RESEARCH NOTE

A pandemic of uncertainty: Leading together when we can't see the future alone

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Abstract

Purpose: *In this research note, I reflect on the role of certainty in educational planning, amid the challenges to certainty posed by the COVID pandemic. This reflection is autoethnographic, based on theoretical literature from the field of organizational leadership, as well as my own teaching observations.*

Methods: *Over the past several months, the COVID pandemic has undermined and frustrated efforts to plan the future. In this paper a litterature review research was adopted.*

Results: *The possibility opened by the pandemic is that organizational leadership can become more relational, fluid, and responsive; rather than relying on assumptions of certainty. To further enrich this argument, follow-up studies could explore specific examples and cases in which organizations have adjusted their assumptions regarding certainty, planning, and leadership.*

Implications: *Insight identified in this article has lasting implications for how educational institutions approach planning and how organizations can cultivate leadership to be more resilient and nimble.*

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1   INTRODUCTION

The COVID pandemic has caused the end of a world. The world that's ended, is a world of certainty, forecasts, and confident plans for the future. The COVID pandemic has exposed, and upended, assumptions which underlie dominant modes of organizational management. As I explore in this essay, that disruption in certainty can actually produce an opening for organizations to become more agile and resilient. The pandemic enables us to reflect on our assumptions about certainty in ways that could enable more responsive, shared leadership for a future that is inherently, and increasingly, unpredictable.

2   GOING APOCALYPTIC AGAIN

In 2016, I edited a book entitled *Apocalyptic Leadership in Education* (Miller, 2016). At the time, the notion of

"apocalyptic leadership" was borrowed from Jensen (2013), who argued for the importance of educators confronting multiple crises of climate change and social injustice. Jensen was not actually predicting the end of the world when he talked about apocalypse; rather, he was arguing that we should hold the world's deepest problems in the forefront of our educational work. Even amid the constrained possibilities for system change, Jensen suggests, educators still need to "go apocalyptic" and face the looming threats to our collective well-being and survival in our teaching, writing, and leading.

But when I wrote about apocalyptic leadership in 2016, I never expected that, within my lifetime, the world would actually end...perhaps not the whole world, but a world we knew.

Over the past several months, there have been moments that have felt positively apocalyptic, with the entire planet exposed to a common danger, with all of us fearing that our health, as well as a familiar way of being, is threatened. And

we're now coming to realize that the pre-pandemic world--in which it was safe to teach in a classroom, safe to attend a meeting, safe to sit together over coffee at a café--has somehow ended.

For many educational leaders, what can feel particularly apocalyptic is the end of certainty. It is no longer possible to forecast the future, based on stable assumptions and clear parameters. In emails and websites, leaders repeatedly invoke terms such as "uncharted" or "unprecedented" to indicate that they cannot see what's coming with any clarity or certainty. They don't know any more than we do and can no longer claim a superior range of vision.

If our leaders can't see what's coming and can't navigate the COVID crisis with any clarity, what does it mean to lead? For some, the pandemic has caused an existential crisis of leadership identity.

3 LEADERSHIP AMID UNCERTAINTY

The pandemic resulted in a global shutdown of educational institutions in the spring of 2020. Since then, thousands of schools, colleges, and universities have faced complex logistical questions about how they re-open their classrooms and offices. Given the enormous complexity involved in this challenge, it is not surprising that administrators are pre-occupied with short-term, tactical decisions (Bowen, 2020). There is an intense pressure on forecasting, planning, and scenario-building to ease the intense anxieties and answer the relentless questions that students, staff, and communities all ask: How do we arrange our schedules and classrooms? Which classes will be online? How will student achievement be assessed? How will faculty be evaluated? What about next semester? How long will these changes last?

Now more than ever, managers and staff are hungry for certainty. It's an expected response to chaotic, disorienting events. As Wheatley observes, «*Uncertainty leads to increased fear. As fear levels rise, it is normal for people to focus on personal security and safety. We tend to withdraw, become more self-serving and more defensive. We focus on smaller and smaller details, those things we can control. It becomes more difficult to work together and nearly impossible to focus on the bigger picture.*» (2007, p. 115)

In an email conversation, one of my university colleagues observed that it seems like everyone is waiting to be told what to do. We are all waiting for The Plan to be pronounced, by the system office, by the Chancellor's Office, or some other similar central authority. We are often reminded: The Plan is being developed; please be patient and wait for The Plan.

It only makes sense; people are waiting for clarity from the "top" and managers typically assume their essential work is creating a solid, well-lit pathway for their organizations. Most managers hold (an often unexamined) modernist paradigm, which centers on the importance of rational decisions, clear plans, and control of the future (Kezar, 2018).

What's happened during the pandemic, is that parameters which guide planning have dissolved. There's no firm foundation on which to base decisions. Radical uncertainty is now certain. In a recent essay, Bowan (2020) argues that

university leaders should not expect that the situation will "calm down" anytime soon.

What we know for sure is that more chaos, volatility, stress and disorder will come. We like plans, but what we need is nimbleness. As we saw with milk and toilet paper, the increased efficiency of on-demand supply chains becomes a vulnerability during rapid change. We need optionality. Humans have a bias to wait for more certainty, but when new information is almost certain to be contradictory and chaotic, we are waiting in vain. More uncertainty is coming, not less. (para. 6)

As Bowan suggests, the leadership challenge of the pandemic is existential. Fundamentally, it's a challenge of shifting from an orientation of prediction and control - the domain of modernist planning - to an orientation of agility, responsiveness, and embodied co-presence amid uncertainty. In short, leaders are being asked to give up leading alone from the "front", and thus, stand together with others as we find our way forward together.

Leadership theorist and cultural critic, Margaret Wheatley, frames this challenge as a shift from a preoccupation on fixed plans to the process of being collectively responsive to changing circumstances. In the years following the events of 9/11 in the United States, she wrote the following: Being present for what's happening in the moment doesn't mean that we act without intention or flow directionless through life without a plan. But in an unpredictable world, we would do better to look at plans and measures as *processes* that enable a group to discover shared interests, to clarify its intent and strengthen its connections to new people and new information. We need less reverence for the plan as an object and much more attention to the processes we use for planning and measuring. It is attention to the process, more than the product, that enables us to weave an organization as flexible and resilient as a spider's web. (p. 112)

What do leaders do, if they can't map and manage detailed scenarios? What Wheatley and other leadership theorists offer, is a vision of leadership based on the emergent intelligence of living systems. Such systems find their own solutions, as they adapt to a changing environment. Adaptation relies on an exquisite sensitivity to the present, what's unfolding now, rather than rigid plans made in the past. Resilience comes from an internal sense of coherent values as well as thick, trust-rich interpersonal connections across the system.

For Wheatley, the essential leadership task during an apocalyptic moment like the current COVID pandemic, is simply to trust others. Because leaders cannot control outcomes on their own, because forces of chaos are more powerful than our institutional mechanisms of stability and planning, what leaders can do, is call us to turn toward each other (Wheatley, 2007). This turn does not mean passivity. Even without plans, Wheatley argues, we can prepare for the future: *It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be*. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another. (2007, p. 117)

Wheatley's approach to uncertainty is not anti-planning; rather, it seeks grounding in our co-presence and confidence that we can take care of each other, and we'll know what to do, when we need to do it, because we hold a sense of shared

presence, purpose, and care for each other. That's what, for Wheatley, creates the flexibility and strength of a spider's web that holds our work together.

Based on several decades of leadership experience in higher education, Haney (2020) also suggests a shift in the way we think about planning—not to abandon it, but to reframe planning as engagement in design. Haney builds on insights from processes of design thinking that have emerged in technology-based industries. Innovative companies have focused on specific, user-oriented problems to solve and opened creative spaces to imagine (and prototype) multiple solutions. Haney contrasts the questions that need to be asked by a designer and planner. Rather than the planner's question about where the institution wants to be in five years, the designer's question, for Haney, is this: "what problems do we need to solve?"

This change in question shifts attention from inherently unknowable predictions, to what can be done now, in order to creatively engage with real problems. Haney also suggests that, rather than exhausting planning committees in trying to reach consensus about future goals, to focus on providing resources to innovative, problem-solving people who will tinker toward the future and energize others' creativity. Broadly, this approach envisions the future as emerging in cycles of organizational learning in a climate of freedom to notice, respond, create, reflect, and then do it again.

4 WHAT MY STUDENTS TAUGHT ME ABOUT THE PANDEMIC

I teach organizational theory in an online doctoral program in educational leadership. This spring, my doctoral students surprised me. I invited them to reflect on their experience of the COVID pandemic and how it had impacted organizational life in their schools and colleges. Many of them wrote about the precipitous shift to online learning, a common challenge across systems. What surprised me, though, was another theme: autonomy.

The pandemic demanded that superintendents and principals admit to their staff, "We don't know....and we trust you to do what's best." Several teachers and mid-level administrators felt a new-found sense of autonomy and respect under these circumstances. Rather than being treated as cogs in the "achievement machine", teachers were being freed of restrictive accountability mechanisms so that they could respond to the situation in front of them. They were tasked with finding new solutions to immediate problems, and they experienced that upper-level administrators were listening to their ideas more intently. Institutional hierarchies which had kept them "in their place" had dissolved; when everything was out of place, the organization suddenly needed everyone's best thinking to survive.

What I learned from my doctoral students, is that the pandemic can provide a catalyst to dramatically enrich educational leadership--if leaders can relax their grip on hierarchical command as well as their desire for certainty.

Given deep and abiding uncertainty, how do leaders move forward? Fundamentally, uncertainty calls for rich communication, abiding trust, and the capacity for quick collective responsiveness to changing events. Organizational

agility, in turn, requires particular cultural understandings; for example, a high tolerance for ambiguity and error. Organizational agility calls for the organization to pursue plans as experiments, knowing that some are likely to fail, or run into dead-ends, while others may produce something new that we didn't expect.

In my own College of Education, we had been preparing to revise a multi-year strategic plan. And then the pandemic hit. Since then, there has been little mention of strategic planning, as we begin to understand how we may be wearing masks and maintaining social distancing requirements for the next one to two years. Our planning work has become more localized, as each unit/department begins thinking about what it needs now and how it could work differently. Central offices realize that each unit must think for itself about the nature of its goals and daily interactions, and how its work could be accomplished differently. Planning in these circumstances becomes necessarily local, contextual, and relational. I have been asked to co-convene a group of "think partners" to help our college better understand the needs, anxieties, and aspirations of our community as we move forward together. Although some may envision our primary task as the preparation of more scenarios and plans, I would suggest that our work may be best understood as being in conversation together, now, and beginning to ask questions that will open new pathways of experimentation and adaptation.

5 CONCLUSION

Rather than waiting for the central office or the next ad-hoc planning task force to promulgate a plan, what if the pandemic interrupts how leadership happens and our assumptions about who can lead? In educational institutions around the world, the pandemic has forced us to behave differently and organize differently. It's also inviting us to think about leadership differently, to adopt a more organic, uncertainty-tolerant understanding of change. What if our organizations could resist the urge to produce detailed plans and take this pandemically-produced pause in "normal" operations to reflect on our deeper assumptions about our work, and how we accomplish it together? The acceptance of uncertainty as an existential reality invites leaders to relax their grip on planning, trust more fully in their moment-to-moment presence, and lean into their community's capacity for creative problem-solving.

One world ending opens the possibility of other worlds being born. In pandemic circumstances, we have a radical opportunity to rethink our desire for certainty because certainty is no longer available and is not coming back. In terms of leadership, the possibility is to adopt a stance of profound humility and relationality, and thus, open space for others to share in collective leadership work. In a crisis, people find meaning when they feel that the organization actually needs them more than it needs plans...and needs them more than ever.

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