Leading Your City Effectively in a Rapidly Changing Context
with Herman B. "Dutch" Leonard

Never give up, never give in, never give out. Keep the faith, and keep your eyes on the prize.

— Rep. John Lewis

Months after venturing to reopen without a coherent national strategy to suppress the novel coronavirus, many of you find yourselves in the situation you were dreading (however foreseeable it may have been). The volcanic impact of the virus has left none of our cities untouched, but there is wide variance across the country in terms of COVID-19's prevalence and rate of spread, and the degree of risk to local populations.

While you work to respond to an ongoing public health crisis (which has in turn spawned an economic crisis, a fiscal crisis, an educational crisis, a mental health crisis, an equity crisis, a disinformation crisis, a legitimacy crisis, and on and on), demands for racial justice have brought new, urgent challenges to city hall. You are responsible for understanding the issues, managing the competing priorities, asking the right questions, making good decisions, and assigning tasks—all in the face of deep uncertainty.

All the skills you got a crash course in over the spring are still relevant and will be vital for building resilience in a world that will be permanently changed. Our systems will have to be rebuilt, and they will not (and cannot, and should not) be built according to the same blueprints.

Even as much has changed already and will continue to change, however, **the basics of crisis response** remain the same: continuously (re)establish and maintain situational awareness; stand up or reconfigure problem-solving processes; and identify and manage risks.

THE ANSWER IS STILL A PROCESS

To the best of your ability, work to understand what has happened thus far, where you stand today, and where you are headed. Step back and think through the fundamentals:

- What data do you have on hand? What are the gaps?
- What are the urgent tasks and who is the responsible party for each?
- What new tasks are on the horizon and who will manage them?
- Who will take over tasks as priorities, resources, and urgency shift?
- What is at stake in your prioritization and decision-making?
- Have you clearly communicated priorities, needs, and responsibilities to team members, partners, and coproducers?

(Re)establish **integrated, comprehensive processes for real-time problem-solving**:

- Establish teams made up of three categories of people:
    - People who understand and can represent the city's <u>key priorities, values, and goals</u>
    - People who have <u>expert knowledge</u> in the relevant area

- - People who have intimate knowledge of <u>the city, the community, and the workings of city hall</u>
- Task teams with (or designate actors responsible for) iterative problem solving:
  - Establishing goals, priorities, and values
  - Understanding the key issues of the situation
  - Developing options
  - Predicting outcomes
  - Choosing among the options
  - Executing
  - Reflecting and repeating!
- Be thoughtful about facilitation:
  - Appoint a facilitator who is not the key decision-maker.
  - Establish psychological safety and encourage everyone to speak up and share their views.
  - Foster a spirit of joint inquiry rather than individual advocacy.
- Commit to learning:
  - Frame actions that don't work as well as you hoped as providing information about how to do better.
  - Revise plans as you go.
- Keep expectations reasonable for yourself and those around you:
  - All you can reasonably ask of yourselves and those around you is that you all make our best effort.
  - Maintain your focus.
  - Normalize self-care.

Finally, work to maintain legitimacy and support for your political leadership.

- Establish communications tasks and political management as core functions on each team
- Recognize value conflicts and accept that the buck stops with you
- Ensure that team leads understand the essential conditions and procedures for delegating decision-making authority upward and downward.
- Think ahead and err on the side of preventative action
- Be honest and transparent about what you know and don't know and why you are making the choices you're making
- Communicate empathy and provide a rational basis for hope
- Remind people of their role in improving the situation
- Keep the concerns of the most vulnerable at the top of your priorities
- Work to eliminate barriers to effective collaboration across boundaries

SUSTAINING YOUR TEAM(S) AND YOUR CAPACITY FOR RESPONSE

This is an unprecedented moment of cascading crises. Just as institutions, organizations, and businesses figured out how to stretch their capacity farther than they thought possible, new challenges and disruptions surfaced. And this time of profound uncertainty is showing no signs of resolution. How can you keep up? Responding effectively requires a strategy for sustainability.

It is helpful here to think back to **the lessons Professor Nancy Koehn shared from Ernest Shackleton's polar expedition.**

- Stay focused on the long-term goal(s) but stay flexible in how you get there. Adjust, improvise, and redirect as needed.
- Assign tasks and remind everyone why their work matters.
- Prioritize helping others.
- Take time for reflection.
- Take responsibility for the situation and for team morale and cohesion.
- Learn from mistakes but do not dwell on them. Pivot quickly.
- Focus on the likely outcomes rather than best-case or worst-case scenarios.
- Keep the doubters and naysayers on your team close.
- Acknowledge and address fears without feeding them.
- Prioritize self-care.

Remind yourselves that leaders are forged in times like these, and however hard this may be from moment to moment, great leaders before you have made it through to the other side of enormous challenges and shown the way. They were not perfect, and you will not be either, but can lead your city through this time because *you already are*. Keep the faith.