

Feature on leadership over the long haul

Debbie Sorkin, written for South East COVID-19 Health and Wellbeing
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Like many of us, I've been working from home for the past few months. My dining-room table doubles as a home office. It's next to a large window, looking out onto a tree whose leaves are rippling in the breeze as I write. The street outside is still quiet, although the traffic is steadily increasing. It's mid-July, and although the numbers of people dying of Covid-19 today bear no relation to where we were in April and early May, and the trends at the moment are all going in the right direction, it looks like we've reached a plateau rather than achieving the marked reduction in deaths seen in other European countries.



*View from a window,
S.Gore (1878 – 1914)*

For me, it feeds into a mix of conflicting emotions that I can't always reconcile: worry about new outbreaks, especially with the easing of lockdown restrictions, lack of clarity in trying to assess the degree of risk, tiredness from unremitting workloads and Zoom meetings and at the same time, a palpable desire to get back to any kind of 'normal'. Just to sit in a café, have a coffee and watch the world go by would be wonderful. For many of my friends with children, the opening of schools cannot come soon enough.

If this is what it feels like for me, someone on the periphery of the NHS and social care, I can only imagine how hard it must be for others who are trying to balance home schooling with leading and managing a remote team, or looking to provide leadership across a system, or working on the front line.

So how do we all keep going over the longer term? What's our leadership role in the next phase of this pandemic?

In this final regular dispatch, I would like to share with you my thoughts on what our focus, as leaders, should be in the coming months.

Prioritise self-preservation, for ourselves and our teams.

This is not a luxury indulgence. It's a necessity. You wouldn't push an ambulance into a lake, leave it there for a couple of months, then haul it out and expect it to be in mint condition. Maintaining our own psychological and physical health, and that of our teams, is essential. Otherwise we won't be in a position to help anyone else.

This is especially the case if we feel like we're on our own (by the way, this is me, and I find it difficult to say 'no' to things, but even I'm getting better at pushing back against back-to-back online meetings). Meg Wheatley, a writer on leadership whom I recommend you get to know if you don't already, has described one of the roles of leadership as 'creating islands of sanity'.¹ This is really what we're doing here.

Over the last few months, we have shared a number of resources that will help you and your team to do this, including:

- **NHS guides**, especially [#HowAreYou](#) (HAY), with its advice on a whole range of issues including coping strategies; providing space for staff to decompress; practical

¹ Meg Wheatley, [Who Do We Choose to Be?](#)

advice on psychological safety and noticing your own 'warning signs'; suggestions on how to stay connected; and a range of detailed resources and frameworks around inclusion and diversity, which would be important at any time but are especially crucial at present.

- **Advice and tools on resilience** which is about developing mutual networks of support on which you can rely when times get tough, so that your basic sense of competence, and sense of self, isn't compromised.

Keep the learning going.

One of the palpable 'benefits' of Covid-19 is the speed of change it has wrought across health and care. People have shown immense adaptability and willingness to work in new ways, with many working together in multi-disciplinary teams where their banding is suddenly much less important than their knowledge, experience and attitude. Hospitals have been reconfigured in a matter of days. There have been significant changes in primary care. Prior to Covid-19, 70% of GP consultations were face-to-face, now the figure is 23%.²

- Out of the changes you've seen in your team and your organisation, what would you like to keep? As a corollary, what do you want to jettison, because it isn't working anymore? This can be as much about behaviours and attitudes as it is about processes. One way to do this, is to get a *Learning History* going, so that you have a record of the changes and what made them work, and they're not lost in the future³.
- Learning doesn't have to be 'invented here': there's lots of learning from other sectors, especially the military, that's absolutely relevant in relation to downtime and keeping staff going. Here is a [useful tool](#) from the RSA to help you look at what to keep, what to lose and how you determine which is which.

Continue to embed behaviours and approaches that enable people to work in complexity, when the future is hard to see.

It's not easy to predict where we'll be in six months' time, not just because, well, it's the future, but because there is a whole heap of new variables to sit on top of the ones we already know about. Welcome to the world of complexity, where there's no cause and effect, issues keep shifting shape, and no one person can be solely in charge.

It's ok to keep going and give your teams enough 'clarity for now'. You can say 'yes to the mess.' You can use adaptive, or systems leadership approaches, especially around working to a common purpose - being really clear, along with all your colleagues, what it is you're trying to do, and why, and what it means for everyone around the table. Taking the time to do this is a worthwhile investment when you're trying to work with lots of different people with different priorities. [In this video](#), the Director of Pharmacy at the London Nightingale Hospital describes how their team's uniting around a common purpose of saving as many lives as possible helped create an open culture of continuous improvement.



The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, Caspar David

- Allow yourself to take small steps and do more short-term planning so that you can easily adapt to circumstances as they change, and build relationships and trust, so that you can have influence irrespective of whether or not you have positional

² HSJ Daily Insight, 27th June 2020

³ For more on Learning Histories, see pp 250 - 252 of [The Art of Change-Making](#)

authority. You can work with clumsy solutions - they don't need to be perfect, as long as they work well enough for now. You can experiment, and then amplify what's working and stop doing what isn't.

- Practise behaviours that lead to change by supporting, connecting and enabling your teams, and by helping people make sense of things so that they have just enough clarity to continue. Develop narratives and stories about what's happening that invite others to join you in taking action.

All of these things can help keep us going and create real, lasting change, even if Covid-19 persists, as we try to see our way through the fog. Despite all my conflicting emotions around what's happening at the moment, I am holding on to the thought that the fog, and the cloud, will eventually lift, and we'll all have a much clearer view.



*Belle Tout Lighthouse, E.
Ravilious (1903 - 1942)*

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