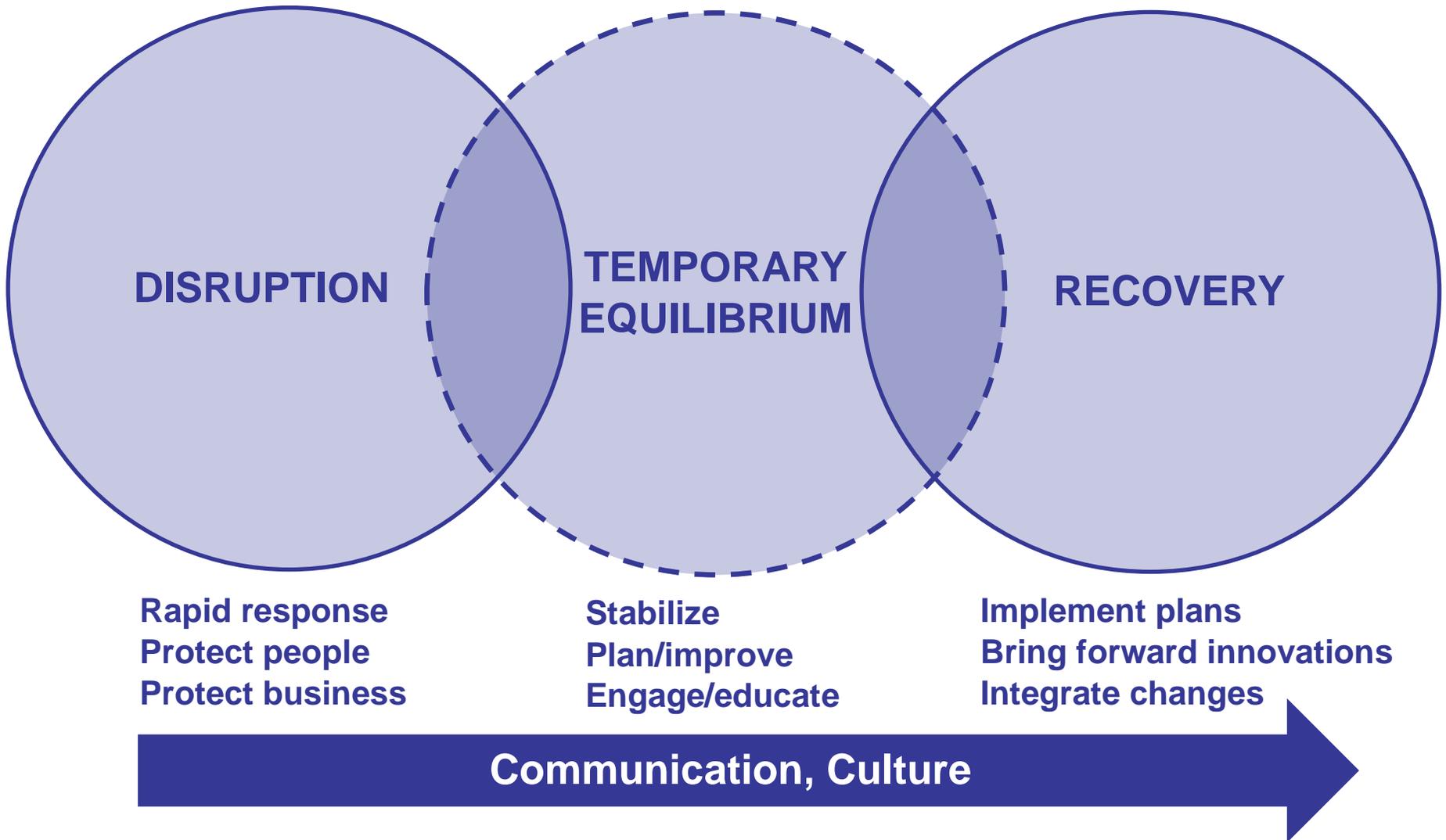


**Leading in the Time of COVID-19**





## Leading in the Time of COVID-19

"The current situation demands both thoughtful action and flexibility from everyone, as we each work to balance the new challenges that confront us all. For all of us, certainly patience, flexibility, and grace should guide our actions and our interactions." (CDC, March, 2020)

### Introduction:

At Praxis we have been deeply impressed with how the leaders we work with in employee-owned companies, non-profits, and health care organizations have responded to the needs of their staff, clients, and other stakeholders in the midst of the turmoil created by the coronavirus pandemic. In this pandemic, leaders are challenged by balancing the management of their own emotions, moving quickly to keep people safe, communicating with staff to address people's anxieties, and continuing to deliver on their mission.

The table below outlines three phases of organizational change in a crisis that are guides for recognizing and taking action as organizations move among the three stages: Organizational Disruption, Temporary Equilibrium, and Recovery, the latter of which we can only anticipate and yet must try our best to prepare for.<sup>1</sup> Each phase identifies a range of organizational changes (i.e. real-time challenges) related to COVID-19 that are occurring as well as the human experience (i.e. the individual psychological and emotional reactions ) that accompany this level of change. Further, it includes a range of suggested leadership actions (i.e. practical strategies) that address these new challenges. We do not suggest that these phases are linear, rather we see both organizations and individuals move back and forth from one to another.

Finally, for leaders, this is a time to reflect again on who you want to be as a leader and, if you looked back at this time in 5 or 10 years, what will you have done now that will make you feel proud? Take action with that in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> To help organize resources and people and avoid overload and respond comprehensively, in practice the activities in each phase will overlap and occur simultaneously.



**Phase 1: Disruption: Leading through the Shock of the Crisis**

This phase is characterized by a sudden and unanticipated change in the environment that requires organizations to quickly adapt in order both to protect staff and clients and lay the foundation for sustaining the organization throughout the crisis.

**Key Questions:**

1. How do we ensure safety and survival for staff, clients and our organization?
2. How do we reorganize our resources and structures, and revise our policies to continue to achieve our mission and purpose?
3. What, if any, past experiences can we tap into/build on to help bring insight to how we respond?
4. What values, norms and expectations do we want to sustain and what new norms and expectations do we need to set?

Organizational Shifts	Human Experience	Organizational Response
<p><b>Where/how work is happening</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Distancing</li> <li>• Work from home</li> <li>• Changes in hours</li> </ul> <p><b>Clients/Customers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service disruption</li> <li>• Delivery vs. in-person</li> <li>• Delayed orders</li> </ul> <p><b>Staff</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Layoffs, furloughs</li> <li>• Reduced or increased hours</li> <li>• Change of assignments</li> <li>• Pay cuts</li> </ul> <p><b>Work/Home</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No clear boundaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disorientation</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Grief/Loss</li> <li>• Lack of control</li> <li>• Fear (for self/family)</li> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• Sense of being overwhelmed</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Openness to new opportunities</li> </ul>	<p><b>Executive Leadership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine potential impact of the situation on your people and organization immediately</li> <li>• Put staff safety first</li> <li>• Understand potential business &amp; financial impacts in immediate time frame</li> <li>• Distribute responsibilities to senior team and others to manage responses needed</li> <li>• Organize groups and teams to focus on responding to different concerns (staff, programs/services/products, maintaining client connections, financial/ business sustainability, ongoing administrative needs)</li> <li>• Make decisions with the awareness that some people (staff and clients) are more vulnerable than others, having fewer resources to rely on)</li> </ul> <p><b>Executive Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain decisions in context of organizational values</li> <li>• Develop a frequent cadence for executive communication to staff, clients/customers and other key stakeholders to update them on what is known and shifting organizational responses</li> <li>• Express empathy for staff and appreciation for what their willingness and efforts to adapt</li> <li>• Tell what you know and what you don't know - express calm confidence without false assurances</li> <li>• Communicate regularly with the Board</li> </ul>



**Phase 1: Disruption: Leading through the Shock of the Crisis**

**Organization/Operations Processes**

- Act quickly to protect staff and reorganize work (who will be remote? onsite?)
- Authorize others to make decisions in their areas to avoid delays in action
- Maximize safety for those still working on front lines
- Ensure people have resources needed to work effectively in new environments
- Set realistic expectations and processes for accountability: don't expect the same level of productivity as people adapt to new situations
- Establish processes for staying connected to team members
- Understand which individuals need more/less structure and support to function productively and provide what is needed in new configurations
- Provide training for those with new responsibilities (e.g., supervising remote workers/teams)
- Create processes to stay connected to clients
- Encourage collaboration within and among groups
- Be attentive to the fact that some people are more vulnerable than others due to having fewer resources to fall back on (both staff and clients); take this into consideration as changes are considered

**Communication**

- Communicate empathy for people's experience, appreciation for adapting, and support for people attending to their own and others' well-being
- Create psychological safety: answer questions openly and respond to staff concerns; avoid defensive responses
- Remind people that misunderstandings and conflicts are more likely to occur in times of stress; assume the best
- Encourage people to communicate directly when there are conflicts (use the phone, not email)
- Communicate clearly, candidly and frequently with individuals and teams to stay connected and reduce ambiguity as much as possible



## Phase 2: Temporary Equilibrium

There are two stages in this phase: Stage A is represented by integrating new ways of working and implementing new policies and processes to maximize efficiencies in a still changing environment with an uncertain future. Operations are less chaotic with new norms established. Stage B is characterized by innovation and planning for the future.

### Key Questions

1. What are we already learning about ourselves and others as well as the environment that will influence how we're operating now and might be relevant for the future?
2. What new norms and expectations do we need to set moving forward?
3. How do we keep everyone in the organization connected and motivated?
4. How do we begin to restructure for the future based on the foundations we've built, and the current lessons learned?
5. Who are we now, how do we want to be repositioned when this is over, what are the implications for our clients, customers, supply chain?
6. What do we want to refine, recommit to, revise, and/or replace?

### Organizational Shifts

### Human Experience

### Organizational Responses

### Stage A: Operational Stability

- Operations in the new form are beginning to stabilize
- Patterns are established for different work arrangements (knowing they might change based on shifts in the external environment)
- Federal, state and local health and safety regulations continue to evolve

- Concern about duration of situation
- Ongoing anxiety about health and safety of self and loved ones
- Grief and loss
- Increasing comfort with new ways of working
- Drop in energy
- Drop in motivation and engagement
- Energy swings

### Executive Leadership

- Reflect on and refine what is and isn't working currently re: critical mission-related efforts
- Attend to organizational needs and revise organizational policies and processes (communication, team interactions, etc.) to address them
- Encourage innovations and continuous improvement initiatives that can strengthen the organization once Recovery is reached
- Organize cross-functional leadership teams or groups to pay attention to three periods of time: now, emerging future, and new normal to provide feedback to the planning process in Stage II (below)
- Rely on and encourage a diverse set of people to take leadership
- Notice leaders who are emerging in the midst of the crisis, responsibility
- Update your Board regularly



		<p><b>Executive Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to communicate frequently and consistently with all staff, updating them on progress and any additional changes in the environment or policies of the organization</li> <li>• Continue to express appreciation for employees' efforts and organizational successes</li> <li>• Ensure core values remain the basis for organizational decisions and communicate decisions in that context</li> <li>• Acknowledge and appreciate differential impact of the crisis on employees (i.e. impact on those who are virtual vs. those who still work on site; those with young children and those without)</li> </ul> <p><b>Organizational Operations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create processes to continually understand what is and is not working well for people/ the organization and make adjustments to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness</li> <li>• Modify workflows as needed (e.g., different shifts/work schedules; how work is distributed)</li> <li>• Capture the innovation and adaptations emerging formally or informally that could be valuable to continue when the crisis ends</li> <li>• Continue to develop and test new supervisory practices to manage the workforce and keep people connected</li> </ul> <p><b>Communication (Managers &amp; Supervisors)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue with regular, frequent communication with individuals and teams</li> <li>• Continue to express appreciation for accomplishments of individuals and team</li> <li>• Ask for feedback about any obstacles or needed resources</li> <li>• Foster collaboration among individuals and teams to minimize duplication/frustrations; may mean creating new communications channels</li> </ul>
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**Stage B: Preparing for the Future: Improvement, Innovation & Planning**

- Continued reassessment of financial realities and implications for mission-delivery and personnel
- Discovering innovations and adaptations
- Exploring new options (e.g. government recovery efforts, new revenue opportunities)

- Optimism and skepticism that planning for the future is meaningful in this world of pandemics

**Executive Leadership**

- Reflect with cross-functional teams (see above) about what is being learned about leadership/structure/programs & services/operations with an eye towards adaptations and innovation & new organizational strengths; encourage people to listen to customers/ vendors to understand emerging changes and needs; engage a broad group re input into SWOT analysis
- Undertake scenario planning to create possible service and staffing plans for how the organization experiences Recovery
- Revisit overall business model if changes may be significant
- Update your strategic plan if you have a clear sense of the future – note changes in services, delivery methods, markets, infrastructure, staffing.
- Assign teams to work on and/or track improvements in the organization's infrastructure and/or processes – the things you know need improvement, but no one has had time to address, or changes you've had to make that are improvements

**Executive Communications**

- Continue to communicate frequently, giving updates, providing transparency around decisions, expressing appreciation for staff, and emphasizing the organization's values
  - Include the Board's input and/or guidance in the planning process
  - Provide regular updates on any changes in organizational operations
- Engage staff at all levels in generating ideas, improvements and innovations for the strategic plan that will contribute to helping the organization move forward

**Communication (Managers and Supervisors)**

- Express appreciation for staff's participation and commitment to the planning process and the organization's future
- Continue regular communication with your team



### Phase 3: Recovery

This phase is characterized by the immediate crisis ending and the general economy improving. Clients/customers return. Organizations that were distressed but survived may be expanding their production and services to customers, testing new markets, and/or figuring out how to operate in the medium-term with new restrictions in place.

#### Key Strategic Questions

1. What structural changes in how the “work is done” will be carried forward? (ex: will people be working remotely more of the time; will we have more shifts with fewer staff on each? Will tele-medicine be the norm for initial diagnosis and treatment?)
2. How will what we have learned change our business/financial model?
3. How will staffing models and organizational designs change based on what we’ve learned?
4. How do we integrate innovations and improvements developed during the crisis into our ongoing operations?
5. How will the organization be prepared if there is another major disruption?

Changes	Human Experience	Organizational Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff come back intermittently</li> <li>• Where and how work is done may shift again</li> <li>• Innovations and adaptations become new ways of operating</li> <li>• Government recovery efforts result in long-term policy changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New identities as survivors and/or victims</li> <li>• Survivor guilt for some; trauma and/or loss for others</li> <li>• Higher morale re; “surviving”</li> <li>• Feeling of unity in surviving together</li> <li>• New attitudes toward work, health, and government</li> <li>• Openness to new information</li> </ul>	<p><b>Executive Leadership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement revised strategic plan with clear milestones for progress and check points to review or revise plan</li> <li>• Ongoing analysis of the environment and any changes</li> <li>• Determine priorities for acquiring resources to support the plan</li> <li>• Implement revisions to business/financial model</li> <li>• Realign and communicate structure, policies, roles with new normal</li> <li>• Continue to communicate regularly with Board</li> <li>• Begin planning to better prepare the organization in case of a future crisis, including preparing for and monitoring for a possible return to disruption due to covid-19</li> <li>• Celebrate success</li> </ul>



<b>Phase 3: Recovery</b>		
		<p><b>Executive Communications</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue with frequent communication to all staff updating them on progress and any additional changes in the environment or the organization</li> <li>Reassert organization’s core values and how any changes now being implemented are consistent with them</li> <li>Communicate what has ended and what has been tested and pulled through the crisis</li> </ul> <p><b>Organizational Operations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At all levels, describe new/enduring purpose of the organization and each employee’s new/enduring part</li> <li>Determine which changes in responsibilities and/or reporting relationships will remain in place and/or what they will be now and going forward</li> <li>Fully incorporate improvements, innovations and adaptations that emerged during the crisis as better ways of working</li> <li>Set expectations for work as the organization moves into recovery; clarify roles, responsibilities and authority</li> <li>Empower staff to participate in ongoing learning and continuous improvements</li> <li>Reinforce new forms of collaboration and communication among subgroups</li> </ul> <p><b>Communication (Managers and Supervisors)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Express appreciation for staff’s commitment and flexibility that contributed to getting the organization through the crisis</li> <li>Continue frequent communication with individuals and teams until operations are stable</li> <li>Keep two-way communication channels open and continue timely responses to questions and concerns</li> </ul>

*We will be updating this framework on a regular basis as the situation develops, and as we learn more from what organizations are doing during through this time. Last updated: 05/12/2020*