP STYLES



"I had to move from a member of the choir to the person who was conducting."

"I realized one night that the buck stopped with me. If someone died or got severe COVID, it was my responsibility."

Even leadership styles had to adapt. The most notable changes described were their approach, how they led, communication styles, decision-making, and relationships with staff. Some leaders shared how their behaviors took a 180-degree turn, meaning they were doing the opposite of what they usually do. Leaders also expressed the insight they had gained during the pandemic. They reflected daily on how to best navigate the overwhelming elements of leading through a pandemic.

APPROACH

Many leaders learned early on that their tendency to micromanage served as a barrier. Pivoting away from micromanaging made it possible for leaders to focus on organizational sustainability. EDs/CEOs leaned on their leadership teams to meet and navigate day-to-day operations. Shifting this behavior gave leaders the space to "think outside the box" and "step up" their leadership. They now focused on getting additional funding as expenses were climbing, seeking collaboration, and balancing competing internal and external forces.

COMMUNICATION

Crisis management requires strategic communication. Leaders expressed how they were intentional around visibility and ensuring they "checked in" with staff. They shared updates on the organization and relieved staff anxieties about being laid off or losing their health insurance. One leader created daily videos on bright spots to engage staff in a fun way (such as dancing with other staff and sharing some personal stories). There were times when the videos were heartbreaking, especially as the country was navigating the murder of George Floyd; however, it felt important to be authentic and vulnerable during this time. These communications gave staff the sense that "we are in this together."

DECISION MAKING

Being able to make fast decisions is critical in crisis environments. One leader noted, "the pandemic demanded day-to-day change and decision making." Leaders who tended to be more collegial and preferred consensus realized that during a crisis, they needed to be more assertive in their decision-making; hierarchy served a purpose (especially because staff look to their leader during a crisis). Also, those who tended to use data to make decisions realized a different approach was needed.

INSIGHT

Leaders expressed the insight they gained by leading from the balcony. It became evident that "autonomy and decision-making increases job satisfaction," realizing there was no space for micromanaging during this time. Others were able to see how their ways of operating would no longer be effective and had begun to examine how to build a sustainable organizational infrastructure during a crisis. Remaining optimistic as board members, clients, and staff were all impacted by the pandemic was important. Others realized that at the onset of the pandemic, "grace" and "trust" were essential. Leaders felt a sense of loneliness and isolation; others expressed guilt because some staff could work from home, and others had to remain working with clients.

STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

Every leader shared their gratitude toward staff for adapting quickly, stepping up, putting their health on the line to be in service to others, and working harder even as they navigated their own personal crisis. These experiences deepen leaders' compassion for their staff. Leaders have been offering more flexibility around work time and deadlines and hiring additional staff to lessen the workload, they are also intentional about publicly acknowledging staff's hard work. Overwhelmed by the commitment expressed by staff, some leaders gave staff bonuses or raises, even before having the funds. While some leaders discussed increasing their communications, others were so short-staffed that formal meetings were burdensome. They trusted the staff to meet informally, as needed, and encouraged making decisions and not waiting for permission. Organizations that lost staff and volunteers to the virus, strengthen their bond with other colleagues.

A COMPLETE 180

Many leaders had to do a complete 180-degree change in their leadership. Leaders who tended to be "in the weeds" became more strategic, while those who tended to be a "light touch manager" had to get more involved because staff needed strong leadership. One leader expressed how they are much more adaptive because of the pandemic. Today, leadership teams that were focused on operations are now centered on strategy and long-term planning. Others had to get into the weeds because the pandemic affected everyone, resulting in "a level of chaos" in need of leadership. When describing these vast changes in their leadership, respondents also shared how tired they are now, which is common when we operate outside our comfort zone.

IMPACT

Changes made due to the pandemic had positive and negative impacts. Leaders believe that trusting their staff was instrumental to their success to adapt; others described how working through the crisis strengthened relationships and served as a great team builder. One leader mentioned how their staff retention had been the highest it's ever been; however, many experienced high turnover during this time. Staff left for many factors, sometimes beyond what was happening within the organization. For example, one organization learned that staff were changing careers because of the pressure of direct service and the added burden it placed on what they were dealing with personally. One organization that uses performance metrics to monitor productivity began to use it to observe how the staff was doing. The metrics provided insight into issues that may be surfacing for the staff; this led to conversations around the staff members' needs and capacity during the pandemic. The metrics may have been designed for productivity but were now being used to assess how best to support their staff.

THE NEW NORMAL

We can safely say that the nonprofit sector will never be the same. The pandemic has created a new normal around how organizations operate, where staff work, funding, and service delivery. Some of the changes are positive and others are negative; however, leaders feel more equipped and confident in navigating the negative impact and developing solutions as the pandemic continues.



"The funding we received allowed us to change our thought process. Today we realize you don't have to be in the trolley; you can experience it without ever stepping in it."

"We don't have to bring people to do paperwork now; we use the office to collaborate and socialize and bring connectivity."

OPERATIONAL CHANGES

The pandemic challenged nonprofits to rethink the purpose and use of an office. One significant change is where staff work. Today, many nonprofits offer options to work remotely, surfacing a new challenge: how to build community and relationships in this setting. Infection rate spikes, such as the recent Omicron variant, led some nonprofits to go remote, again – this may be the new normal for a while.

ED's/CEOs expressed how much they think about space. Questions such as, "what is the purpose of the office," "do we need to do paperwork in a centralized location, or can staff be just as (or more) productive at home," "which jobs are truly "office dependent"?" Intentional and elaborate safety measures are also a new normal. Staff now work in environments with plastic barriers, mandated vaccinations, or have eliminated in-person all-staff meetings.

All the organizations in this survey have experienced an increase in clients. For some, this increase came with additional financial support, and for others, staff census has remained the same. The combination of staff shortages and increased demand are concerning leaders.

THINKING ABOUT GROWTH

The pandemic has lifted the need for growth in many nonprofits. Funding offered an immense opportunity for some organizations to grow either by hiring more staff, expanding their services, or investing time into strategizing and future planning.

Providing services virtually also allowed organizations to expand their recruitment pool and hire individuals outside of Connecticut. This has helped immensely, especially since the *war on talent* has been challenging for nonprofit organizations. For organizations that need to provide their services in person, growth in staff is challenging, especially when many individuals seek remote work.

Providing services virtually has come with an increase in competition. Individuals are no longer confined to geographic locations and have a greater pool of service providers to choose from. Arts organizations and nonprofits providing training are realizing the positives and negatives of this new competitive landscape.

PROGRAMMATIC CHANGES

The use of technology has created one of the most significant organizational changes. Organizations that offer behavioral or medical services continue to use telemedicine, increasing revenue and reach. Others have explored other virtual platforms to conduct services including What's up, messenger, and.

Some programmatic changes during the pandemic were not long-term solutions and have reverted to their pre-pandemic processes; however, they feel much more prepared to make quick changes in their service delivery if necessary.

RESPONDING TO THE RACIAL UNREST FIVE MONTHS INTO THE PANDEMIC

The murder of George Floyd and the civic unrest that followed, forced leaders to look at their work and organization from a different lens. This has led to changes on all levels of the organizations, including recruitment strategies, improving access, or being intentional around equity; organizations recognize that the new normal also includes a heightened social conscience that is here to stay.

ADAPTABILITY BEFORE THE PANDEMIC



"Humans have an incredible ability to adapt and be extraordinary, but there is also a need for homeostasis."

"I tend to be optimistic and would have said we were a nimble and adaptable team, but never did I imagine that we would have had to adapt so much."

Nonprofit organizations are constantly adapting either because of their client's needs, the economic rollercoaster, or changes in funding streams and yet there are other areas where nonprofits tend to be less adaptable. When asked about their organizational culture around adaptability before the pandemic, there was an (almost even) split between being adaptive already and being less adaptive previously.

ALREADY ADAPTIVE

Several of the organizations attributed pre-pandemic growth as the impetus to their adaptability. Their ability to respond to client needs and make programmatic changes based on how best to serve their clients encouraged creativity and innovation. Organizations in this group expressed having creative staff who were "good at adapting." But even the most adaptive organizations struggled at the onset of the pandemic. For example, the pace of adaptation was new for some organizations. Furthermore, balancing all the changes that needed to happen and dealing with a reduction in staff (either due to resignations or illness) added to the challenge.

NOT VERY ADAPTIVE

Leaders who identified their organizations as less adaptive attributed it to the nonprofit ecosystem. Funders can inhibit change based on their regulations and guidelines on service delivery. One organization reported that their accrediting entity restricted their ability to innovate based on their model. During the pandemic, funders and accrediting entities lifted many of their restrictions, allowing organizations to make shifts.

Other reasons attributed to the lack of adaptability were related to staff or board members. Respondents shared the belief that before the pandemic, their directors or managers lacked confidence in their abilities or felt they did not have the authority to make changes and therefore kept the status quo. When leaders began to give their executive teams autonomy around decision-making and trusted them to make changes daily, adaptation began to surface. Respondents also talked about being "stuck" as an organization – even those in industries where others were adapting to a new way of delivering services..