Coronavirus Local Response Initiative Session Five
"Crucibles of Leadership: From Conflict to Collaboration"

This handout reviews key points on crisis leadership from session five of the Coronavirus Local Response Initiative for city leaders with Howard Koh and Jorrit de Jong.

> *"Leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations."*
> *—Barry Posner and James Kouzes*

FACING CONFLICT

The most energy-intensive work you have to do as mayor involves **convening and collaborating** with others across departments, sectors, and levels of government. These efforts leave you and your staff working overtime to navigate tangles of **red tape** and manage **tensions** around resources and finances, turf, personalities, and access to power.

Leading collaborative work in the midst of an unfolding and evolving crisis *while keeping the urgent needs of your community front and center* strains the best of us, but it also offers **our best chance at an effective response and a resilient recovery**.

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Since you were undoubtedly already seeking cross-boundary solutions for "wicked problems" in your community before this particular crisis hit, you already know that:

- each wicked problem is a **unique** snarl of other problems, there are **no perfect solutions**, and progress is **slow** and halting.

- There is competition for **limited resources**.

- Different actors and stakeholders hold different **beliefs, opinions, and values**. There are different **communications styles** and preferences, different **interests**, and different **organizational cultures and assumptions**.

- There are concerns about **sensitivity** to different groups of historically disadvantaged stakeholders that can put everyone on edge.

All that is challenging in ordinary times. But when you drop it all into the exceptionally **volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous** (VUCA) environment the COVID-19 crisis produces, little wonder that tensions start to boil over, even when assuming the best intentions from everyone.

MANAGING CONFLICT

Broadly speaking, there are five approaches to consider regarding conflict:

- *Avoid* — ignore the conflict and take no action

- *Force* — use your formal authority without regard to the other party

- *Accommodate* — yield to the other party

- *Compromise* — identify a partially satisfactory solution for both sides
- *Collaborate* — co-operate with the other party **to understand their concerns** in order to find a **mutually satisfying solution**

The last option deserves special consideration in a time of crisis. The bad news is that it takes more time and energy than the others. The good news is that it gets you moving in the direction you want to go and ensures that **you don't have to go it alone**.

CROSS-BOUNDARY LEADERSHIP

The basics of cross-boundary leadership are straightforward: your task is to **build teams, solve problems, and get results.** We can break those tasks down a bit more.

Building Teams

- Work to **develop trust** among team members. Ideally, you can model trustworthy behavior to set the tone from the beginning. Ask yourself:
    - *How can I encourage empathy in this crisis?*
    - *Am I listening to other perspectives?*
- To **align motivations and values**, focus on the outcomes you are pursuing and who has the capacity and motivation to help you achieve them. Ask yourself:
    - *How do I identify and work with new, unexpected allies?*
    - *How can I leverage different stakeholders' motivations/values/ resources to create value?*
- Be proactive in your efforts to **manage power dynamics and conflict**. Jim Collins warns against raising the importance of the task over the importance of "getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats." Ask yourself:
    - *Who needs to be on the bus? In which seats?*
    - *Who isn't being heard?*

Everyone on your team is an individual with a unique set of strengths and weaknesses—including you. **Capitalize on that uniqueness**. Building trust means making the team **a safe place to take risks and make mistakes**. You can set the tone by **modeling vulnerability**, setting norms that ensure **everyone talks and is heard**, giving **credit to the team** when results are favorable, and **heading off attempts to lay blame** when they are not.

Solving Problems

- **Take a systems approach** to understand the problem through a wide lens. Ask yourself:
    - *How do I encourage each stakeholder to view the whole system?*
- You are coming together to work on a problem collaboratively because the usual ways of working could not fix it. But that is just the beginning of innovation. **Foster innovation** at every step along the way. Ask yourself:
    - *How am I actively encouraging new ideas and solutions?*
    - *How are we continuously improving (learning from failure)?*

- Finally, you cannot manage the problem-solving process if you don't know what success looks like or whether you're making progress. If you are going to get anywhere, you have to **define success and use data**. Ask yourself:

    o *What does success look like at the system level?*

    o *What data would tell us we are making progress?*

Wayne Gretzky famously advised hockey players to "skate to where the puck is going, not to where it has been." Parts of the problem you are trying to solve with your collaborative team will be familiar to some or all of you, but other parts are new and evolving, and **a flexible team itself represents an innovation in governance** around the problem.

To collaborate effectively, acknowledge that many or all of you are finding yourselves in **unfamiliar roles,** taking on **new responsibilities,** integrating **new values** into your understanding of the problem, and adjusting to **new ways of working**. Actively **seek out opinions that are different** from yours; **challenge your assumptions**. A good team practice for keeping your eye on where the puck is heading rather than where it's been is to establish a weekly **"proactive hour" for brainstorming**.

Achieving Impact

- One of the biggest (and most common) mistakes in efforts to tackle complex problems is a failure to **engage people directly affected by the problem**. Ask yourself:

    o *How are we engaging those most directly impacted in problem solving?*

    o *Do we understand what success looks like for those suffering the most?*

- Understand where your team has leverage and **use leverage points** effectively. Ask yourself:

    o *Which levers have biggest impact in the short term?*

    o *Which levers have the greatest potential for improving the problem over the long term?*

- Finally, you will learn hard lessons and claim hard-won victories along the way. Don't let the lessons learned wither on the vine; **share your learning**. Ask yourself:

    o *How am I communicating the story, and to whom?*

    o *How do we acknowledge and celebrate progress and "quick wins"?*

To maximize your impact, have everyone on your team working to **identify resources**—human or otherwise—that are underutilized. Be honest and **transparent with the data** and what it means, but don't let disappointing or incomplete data tell the story alone. Share human stories to **connect emotionally** and demonstrate to the public that there is a **system** in place, **working hard to protect people**.

THE CRUCIBLE EXPERIENCE

This crisis has thrown each and every one of you into a crucible. You are being put to the test and strained to the limit. As Nelson Mandela reminds us, "*It always seems impossible until it's done*." It will be some time before you can look back at this experience and see that you did the impossible. But whenever hindsight is possible, you will see that you walked through the fire, reframed adversity to create new meaning, and hopefully emerged stronger and more committed than ever to the values that called you to public leadership in the first place. **Self-doubt and vulnerability in this moment are inevitable, but so is growth.**