COVID-19 Local Response Initiative Session Nine
"Leading Diverse and Dispersed Teams in Times of Crisis"

This handout reviews key points on crisis leadership from session nine of the Covid-19 Local Response Initiative for city leaders with Amy Edmondson and Jorrit de Jong.

TEAMWORK ON THE FLY

As you work to respond to and manage the evolving threat of Covid-19—and the ripple effects of efforts to mitigate it—you are constantly **reaching across boundaries, seeking out new expertise, and standing up new programs and processes**—all from behind a screen or a mask and across physical, cultural, organizational, and political divides.

This crisis thus challenges you to **adjust your instincts, your assumptions, and your normal working methods** all at once.

To lead your city through this time of upheaval, you must engage in "teamwork on the fly," coordinating loose networks, teams, and task forces to **plan, execute, and learn—not sequentially but simultaneously**.

Many of you cited **collaboration and managing teams remotely** as the top challenges you currently face.

- What tools can you bring to these complex leadership challenges?
- How can you bring people together to act with urgency, absorb new knowledge, and adapt continually?

HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE FOR EFFECTIVE TEAMING

Responding with agility to this multidimensional crisis means embracing the shift from forming and managing bounded teams **to inspiring and enabling "teaming"**—bringing together more temporary and fluid collaborative teams comprising the expertise and ideas you need to tackle new and emerging issues.

This work presents both **technical and interpersonal challenges**. You will have to navigate conflicting values and priorities, confusion or discomfort around chain-of-command issues and reporting practices, to say nothing of the general awkwardness of doing all this from a safe distance.

Neither traditional project management nor old-fashioned team building practices translate very well in a rapidly evolving and unpredictable crisis environment. The differences are at least the following:

- You face many **unknowns**
- You have to bring in different **expertise** at different times.
- You **lack** fixed roles and deliverables
- You often have to do things that have **never** been done before
- You have to **act** in order to learn

Teaming is an iterative process of relating, experimenting, and problem-solving. **How can you organize yourself and your collaborators in ways that permit you to learn as you execute and plan as you learn**?

HARDWARE:

Traditional project management tools must be modified to enable agile execution, where **updating** occurs as you gain new information and experience. Err on the side of overcommunicating. The pace of work combined with working at a distance requires a heavier hand to ensure coordination or communication among partners. **Be explicit** about tasks, actions and expectations.

Scope the challenge:

- Start to identify needed expertise and tap collaborators.
- Take on and assign new roles and responsibilities.
- Determine what resources are needed—recognizing that these will shift over time.
- Set tentative goals.

Structure coordination:

- Work to create light structures to facilitate communication and collaboration.
- Clarify the interfaces between roles and responsibilities to identify points of intersection.
- Check in frequently and solicit feedback to ensure you are enabling progress (rather than micromanaging).

Sorting tasks:

- Prioritize reciprocal tasks (those that require back and forth discussion to make progress) to avoid creating bottlenecks and ensure that subgroups are coordinating as well as possible.
- DON'T assume everything has to be collaborative; not all tasks and decisions are team encounters.
- Delegate all tasks that can be done with minimal coordinating. Get yourself out of the way.

SOFTWARE:

While you cannot reap the benefits of working in close physical proximity right now, this moment of crisis may offer a few silver linings in terms of "software" challenges:

- You might not have to work as hard as you otherwise would to create **a sense of urgency and shared purpose**—but keep in mind that it is motivating to keep emphasizing the importance of the purpose.
- Shared recognition of everyone's **vulnerability** to this threat can support psychological safety (and ideally build habits of care that we will all carry into the future). **Fear that is shared can be productive**.

Interpersonal Fear at Work	Fear Related to COVID-19
Subtle/Hidden	Obvious/Explicit
Experienced Alone	A Shared Experience
Concerned with What Others Think	Concerned with What We Can Do
Inhibits Innovation	Promotes Innovation

There are three key considerations for helping people get comfortable with new ways of working.

Purpose: A compelling shared purpose motivates efforts and overrides conflict.

- Remind everyone whose efforts you need what's at stake, and what role they play in helping to solve the problem.
- Bring together project participants to discuss "arguable" changes in scope.

Psychological safety: Psychological safety is a shared understanding that the context is safe for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or failures—and that everyone's voice will be valued.

- DO model the behaviors that encourage others to contribute in meaningful ways:
  - Ask thoughtful questions and acknowledge gaps in your knowledge. Convey awareness of your own fallibility.
  - Emphasize the novel, experimental nature of the work.
  - Clarify the legal context and what is and is not permissible.
- DON'T mistake niceness for psychological safety. Psychological safety is not:
  - Freedom from conflict.
  - A guarantee that all your ideas will be applauded.
  - Permission to slack off.
  - A license to whine or overshare.

Empathy: Perspective taking is a key enabler of effective teaming. You are managing a diverse group, and everyone has a point of view their collaborators can learn from. To encourage empathy:

- Invest upfront in cross-domain learning.
- Align teams around professional values and find common ground.
- Encourage everyone to share their thought processes in a spirit of inquiry.
- Force moments of reflection: "What might I be missing?"

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING ZONE

Psychological safety and courage are two sides of the same (precious) coin. **A culture characterized by psychological safety and courage is—and will continue to be—needed in this crisis** (and in a complex and uncertain world). If you can build this culture and act with urgency, your teams will rise to the challenge.

Urgency + Psychological Safety → Problem Solving

Bear in mind that **getting in the problem-solving zone starts with you**. Our own cognitive biases and fears, dysfunctional group dynamics, and political and organizational pressures can push us to downplay risks and delay action. The more you check your instincts and assumptions and let the urgency of the moment drive you toward action, humility, empathy, and learning, the more effective you will be in your response.

What's *instinctive* when facing uncertainty	What's *needed* in a crisis
Waiting for additional information	Acting quickly on what you know
Downplaying the threat and withholding bad news	Communicating with transparency
Doubling down to explain your actions more clearly	Taking responsibility and focusing on solving problems
Staying the course	Engaging in constant updating