



northeast regional
children's advocacy center

CAC LEADERSHIP

LESSONS LEARNED FROM NAVIGATING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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ABSTRACT

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) leaders have been presented with challenges the likes of which they have never seen before. Essentially overnight, CAC leaders had to think of ways to shift their center’s direct service delivery and the management of staff and multidisciplinary team (MDT) members facing daunting levels of uncertainty, all while staying true to the vision and mission of the CAC. In this issue brief, we examine lessons learned from leaders of the CAC movement in tandem with current research on crisis leadership, with the intention of providing insight for leading through adversity, no matter what the crisis.

INTRODUCTION

A crisis can be defined as “a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten...an organization’s high priority goals” (*Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007, p. 7*). During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of uncertainty of the state of the world increased organizational challenges associated with decision-making. “At an international, national and community level, leaders across all sectors have been required to respond to both direct and indirect effects of this crisis, with little time for preparation, and in a constantly changing environment.” (*Ahern & Loh, 2020*). In 2021, just when we thought the pandemic was starting to get under control, variants began to spread throughout the US and the world, indicating the pandemic was not yet over.

Through interviews with leaders in the CAC movement from the northeast region of the United States, several themes rose to the surface which we have incorporated in this brief under “lessons learned.” These themes encompass the individual qualities needed to lead through a crisis; the importance of setting the right tone for the organization’s response to crisis; and what was needed to make the best possible decisions during uncertain times. The insights shared from the leaders interviewed coincide with much of the research and commentary provided in recent months regarding leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“A crisis is when it is most important for leaders to uphold a vital aspect of their role: making a positive difference in people’s lives” (*D’Auria and DeSmet, 2020*). By sharing lessons learned from CAC leaders navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope that current and future leaders in the CAC movement will be inspired to lead with confidence and continued adaptability no matter what adversities they are faced with down the road.



Leading a children’s advocacy center and multidisciplinary team is a complex undertaking that requires a wide set of competencies. In the best of times, navigating through the decisions that must be made, developing and maintaining critical relationships, and addressing the inevitable “fires” that need to be put out on a daily basis, can stretch the best of leaders to their maximum capacity, all of this while leading a group of team members who are serving children and families suffering from the trauma of abuse.

From our interviews with CAC leaders, we have identified individual leadership qualities they found to be important during the pandemic, which include:

COMPASSION & EMPATHY



It is fair to say that professionals in the children’s advocacy center movement are a compassionate group by nature, and most often their compassion is directed toward the children and families they serve. Many of the leaders we interviewed spoke to the importance of compassion and empathy in recognizing the fact that all their team members were experiencing the pandemic in their own way. They emphasized the importance of giving grace to MDT members and staff in their attempt to seek work/life balance. “Strong empathic responses are important at times when many people’s lives are disrupted and families have lost loved ones.” (Ahern and Loh, 2020).

“Strong empathic responses are important at times when many people’s lives are disrupted and families have lost loved ones.”

- Ahern & Loh, 2020



HUMILITY & VULNERABILITY



From the onset of COVID-19, everyone was faced with a level of uncertainty, rapidly changing information about the dangers of the virus, and the challenge of searching for the best way to move forward as individuals, as organizations, and as a society. CAC leaders were placed in a position where decisions had to be made that would impact the children and families in their communities and the staff/team members that were tasked with providing services. A worldwide, life-threatening pandemic will humble the best of leaders and open them up to a feeling of vulnerability to which many leaders are not accustomed.

"Research shows that demonstrating vulnerability, such as grief over shared losses or authentic feelings about the impact of changes on employees, can help build trust."

- Mendy, et al, 2020

"Research shows that demonstrating vulnerability, such as grief over shared losses or authentic feelings about the impact of changes on employees, can help build trust." (Mendy, et al, 2020). During a crisis, embracing these feelings can prove to be beneficial to the way a leader leads their people through challenging times. Acknowledging that each individual has the right to ensure their own personal safety and that of their loved ones, while at the same time, maintaining their dedication to the work at hand, allowed staff and team members to express their own vulnerability and know they would be met with acceptance and support. In the words of Brene Brown, "The courage to be vulnerable is not about winning or losing, it's about the courage to show up when you can't predict or control the outcome."

COURAGE TO LEAD



The CAC/MDT model is built on the concept of collaboration and cooperation, and both are important during times of crisis. But, as one CAC leader commented, "there are times when someone needs to emerge as the leader." At the onset of the pandemic and almost overnight, CAC leaders had to make decisions that would impact children and families served, CAC staff, and agency partners. These decisions not only focused on providing services for the trauma children and families were suffering, but also the health and safety of everyone involved with the CAC. The leaders we spoke with recognized the importance of having the courage to take on this massive responsibility. They found the strength to make and stand by decisions based on the best

information they had at the time. And when they were wrong, they had the courage to admit their mistakes and move forward, exhibiting humility and vulnerability.

FORWARD-THINKING



"In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity"

(*Albert Einstein*). When leaders are faced with a crisis, it is easy to have tunnel vision and focus in on the immediate needs that will resolve

the crisis in the quickest way possible. While resolution of the crisis and immediate safety concerns were of paramount importance, many of the leaders we spoke to for this paper realized that the decisions they were making in response to the pandemic could be opportunities for change in the future. As one CAC leader put it, "I was looking to make the best decision for today, but also a decision that would stick tomorrow."

"In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity."

- Albert Einstein





SETTING THE TONE



One of the most important roles of a leader in any organization is that of “tone setter.” The tone leaders set is critical for the comfort, the safety, and the responses of teams. How an organization and the people that work within it respond to a crisis is often dictated by the response of the leader. If the leader responds to crisis with panic and disorganization, the organization’s response will more than likely follow that same path. Many of the leaders interviewed for this paper spoke about “slowing down” and “staying calm” as the pandemic started to impact their ability to deliver services. The importance of setting this tone appears to be two-fold. First, leaders spoke to being a calming presence for their staff, and in turn, for the children and families being served. This would prove to be crucial in helping everyone navigate through the uncertainty of COVID-19.

“My first thought was to be calm and steady.”

- CAC Leader

During the early stages of the pandemic, CAC leaders were faced with the difficult challenge of trying to determine what information was valid and what was not. Identifying reliable sources of information was key. All the while, there was an immediacy to making these decisions as the virus continued to spread through our communities. While it may sound paradoxical, many of the CAC leaders we spoke with related the importance of “slowing down” to speed up their decision-making process. In times of crisis, leaders are often faced with many people with varying opinions. CAC leaders may have Boards of Directors, work under an umbrella agency, or work as part of a government-based agency, all of whom the CAC leader must answer to. In addition, partner agency leaders are likely to contribute their points of view. The leaders we spoke with shared the importance of taking in all the information but avoiding making “knee-jerk” decisions.



DECISION-MAKING



DECISIVENESS



CAC leaders are problem solvers by nature. During the everyday course of business within a CAC, the leader is faced with a multitude of decisions ranging from the purchase of building supplies to how to best meet the needs of children and families they serve.

Crisis, a time when a difficult or important decision must be made, is not uncommon for most CAC leaders. Throughout the interviews for this paper, there was a certain sense of pragmatism from all the CAC leaders. While the COVID-19 pandemic presented situations outside the “normal” crises that make up everyday life at a child advocacy center, leader after leader shared they never had a doubt that “we were going to get this done.”

That said, a question that begs to be answered is, “How are decisions made when faced with a crisis as widespread and potentially overwhelming as the pandemic?” One CAC leader spoke about their difficulty with decision-making because they never knew if the decision was correct and how it might impact staff, team members, and families, stating, “I always felt like I was operating in a gray area...and that is a really scary place to be.” It was difficult to know if the decision was too overboard or too lax since information was changing so rapidly, especially in the early days of the pandemic.

“How are decisions made when faced with a crisis as widespread and potentially overwhelming as the pandemic?”

- CAC Leader

The fact that information was changing so quickly made decision-making difficult since leaders never felt comfortable that they had all the information they needed. “Decisions you make need to be informed but are not always precise.” Process matters. Having a decision-making process in place within your organization/team is the foundation to making good decisions during a crisis. “We have had to negotiate with each other about how not to break down when we disagree.” (CAC leader).



SUPPORT SYSTEMS



Many of the leaders we spoke with stressed the importance of identifying their individual strengths as decision makers and having a support system to help them when making decisions. Many came to realize the important role participatory and inclusive decision-making can play when leading an organization through a crisis. They learned the importance of leveraging the strengths of their team to fill in those areas where they may not be as strong. The leaders also spoke about the importance of staying true to organizational values and culture for guidance in decision-making. As one leader put it, "Values guide the decisions and processes at our CAC."

"Values guide the decisions and processes at our CAC."

- CAC Leader

CAC leaders are decision makers. Pragmatic leaders who are not afraid to make decisions even when faced with conflicting and uncertain information. What resonated throughout these interviews was that CAC leaders are also filled with hope. They look at crises with hope and the belief that there is something they and their team can do to make it better.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS



Decision-making during a crisis cannot be done in isolation. All the leaders we spoke with described relying on a team of people within and outside their organizations to help guide them through the many decisions that had to be made during the pandemic. One leader described it like this, "I have a job that has a tremendous amount of responsibility and no authority. Everything I have done for the past ...years has been based on relationships."





During the early stages of the pandemic, many people struggled with how fast information was changing, the volume of information, and the not knowing who to trust or who had the most accurate information. All the leaders we spoke with stressed the importance of transparency, and having constant, consistent, and honest communication with their staff members. They quickly learned that if they did not provide information to their team members, that the team members would fill in the gaps from other resources. Many of the CAC leaders stressed the importance of identifying reliable information sources and getting that information to their team members as quickly as possible. "As soon as we got it, they got it" was how one CAC leader described the process.

TRANSPARENCY



"Crises require leaders to take responsibility and do this visibly." (Ahern and Loh, 2020).

This shows accountability and willingness to share risks with their followers, which leads to a sense of solidarity among the entire staff. By being transparent with staff, leaders are modeling personal vulnerability, which allows staff to do the same and that lends itself to a strong sense of psychological safety for the team.

The CAC leaders we spoke with were also concerned about the loss of connection and isolation many team members were experiencing due to the national shutdown. They learned that it was important to take steps to keep the team connected in whatever way possible. Many spoke about frequent virtual meetings that focused on both professional obligations along with social connection. There was also a concern about the loss of connection to their purpose and the mission of the CAC. It became incumbent on CAC leaders to continually remind their staff members that they were still serving children and families, even though they were not providing services in person.

Throughout this experience, leaders learned that the more collaborative and inclusive they could be in their approach to leading the team, the better it would be for their team. In the NRCAC

"Crises require leaders to take responsibility and do this visibly."

- Ahern & Loh, 2020

Leadership Exchange and Coaching Project, participants explore the concept of taking a “witness stance” in their role as a leader. Sitting in a position of compassion and “walking with” others through the experience. Whether they were aware of the concept or not, this rang true for the leaders we spoke with for this paper. Each of them learned and valued the importance of being vulnerable and experiencing the pandemic with their teams. This manifested by being able to show staff members grace, not micromanaging them, and demonstrating trust in their teams while still holding them accountable. They also welcomed the idea of group decision-making while also accepting the responsibility that comes with their leadership role.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE



Strong relationships among staff, peers, and MDT members is critical when faced with a crisis. Most CAC leaders understand the value of trusting relationships under normal circumstances. When faced with crisis, this makes it much easier to count on one another and build consensus when making complex decisions that can impact their team and partnering agencies.

On the other hand, working to establish relationships during the pandemic was a necessary added step for those who had not made relationships a priority in the past. This is crucial when determining how to move forward with services, especially when changes in the services of the CAC might impact the work of partnering agencies.

CAC staff should be able to weigh in as well when determining how to move forward. When staff feel they have a voice, this enhances trust. By relying on a shared sense of purpose and values, and instilling empathy and grace for each person’s individual needs resulting from the disruption of their lives due to the pandemic, leaders can sustain trust among their staff and partners.

“Everything I have done for the past 15 years has been based on relationships.”

- CAC Leader

CONNECTEDNESS



Sustaining trust and strong relationships requires the need to remain connected to those who are impacted by leaders’ decisions. Leading in the spirit of collaboration with staff and partnering agencies can provide a sense of buy-in and elevate trust. Interviewees shared that the onset of the pandemic forced them to increase communication with staff, peers, and agency partners. Although much of this was accomplished through virtual meetings, it did give people the opportunity to meet more frequently and connect on a more regular basis.

This provided a sense of inclusion, which lessened the effect of isolation when working remotely.

Several interviewees shared that their understanding of the impact of trauma helped them know the importance of listening to staff, peers, and agency partners with an empathic ear. Many leaders interviewed emphasized their roles as servant leaders, making sure people had what they needed to perform their duties.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion was on the forefront during this time due to the George Floyd murder, and police involvement. Providing support to staff and MDT partners struggling with these concerns became an important role for leaders, in addition to addressing the pandemic. More than ever, open, compassionate communication was necessary to persevere.



CONCLUSION

“You don’t just become a good leader in a crisis, you should be a good leader all the time.” (CAC leader). Child Advocacy Center leaders have become accustomed to managing crisis and leading their teams through the various issues that arise during the daily course of business. But there was something different about the COVID-19 pandemic that had CAC leaders reflecting on their leadership in a different way. What we learned from our research and from the interviews conducted was that the pandemic helped leaders value the importance of looking in, reaching out, and always, always, moving forward.

The hectic pace of being a CAC leader does not lend itself to reflection on the personal qualities that leaders want/need to bring to the role. During a crisis, the qualities we possess often rise to the surface, both good and bad. Leader after leader shared that what they learned from the pandemic was the value of exploring the qualities that made them the leaders they are and strengthening the qualities that will help them continue to become the leaders they want to be. It is important to consider the appropriate leadership stance and take the time to develop it before a crisis hits so it can be the foundation from which to lead.

To a person, every leader we spoke with for this paper stressed the importance and reliance on the team of people they had around them. The weight of a leadership position is real and most likely has never been as heavy as it has been the past 2 years, but it is not a weight the leader needs to bear alone. Building a team of trusted people who challenge and help make difficult decisions, can ease the burden of leadership during a crisis.

Two things struck us the most in developing this brief. The first was that the leaders we spoke with, while acknowledging the enormity of the global pandemic, never wavered in their dedication and calling to continue providing services to the children and families in their communities. Their ability to adapt, innovate, and embrace change came naturally out of necessity. The second was their ability to continually look to the future and make decisions that would not only manage the crisis in the moment but would prove to be beneficial to the CAC and the children and families they serve down the road.

While acknowledging the toll the pandemic has taken on CAC leaders both personally and professionally, we believe there are some lessons leaders can take away from having navigated through the crisis up to this point. The field is flush with leadership models, trainings, and resources, and it is not our intention to promulgate one over the other. What we do hope is that readers will take some of the lessons learned from the leaders we spoke with and apply it to their personal and professional development as they continue to grow in their role of CAC leader.

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