



M O N O G R A P H

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# **LEADING, LEARNING AND LOCKDOWN**

## **First thoughts on lessons for leadership from the coronavirus crisis**

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FETL monographs are short, forward-looking treatments of subjects key to the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Written at the invitation of the Trust, they aim to influence leadership in and of the sector, taking its present needs and concerns as their starting point and looking deeply into the experience of colleagues in order to devise scripts for the future. As with all FETL's work, the intention is not to offer definitive solutions but to engage readers in further thought and debate about issues crucial to the development of FE and skills in the UK, often drawing on ideas from other sectors and disciplines. Each monograph concludes with a number of key ways ahead for the sector.

## FOREWORD

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### Dame Ruth Silver

This is a hugely welcome contribution that reflects on the challenges the COVID-19 crisis has posed for learning and its leaders, and asks what it can tell us about leadership and the future of education. The almost overnight transition from face-to-face teaching to online and distance learning has placed significant and unprecedented demands on leaders, their institutions and staff. The response in further education, and in the education system more generally, has been remarkable, but there are also important lessons to be learned from all of this, and this FETL monograph begins the process.

Leaders sit at the interface between national policy directives and their staff and students. This is demanding at the best of times, especially in a sector where the policy environment is so changeable, but it is much more so when policy has to be changed on the hoof and the future is as uncertain as it has been at any moment in recent history. We really are on the verge of a new and unpredictable normal that we, as leaders, have, to an equally unpredictable extent, an opportunity to shape.

This important paper is timely not only for the sector, in view of the challenges we now face and the future we need to forge, but also for FETL, which is beginning the next adaptation of its focus. Some readers will know that in April 2020, with the COVID-19 crisis in full swing in the UK, FETL's board swiftly took the decision to extend the life of the trust by a further year beyond its intended seven-year span. We felt that, with the future so uncertain, our remit to promote and support the leadership of thinking in further education was more relevant than ever. We simply could not depart the field at a moment when the need to engage with the challenges of the present and to try to think beyond them, was so urgent.

While FETL's mission remains unchanged, the challenge of our work in this final year of operations is how the sector can begin to exit from the current emergency and how we can mobilise the voices of sector staff and leaders in thinking about what the future will look like. We want to excavate the wisdom of the sector by listening to all its voices but particularly those of frontline staff, frequently the first to encounter those stunned by the pandemic. With regard to further education and skills, we need to ask what it is the world needs now from us, and what is the agile learning from this emergency; what, in other words, does the emerging FE world need, and how can we deliver it?

Sir Chris Husbands' meditations on leadership, learning and lockdown represent a fitting beginning to this new phase. In these difficult and challenging times, when the present can seem all-consuming, it is more critical than ever that we try to fix our gaze on the future that is emerging from the crisis and on the potential role of FE and skills within that. I would like to add a note of respect and thanks to Sir Chris for rising to the call so eloquently and offering some direction and foresight from the heart of the storm.

*Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership*

## INTRODUCTION

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As are all leaders, I am used to dealing with the unexpected. As for all leaders, the COVID-19 coronavirus crept up on me – not unlike the way it infected its victims. From the end of 2019, I had followed the news stories as it spread from China, and it was clear from early February that it would require significant institutional responses. But, again like all other leaders, I think I was unprepared for the speed and scale of what was required. Governments around the world imposed lockdowns on their nations, essentially shutting down much of their economy to save lives and to relieve pressure on health services by slowing down the spread of the virus.

I lead a university of 32,000 students and 5,000 staff. Over a 48-hour period in mid-March 2020, the university pivoted from face-to-face to remote operation. In place of two crowded campuses with packed libraries, teaching rooms and laboratories, teaching, student support, academic administration, corporate services – everything in fact – moved to digital, online operation. If I, or anyone else, had suggested that we do this as a shift in operating model few weeks earlier, I would have been greeted with incomprehension. But we, along with every other educational institution in the country – indeed, in much of the world – did it. As we did so, we began to learn things about ourselves and our capacity to undertake far-reaching change quickly. We began to ask questions about what it all meant for the longer-term future of our organisation, education, and the nation.

In early May, Dame Ruth Silver asked me if I would write down some of my reflections on the experience of leading through this period for the Further Education Trust for Leadership. This essay is the result. These are my reflections; they were written quickly – in a few days – and during the experience. At the time of writing, I don't know how this will end, nor what the implications will be. My learning is not complete – but then learning is never complete. But I hope these thoughts, in the moment, are of some interest, if only as a record of what one leader thought at the time.

The essay explores, in turn, my reflections on the development of the COVID-19 crisis, and then its implications for individuals, teams, organisations and systems: the lens widens, and perhaps the focus blurs, as the essay proceeds. It ends with an attempt to reflect on the learning across these different domains of leadership.

I'm enormously grateful to Ruth and to FETL for giving me the opportunity to structure my thoughts; I am especially grateful for the donation they have made to the Sheffield Hallam student hardship fund in response to the publication. I have depended throughout this extraordinary period on a fantastic team at Sheffield Hallam, from whom I have learnt a huge amount about collaboration and resilience. My good friend Andy Buck read the text in draft and provided me with some rapid and insightful feedback. None of the past few weeks would have been remotely possible without the support I received from Nicky.

Chris Husbands  
May 14 2020

## 1. LOCKDOWN

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Forty-six days after the beginning of 'lockdown' – that bizarre, extraordinary period in which workplaces largely closed and in which colleges, schools and universities were required at speed to transfer their provision into remote operation – the nation marked the 75th anniversary of VE Day. In other circumstances, the event would have been the occasion for extensive national commemoration and celebration. The COVID-19 lockdown imposed significant changes on the planned celebrations. In Scotland, near Balmoral, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall laid wreaths on a war memorial. A socially distanced piper played a haunting lament. Convention would dictate that the Prince should have been passed a large wreath by an assistant. But social distancing rules made that impossible. Instead, the large poppy wreath had been laid on what, it was quite clear, was a cheap folding plastic table, covered with a tartan blanket.<sup>1</sup> The blanket didn't quite cover the table: pale yellow legs stuck out beneath it.

The solemnity of the occasion was real, but perhaps undercut by this adaptation to circumstance. It had – inevitably – been done at the last minute. Perhaps the detailed planning and preparation, the consideration of camera angles and so on had not been possible at speed in exceptional circumstances. But if there was something vaguely comic about a cheap plastic table providing the support for solemn commemoration, there was also something determinedly appropriate about a make-do-and-mend approach to the event. Partly, the show must go on; the wreath-laying had to proceed. In times of privation, we all need to adapt in different ways. But the cheap plastic table and tartan blanket were, I think, saying something else too: in the privations of lockdown, the 'normal' has to be done in 'abnormal' ways, and the relationship between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal' is far from simple. This short paper is about leadership and plastic tables, about visions and tartan blankets, about an up ending of the world which has

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<sup>1</sup> The cheap table and the tartan blanket can be seen at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/may/08/royals-and-politicians-observe-two-minute-silence-to-mark-75th-ve-day-anniversary-video>

undermined so many assumptions about the way institutions, nations and leaders work.

Leadership, of course, is about people. It's about how we inspire, enthuse, engage, persuade, support, cajole, sometimes direct people. It's about how we envisage, describe, shape, mobilise and sustain change in institutions to make a better future. It's about how we imagine, communicate and map transformation. It is above all about interactions: between the present and the future, between what is and what could be, between mind and heart, between leaders and led. Leadership can never be done in the abstract. It gains traction in context. There are – and airport bookstalls would be much less thickly populated if there weren't – general principles about vision, about strategy, about change, about challenge – but leadership becomes real when it is grounded in context and place and institution. The outstandingly successful English cricket captain, and, later, trained psychotherapist, Mike Brearley, in his, for me, compelling, book, *The Art of Captaincy*, tells the story of a 'lionkeeper at the Dublin Zoo called Mr Flood, who was remarkable in that over the years he had bred many lion cubs but never lost one. When asked his secret, he replied "No two lions are alike."<sup>2</sup> Leadership is a conversation between a vision of future possibility and the present realities. It involves shaping a compelling narrative about what might be, and then mobilising intellectual, emotional and psychological resources to map the route forward. It involves a dialogue between possibilities and constraint, between imagination and reality. Challenges between what is and what might be or what needs to be can 'only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.'<sup>3</sup>

Lockdown and COVID-19 challenges so much of this – it wraps the 'normal' and the 'abnormal' around each other in unpredictable ways, throwing the tartan blanket and the plastic table into the midst of leadership. At the time of writing, this is all live for us all; later, it may not be, and so some rehearsal of the details might be sensible.

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2 Brearley, M., (1985) *The Art of Captaincy*, (Coronet) p. 199.

3 Heifetz, R.A., (1995) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Harvard UP).

At the end of 2019, reports began to circulate of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan in China, causing serious life-threatening respiratory illness. By early 2020, cases of this coronavirus illness – COVID-19 – were reported outside China, and began to spread rapidly in populations around the world, with strikingly high mortality in Italy, Spain and France. Whilst almost all governments – albeit few individual institutions – had identified a pandemic as a major risk on their risk registers, responses were confused and disparate. In early March, the UK government confined its guidance to general imprecations to wash hands thoroughly. But concerns rapidly escalated on two fronts: first, the risks posed by the virus itself, with projections of up to 500,000 deaths from the virus in the UK, and, second, that the spread of the virus would overwhelm the capacity of health services to cope, causing widespread chaos. Governments around the world imposed tight restrictions on their populations – essentially shutting down most economic activity, including the complete cessation of face-to-face teaching in schools, colleges and universities.

The British government began to shift position. Schools and colleges were closed, public examinations for 2020 were cancelled, as were planned elections, and then, from 23 March 2020, severe restrictions were placed on workplaces and everyday life. Non-essential shops were closed; people were instructed to stay at home, allowed out only for one period of exercise each day and for essential shopping. Social-distancing measures were introduced in those shops which were allowed to open. The impact was extensive and wide-ranging: rail travel fell by 95%; car traffic on roads fell to levels last recorded in 1955. Most workplaces closed. Economic activity collapsed by up to 30%. Government introduced a number of business-survival and job-retention schemes. The tight lockdown measures were introduced for three weeks, and then extended for a further three – although a sleight of hand in the announcement of the extension meant that the initial period was for seven, not six weeks. In the middle of May a modest relaxation of rules on social distancing was announced, but most workplaces remained closed.

The impact of this on colleges and universities was remarkable. Face-to-face institutions, characterised by the daily presence of large numbers of young people, learning together, socialising together, mixing in large institutions, transitioned at

exceptional speed to remote operation. Not only backroom operations – finance, human resources – but face-to-face core teaching and innovation activity switched almost overnight to distanced delivery. Teaching was conducted online using remote conferencing technologies and virtual learning environments. Assessments were either (as in the case of public examinations and most non-essential internal examinations) abandoned or (as in the case of other assessments for degree and other qualifications) transitioned online. This was change at a speed and pace hitherto unimaginable in institutions. Many had put in place large projects to consider how to develop information technologies and social media in teaching, but progress was generally slow. When push came to shove, it turned out that more was possible at high speed than even the most committed e-learning visionaries had expected. The daily routines of classrooms and marking, assessment and feedback, of task groups, committees and management teams were transformed overnight.

And all this needed leading. It needed, of course, complex crisis-management skills. But it needed more than that. In most cases, in most conventional crises, the focus of crisis-management is on the immediate which needs to be returned to normal as soon as possible. Almost all leaders have experience of this sort of crisis-management, which arises from the unexpected incident in part of the organisation. For myself, a few weeks before the COVID-19 lockdown, a small group of twelve students on a field trip overseas were held up at gunpoint by a gang of criminals. They were robbed, and half of them had their passports stolen. For a week, a crisis-management team worked long hours to address the dimensions of the situation: the traumatised students; their deeply concerned, and in some cases angry, families; the complex liaison between consulates and local police forces – one of the students whose passport had been stolen was not the UK national. Within a few days, all were safely home. This was crisis-management as most leaders know it: something untoward, unexpected happens and there's a need to address the urgent situation, whilst elsewhere the life of the organisation proceeds.

COVID-19 was different. It involved simultaneously three things at least. First, it involved an instant disruption to the routines not of one part of the organisation but of the entire operating and business model – an instant, and overwhelming disruption, generating organisational, logistical, educational, managerial and emotional challenges. Second, it involved preparation for an unknown, untested, untried and challenging

mode of operation for an apparently indefinite period. This was initially a three-week lockdown, then extended, and, for all practical purposes, extended again. The 'immediate' was not simply immediate but open-ended, exacerbating staff and student anxieties. And, third, in this case crisis-management would not involve a rapid, or even phased return to 'normal' but to what McKinsey called a 'next normal',<sup>4</sup> in which a combination of continued long-term social distancing, new social norms, practices learnt during lockdown and massive economic and social dislocation required radical change, if unconditional change for institutions. This was a challenge not simply for leaders but for leadership. It was a profound disruption to the conversation between the future and the present, between the possible and the real. That plastic table and tartan blanket were being placed front and centre of a quite different leadership challenge.

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4 McKinsey and Co. (2020) '*Beyond Coronavirus: The Path to the Next Normal*', <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/beyond-coronavirus-the-path-to-the-next-normal>

## 2. SELF

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*Leadership is a difficult practice personally because it almost always requires you to make a challenging adaptation yourself. What makes adaptation complicated is that it involves deciding what is so essential that it must be preserved going forward and what of all that you value can be left behind. Those are hard choices because they involve both protecting what is most important to you and bidding adieu to something you previously held dear: a relationship, a value, an idea, an image of yourself.<sup>5</sup>*

Above all, leadership in the shadow of COVID-19 and lockdown is a personal challenge. We are all of us, whatever and wherever we lead, out of our customary habitat: the world of the face-to-face contact with an organisation, the world of the task group and the committee, the one-to-one and the planning meeting, the roundtable budget conversation, the corridor conversation and the walk around. David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges, wrote an early, and honest, piece about the challenges of managing in the weeks following lockdown. He comments that:

*the leadership challenge in this crisis is like none any of us have encountered before. I think there are two big reasons for that. Firstly, because it is all-consuming, across every aspect of our society, affecting every bit of the economy, impacting on every person, family and community. There is no respite.<sup>6</sup>*

He goes on:

*working days are now even longer and more intense, with meetings on Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype almost back to back all day. Email traffic has increased, with commonly more than 150 emails each day that all need proper action or response. That's more than*

*normal for me. And every email now feels more urgent and more important, particularly because the emails telling me about cakes in the kitchen have stopped altogether.*

There are three simultaneous personal pressures here: the pressure of intense, on-screen meetings, the pressure volume of communications all mediated through the screen, and the pressure which arises from the disappearance of those moments at work which relieved strain: kitchen cakes, water-cooler conversations, the time spent walking from none commitment to another. There's a toxic combination of the intense and the unfamiliar, with few of the conventional 'hand rails' of daily routine as a guide, and one of the brief safety valves which relieve pressure. And there's the realisation that this is the case for everyone with whom we are interacting.

Leadership thrives and depends on authentic relationships. Nothing erodes leadership more than inauthenticity. If you don't believe in your own vision, why should anyone else? The most difficult question in leadership is often the question 'Why should anyone be led by you?'. David Hughes, again, openly and honestly, begins to confront this: 'some days it is hard to hang on to a positive and confident vision'. And why would it not be? So many reference points in the familiar and the context have been instantly removed by the response to COVID-19. We all of us need to create the familiar, to make the workplace our own, to shape relationships in it. We all need to do that as a part of the leadership challenge: articulating and curating a vision for an organisation of any size depends on an intellectual and leadership confidence. But with so many familiar routines of institutional life removed, how can a leader feel confident about the future and the direction? If we don't know, and we don't the basics of how we might operate in six, nine, twelve months' time how can we articulate a vision which inspires our staff? And all this before the sheer logistics of communicating that. No-one has had to lead organisations at a time remotely like this; this is a challenge on a different scale from an overwhelming budgetary challenge – though it may become an overwhelming budgetary challenge – or an overwhelming quality challenge – though it may become an overwhelming quality challenge. How, in this leadership space cut loose from routines, from the familiar, from the everyday, is it possible

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<sup>5</sup> Heifetz, R.A., *Adaptive Leadership*.

<sup>6</sup> Hughes, D., (2020) <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-more-difficult-i-expected>

to exercise leadership, to be a leader? There are, for once, no gurus, no textbook, no pathfinders who have done it before. We are all, all of us, learning as we go about the difficult technical choices to be made.

Without the familiar footholds on which we depend, leadership confidence becomes extremely challenging. Perhaps acknowledging this is one of the most important things leaders owe to themselves: the frank recognition that this is, indeed, different and challenging. If those we are working with are looking to us for direction and authority, they are also looking to us for reassurance and honesty. Those leaders, nationally and internationally, who have sloughed off the difficulties of the situation have inspired less confidence than those, like the New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Arden, who have embraced the humanity of the situation. COVID-19 makes us all vulnerable. But it's equally true that addressing the challenge involves looking for reassurance to the things which routinely sustain leaders in times of real challenge: an underlying commitment to the values which inspire the leadership vision. If the crisis makes us all vulnerable, it is a reminder that it is our values, as much as our planning and our organisation, which will make the difference. This is, in the end, what sustains David Hughes in his account for the *Times Educational Supplement*: whilst working to ensure that none of our learners or our colleagues are disadvantaged by the crisis, 'the light at the end of the tunnel emerges from the hard work and dedication we can all see across the economy, which will no doubt transform our society. I hope and believe it will be for the better.' Without vision, as scripture has it, the people perish, but without the values on which the vision is built, leaders and their people lose their shared enterprise. If nothing else, COVID-19 and the lockdown are a time for a reassertion of the values which drive the leadership of educational institutions: an equal concern for all individuals, a sense of the common good, a belief in service. And whilst there are no gurus or textbooks, some underlying principles about human connectivity remain: leadership in remote settings is still about finding ways to support, motivate and encourage, to take an interest, to find the things in common which form the basis for doing things better.

But one of the challenges of the lockdown has been the one-dimensionality of communication. The routines of leadership have become something discharged through a screen. The explosion of emails, the intensity of screen-based meetings, the challenges of navigating the urgent and the important, the relational and the specific, the now and the future are all managed through a single screen. There's a Norse myth in which Thor is challenged to empty a large drinking horn. The more he drinks, the more the horn fills, and the thirstier he gets; it is only some way into the ordeal that he discovers that the horn is connected to the sea – he has been set an impossible, endless task – the more he drinks, the more the horn fills. It's always struck me that this is a metaphor for the management of email. Several leaders I've spoken to have bemoaned the explosion of email: that communications technology in which no-one ever quite has the last word, in which minor errors and slips become magnified, in which one is always slogging through an in-box, on the defensive, reacting, behind the curve. I've yet to talk to a leader during this crisis who has not bemoaned the weaknesses of email as a technology: the replacement of multi-modal gathering of information by a single, inefficient, mode. There are tricks which we have all learned: sorting not by date but by sender to allow a focus on the people one works closest with, modelling the routine of the office; switching email off, and focusing only on things which genuinely require extended engagement.

Perhaps there is something if not more basic then more quotidian. The transition to remote working has undermined many of the routines which framed daily lives. The journey to work: often a source of intense frustration – that traffic, that delayed train yet again, that crowded carriage, that inordinately long queue at the coffee kiosk – is also a separation between home and work. That journey home – leaving, again, later than we promised our partner, held up again – is not just an irritation but also a time to transition between work and home, to allow some of the stresses which inevitably occur in a busy day to subside. The weekly commitment to the gym, to the choir, to the book club – these are also safety valves which allow us to stay in touch with other aspects of ourselves. And they have gone, or at best are mediated through the same screen technologies as our working lives. Challenges to routine are always difficult to navigate. COVID-19



and the lockdown have dissolved the routines we took for granted. Taking care of oneself as a leader is perhaps a vital prelude to taking care of others. Almost all leaders I know struggle with this. They work too-long hours; they exercise too little; they – in every sense of the word – take work home with them.

The management handbooks about home-working are stern about this. They insist on a separation between work and home even for those working from home: work in a different room; don't work in the bedroom; observe routine; keep some sort of symbolic separation between home and work. Early on, colleagues tried to do this in different ways. I heard, early in the lockdown, of a friend's partner who insisted on making a packed lunch as in pre-lockdown, and leaving the house to walk twice around the garden before entering by a different door and going to work in the spare bedroom, packed lunch in hand. I related this story to one of my own colleagues who said 'but getting decent lunches is one of the benefits of working at home'. Routines matter. But, as time has gone on, the mantra has eased a little; not, now, work–life balance, or work–life separation, but work–life integration, which operates in different ways for everyone. But I suspect that for many this is difficult. And so, taking care of oneself becomes all the more important. Daily exercise is vital, although it concentrates movement into one part of the day. Equally vital are the domestic and personal routines which have – it seems – been widely adopted to provide distractions: the classics of literature read for the first time in years, the language-learning apps downloaded, the daily exercise programmes on YouTube. All these matter, but the way they have been used varies from individual to individual. It may be that in – what? – six months, a year's time, they are forgotten and the old routines have re-established themselves, but that seems unlikely. Leaders and their teams have experimented with different ways of working, with different ways of negotiating the integration of home and work, of professional and personal. Understanding the ways in which COVID-19 has simultaneously dissolved one set of modes of being a leader and introduced others will be one of the shifts in understanding what it means to be a leader, to be oneself as a leader.

'Leading' from a study or a workroom is a curious concept: like exercising from a sofa, or cooking by reading recipes, perhaps. Where leadership is expansive,

the study is confining. Simple things: getting a feel for the organisation, taking the temperature on the corridors or in the teaching rooms, picking up informal feedback – the sorts of small, daily response loops on which all leaders depend become more difficult. It makes leadership more solipsistic: the view from 'here' must be the view from 'there'. Checking out details, seeing how ideas, communications land is all more difficult. The feedback, when it comes, is via that treacherously unhelpful technology of e-mail, and it is always, therefore, unreliable: those who respond positively are probably (unfortunately) as unrepresentative as the angry few who choose to respond in order vent their own anger and frustration. Gathering and understanding multiple perspectives is one of the most important dimensions of successful leadership; being confined to a single room, with only a screen as the window onto the organisation, poses real challenges. It's all the more important, then, to try to avoid that as the sole perspective. I found myself talking more and more to other leaders in other organisations, urgently collecting their views and perspectives. It was not a good substitute for the perceptions which shaped my everyday routines as a leader, but it did, at least, remind me that there were other organisations, each handling this slightly differently. Finding ways, however flawed, to stand back, to consider different points of view, to think about different approaches, all seemed all the more important. I heard of one institution leader who simply took to phoning members of her staff out of the blue, to find out how they were doing, to hear what they had to say – and, of course, the news that she was doing this moved quickly around the organisation as an example of the interest she was taking.

### 3. TEAM

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*[Culture is] a pattern of basic assumptions that a group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.<sup>7</sup>*

In recent years, leadership thinking has moved decisively away from a focus on the 'hero leader' towards a focus on the importance of empowered teams; effective leadership is distributed leadership; effective leadership is collaborative leadership. They confront us, and each other, now like, as one of my colleagues put it, referring to an unlamented Saturday evening light entertainment show, 'endless repeats of Celebrity Squares.'

It turns out that this is a communications technology which works adequately for some things but much less effectively for others. It turns out to work well for immediate crisis-management. In crisis-management, divergent thinking is not required; there is a clear overarching purpose, and the task of the team is to mobilise around that purpose with clear sequences of decision making, strong delegation to functional leaders and operational step-by-step decisions. Web conferencing, by common consent, works well for such decision making. But it works less well for other things. It is difficult for strategising, for thinking in divergent ways about futures and possibilities. It's therefore a matter of serious concern that leaders and their teams find themselves in the position of envisaging a different future through a communicative mode which is present-oriented. There are no flip charts on zoom: there's screen sharing, but that is a push communication, not a sharing tool which can be co-created. Screen-mediated communication is equally difficult for the side conversations which go on around

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<sup>7</sup> Schein, E., (1984) 'Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture', *MIT Sloan Management Review*, p. 17

face-to-face meetings, the way, in many organisations, staff get the small things done: the word here, the question there, the corridor conversation. It's hopeless for resolving disagreements, which inevitably involve careful calibration of listening and reading body language. And screen-mediated communications are especially challenging for performance management, for holding people to account, for reading the body-language of an interlocutor. That means that the technologies with which institutions were forced to manage through the immediate post-COVID-19 crisis were poorly attuned to individual perspectives, to the genuine leadership of people and teams, to the navigation through institutions which adept leaders at all levels of an organisation do.

Conversely, however, the stringencies of communication during the COVID-19 lockdown did something unexpected in organisations: they almost imposed agility on organisations. Small groups, empowered to make decisions around a common purpose, could move at the pace the situation required. Large committees, which feature, still, in so many educational organisations, were cumbersome. Decisions were made quickly, and because only a small number could be made at each tier of the organisation, empowered delegation was suddenly not simply an organisational desirable but an essential. In any number of sectors, leaders I spoke to talked energetically of the gains which flowed from this sort of decision making: shorter papers, more focused agendas, tighter teams, a clearer focus on outcomes and implementation. One leader, who had been in post for three years, said that she had been talking since she arrived in the organisation about cumbersome and slow decision-making, her efforts at reform always fought off by the stubborn culture of the institution – and now, she said 'everyone agrees with me'. As ever, constraints in one area produce affordance in others. The challenge was to find ways, in a new normal, of consolidating these gains in terms of highly effective teams making rapid decisions and seeing them through. In the best examples, teams have self-authorized to make decisions, not seeking permission to do so, but simply getting on and arranging delivery. There may be tensions where these team-based decisions run up against the COVID-19-stressed formal governance and decision-making structures, but there is huge potential to create lighter-touch, more agile and flexible decision making inside institutions.

Of course, there are different ways in which different individuals and teams within organisations have responded, and these betoken both opportunities and challenges for the future. Very early in the transition, a senior public sector leader said to me, quite simply, that 'productivity will fall'. Productivity in service-based public-sector institutions – including schools, colleges and universities – is notoriously difficult to measure, and there will be an interesting debate about productivity in educational institutions during and as a result of COVID-19. The phrase 'productivity will fall' is almost certainly simply another way of saying that people would work less hard during lockdown, and there are good reasons why this might be so: the intensity of home-working, the challenges of working from home whilst juggling care for children, home schooling or care for elderly relatives. We have few measures of the productivity of teaching itself – the routine measures, of class size and so on are notoriously misleading. It could be that productivity in remote operation has risen in some aspects: staff with greater control over the way they work may work more efficiently; time is saved on tiring journeys to work, and those corridor conversations which are so useful are also great time-wasters. It could be that in remote operation, and, once this is over, in a world of continued social distancing for the foreseeable future, home-based working becomes embedded in organisations, which as a result operate in quite different ways: remote meetings may be challenging, but staff become habituated to them. The remote working 'normal' soon becomes familiar. But the real challenge in all this is that we just don't know; and in leadership, the absence of data, the lack of lines of sight to the frontline, is profoundly disabling. Productivity may have risen; it may have fallen: at the moment, conclusions on this are almost certainly driven as much by prior assumptions about how people work and how they are motivated as by any hard data.

Whatever happens, some important things follow. If challenging discussions are difficult to undertake in remote operation, performance-based conversations are especially challenging. We have repeated, if anecdotal, evidence that in almost all organisations managers avoid these conversations. How to have them in remote operation? How to have a performance conversation over a screen, into a colleague's study, kitchen or bedroom? Early in lockdown, professional associations

pressed for the suspension of ongoing performance and disciplinary reviews, and one understands why. But this is not a sustainable position in the long or medium term. The ways in which challenging performance discussions are undertaken in remote operation, now and in the future, marks a real shift in leadership practices.

Equally challenging are approaches to workload management. If remote operation allows staff and teams to work in novel ways, it also introduces a new tolerance for varied working patterns, which may be less susceptible to conventional workload management. It may portend a significant shift away from 'presentism' and the measurement of inputs towards a focus on outputs and outcomes – of a piece with the sense of the self-authorising team, clear about what is expected of it, but empowered to work in flexible ways which deliver the agreed goals. And this, too, poses a new challenge for leaders, who need to understand the dynamics of the distributed workforce, the more fissile team, where work patterns may vary but where outcomes need to be specified. As ever, new modes of operation open new possibilities as much as they involve new disciplines. Few institutions will have processes which are easily adapted to the demands of remote and dispersed working; all need to think their way into a new model for managing workload.

There is, of course, another dimension of this. We have all learnt, as someone put it early on, a great deal about our colleagues' taste in interior design – or at least, the internal decoration they are prepared to display behind them on video calls. Cut through the intrusive curiosity and one uncovers any number of challenging issues. Senior teams are fortunate: most have comfortable, well-set-up workstations in dedicated studies in which to work, free from interruption and distraction. But one does not need to move far beyond a senior team to discover sub-optimal workspaces: the re-purposed spare bedroom; the corner of the currently used bedroom; the kitchen table. One discovers colleagues sharing workspaces with partners and children. Health and safety teams are rightly concerned about a potential uptick in musculo-skeletal conditions as a result of ineffective and poorly set up workstations, with adapted information technology kit. Inequalities in workspace provision are more pronounced outside the workplace than in it; and those inequalities rebound across all the issues about the way teams work and collaborate.

Even here, though the picture is not clear. Many teams report an upturn in concern for well-being; routinely, the opening of meetings involves enquiries about health and well-being, a greater curiosity of care than was the case in the workplace, where, often, concerns for well-being sit uncomfortably in the tight daily routine of timetables and meetings. One private-sector employer talked to me about the way in which her organisation had introduced a weekly 'catch up with the children': so often had colleagues meetings been interrupted by a child that the team decided to make a virtue of it, and once a week, over the web-conferencing, arranged to introduce children to the screen their parents were spending so long on. As a result, she reported, the team was more engaged in concern for each other, more sensitive to the pressures faced by working parents. A challenge for the post-COVID world will be to build on what we have learnt about the way teams can work effectively in these ways.

## 4. INSTITUTION

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*Most people in senior management positions have the power and the potential to be effective change managers through learning how to help, but their formal position and actual power often lead them into premature fixing.<sup>8</sup>*

Educational institutions are made up of people: student populations, staff teams. But whilst that's true, it's not, immediately, how we think of schools, or colleges or universities: we think of them as places. They have a location; their buildings – high quality or low quality; geared well for the sorts of teaching which takes place in them – define them. They have a physical footprint, demarcated by fences and walls, and, increasingly, security arrangements which control access to them. There are laboratories and studios, workshops and classrooms, lecture halls and seminar rooms. A frequent tool for governments seeking to direct investment into education improvement is to invest in new buildings; a frequent complaint for teaching staff and leadership teams is the quality of the buildings they have to work in. Educational institutions are places, they exist in places, and they exist for places. So there is an obvious question in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis: what is the nature of an institution when its relationship to its physical location and form is loosened, when the operation of the organisation moves outside the physical constraints of place?

This relaxation of the relationship to place and space is an automatic consequence of the transition to remote working. Internal organisational geographies collapse. Classes can be assembled in virtual locations; teams can be drawn together at the click of a switch. Equally, of course, the reverse applies: some students – and some staff – cannot be located. These are enormous challenges for operation in remote mode, loosening the assumptions customarily made about the way teaching, learning and space work together, about the relationship, indeed, between teaching and learning, between teacher and learner. The loosening had already begun

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<sup>8</sup> Schein, E., (2009) *Helping: How to Offer, Give and Receive Help*. (Berrett-Koehler), p. 132.

to happen: the rapid development of mobile technologies and their increasing deployment in learning, the accelerating use of social media as a teaching tool – these had begun to loosen the hold of place. But for most institutions, information technologies had augmented rather than replaced space; despite the enormous investment in learning technologies over the past forty years, basic assumptions about the deployment and organisation of space in institutions had barely shifted, and the key building block of institutions – the classroom – has barely shifted. The adaptations forced by the COVID-19 crisis has unleashed a widespread set of questions about the operation of educational institutions as place. Once assessment, for example, has migrated online on one occasion, there is no strong argument for ever moving it back into large examination halls.

This transition may be relatively temporary. It may be that we will look back on the era of the COVID-19 crisis as a blip, and that we will find ourselves reverting to pre-crisis ways of thinking about institutions as places, in places and for places. But this feels unlikely for several reasons. First of all, thinking about place was already shifting. By and large, crises accelerate developments already in-flight. Secondly, the sheer pace of technological adoption during the crisis has opened up a wider sense of possibilities which have, as I have already suggested, shifted the way individuals and groups are comfortable in working. Finally, there is a clear sense across organisations and society that the consequences of what is in essence a society-wide shutdown of 'normal' is shifting wider assumptions: the 'next' normal will not be what was 'normal'.

Conventional operating models are being upended. Even if many elements of previous practices re-assert themselves for most institutions, operating models will need to adapt in different ways: to continued social distancing, to changed financial exigencies, to the impacts of technologies on teaching, learning and staff interaction, to different commuting and travel to work patterns. The balance between different modes of teaching, forms of engagement and ways of working are changing rapidly and are unlikely to re-appear overnight, if at all. They all feed into strategic and organisational delivery questions. Suddenly we have a digital learning lab at scale which is millions strong. Some detect an opportunity here: at the very least this will

turbo-charge investment and developments in educational technology. *Forbes* quotes Matt Greenfield, Managing Partner of Rethink Education, an edtech venture firm:

*there are hundreds of millions of students in China experimenting with various forms of online learning. We have tens of millions in the U.S., and many more around the world.... A lot of institutions are experimenting and it's going to be hard to go back.*<sup>9</sup>

A common theme of my own conversations with institutional leaders is that this process of redesign, of thinking through operational models, is challenging – and becomes more challenging as time goes on. That in itself creates a danger than any return to face-to-face delivery within currently vacated buildings loses the potential for radical change. There is a tension between the potential of the moment and the ability of institutions to reform themselves after change experiences: the 'old normal' may reassert itself over attempts to re-imagine a 'different normal'.

In all of this, the principle of self-authorisation which has emerged within institutions applies for institutions as well: leading change without seeking permissions to initiate change. Crises are destabilising; they undermine established ways of working, but they also enable institutions to find their inner strength and, certainly for confident institutions, to set a bold course for the future: it turns out that the source of the quotation "never let a good crisis go to waste" is contested – Churchill, Saul Alinsky and Rahm Emmanuel are all cited as its originators. But the precept is well-established. Crises threaten but they also open up possibilities for those confident enough to seize them, willing to use them not simply to prepare for the future but to define it; not simply to respond but to reshape, redefining direction on the basis of core underlying values and over-arching educational purposes. The task is to find ways to shuttle between constraint and possibility, empowering organisations to reshape operations within an over-arching purpose.

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9 Macauley, A., (2020) 'How COVID-19 Could Shift The College Business Model: "It's Hard To Go Back"', *Forbes Magazine*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisonmccauley/2020/04/09/how-covid-19-could-shift-the-college-business-model/>

Self-authorisation of change, and the opportunities to re-imagine the workings and place of the organisation, are the great prizes here, but they are not enacted, of course, in a vacuum. Institutions exist in relation to place, but they also exist in relation to each other. Competition and competitive advantage have been lodged into the workings of the sector. Institutional purpose is also about institutional distinctiveness, and institutional distinctiveness is a way of differentiation from other, neighbouring institutions. One of the features of the immediate response to COVID-19 was a reassertion of common purpose. In sector after sector, the nation needed not just 'this' or 'that' institution but institutions, and institutions to think about the common good. The differences between schools, between colleges, between universities suddenly became less pertinent than the similarities between them. The urgency of the need to respond placed a premium on sharing experiences and swapping information. This was the immediate experience of crisis. It's not clear how enduring this sense of a shared response will, or can, last. It's easy to see how the emergence from crisis and particularly the emergence from crisis into a financially constrained environment could tip sectors back into destructive competition in which it is every institution for itself. Typically, governments do gratitude very badly: there will be poor recollection of collective purpose. Competitive ethos could reassert itself. If so, the delineations of the post-crisis world will look more like the pre-crisis world, a world of competitive edge, of putting the institution first. If there is a belief in common purpose, it will still take brave and committed leadership to put learners and their needs ahead of the institution and its priorities. This will require leaders who can move quickly from handling the institutional response to crisis to thinking hard not just about what their own institution needs to look like and do, but what the sector as a whole needs to look like and do. It will need confident and articulate relational, as well as institutional, leadership.

## 5. SYSTEM

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*There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.*<sup>10</sup>

At the heart of futures thinking are a series of challenges about the way complex systems act in response to rapid change and post-crisis recovery. COVID-19 has proved a devastating economic challenge: the graphs indicating the impact of lockdown on economic activity, on employment and on the wider structure of the economy are simply devastating. At the time of writing there are indications of a 30% fall in short-term economic activity. Governments have largely abandoned predictions of a rapid, V-shaped economic bounce-back as the realisation develops that many enterprises will not survive the interruption to business activity and that some sectors of the economy – air travel, hospitality, entertainment – will be deeply scarred. Recovery will be challenging for the economy in general, and for some sectors in particular. Some parts of the economy will be radically transformed. We know three things from previous recessions which look to be true in the next months and years. First, we know that recessions impact most sharply on those with the lowest skills levels. The most educationally vulnerable are also the most economically vulnerable. Second, we know that recessions prompt significant demands for reskilling and retraining: again, an example of crises creating opportunities as well as severe constraint. Third, we know that the more resilient a local economy was before crisis, the quicker it tends both to recover and to adapt to changed circumstances. And there is perhaps one further lesson which emerges from the experience of the COVID-19 crisis: the nation has learnt that investments in public service, and particularly in health, matter for economic as well as for social resilience. Whatever happens, there will be pressure on government to invest in skills in health in particular and in public service more generally.

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<sup>10</sup> Parks, T., ed., (2014) Niccolo Machhiavelli, *The Prince* (Penguin Classics).

It's unclear how the different policy dynamics will work out: the pressures for more reskilling, higher skills levels, a focus on building resilience and higher skill levels into public services alongside the challenges of long-term fiscal constraints arising from high levels of public debt and the profound difficulties of regional, and indeed local, unevenness in economic recovery will combine in different ways in different places. The pressures for rapid results, for a quick return on investment, will come not only from central government but from local stakeholders. Early, impressionistic data suggests that levels of poverty and deprivation will be high. Governments local and national will want to 'fix' this. That should open up significant opportunities for colleges and their partner universities to think anew about the skills needs now, and economic trajectories tomorrow, of their regions. There is a head of steam building up that this could and should be the moment for further education: long deprived of resource, it is now a key player in any sort of recovery. But it will need to operate flexibly and move nimbly.

The challenges in many regions are deep and ingrained: long-term skills challenges, weaknesses in infrastructure, challenges for many young people in accessing opportunities, which are differentially distributed. These deep challenges now have a pressing urgency, and the danger, as well as the opportunity is in matching long-term challenge against short-term need. Time and again, it's the surface, easier problems which get picked off, so that underlying weaknesses are not addressed. One of the most sobering of recent analyses is Amy Goldstein's account of Janesville<sup>11</sup> in southern Wisconsin. Janesville was an auto town, its entire economy dependent on the huge Ford manufacturing plant. In the 2007/8 recession, the hitherto unthinkable happened: the plant closed. Economic devastation followed. The federal and state governments pumped resource into the community, and in many respects their response was exemplary: short-term measures supplemented by longer-term retraining schemes. There was an enormous focus on adult re-skilling. Goldstein followed families through the years after the recession, and her account is heartbreaking. Almost none of the money spent on re-skilling worked. For too many adults, returning to training turned out to be too hard – they had, so to speak, forgotten how to learn. Several dropped out. Those who did not

completed courses, only to find their new-found skills unwanted by a collapsed labour market. The book, reading like a novel, is deeply engaging – as a reader you are willing Janesville's population to succeed. But they do not. The skills supply system responded rapidly, but the local economy could not match it with demand for the newly provided skills. What followed was not economic transition but social dislocation. Impoverished families broke up; hope was not rekindled.

Janesville in 2008 was one, not unique, but one community. The challenges post-COVID-19 are of a different order: whole economies, whole societies, in almost every nation. Yet the lessons of Janesville remain. It's not enough for colleges and universities to build skills supply, nor for governments to fund the development of skills programmes. The demand side needs to be stimulated too. This is partly a question of macroeconomic policy, but it is a challenge for education leaders too: it's not enough to think about institutional responses; open, collaborative whole-system leadership is needed, opening out the institution to work in genuine partnership with public- and private-sector organisations. Local leadership demands collaborative leadership.

It will also involve innovation. Everything written so far leads to this conclusion. We have, collectively and individually, begun to work in different ways. Capturing and scaling insights from that experience is one of the ingredients for the future. We've all experienced COVID-19 lockdown differently, but the individual and collective experiences have not only enabled us to do things differently but to expect others to do things differently also. There's survey evidence that perceptions of national priorities have shifted: well-being appears to be prioritised above growth – though whether this lasts is a moot point. But it's naïve to believe that the experience of remote working and social distancing will not shift expectations and innovation needs to respond to that. Innovation will need to be bottom-up within organisations, corralled and scaled by leaders as promising ideas emerge. The success of self-authorising teams in lockdown will not, and cannot, end when the constraints are relaxed. Institutions will need to drive innovation in thinking, planning and delivery against high expectations.

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11 Goldstein, A., (2017) *Janesville: An American story* (Simon & Schuster).

Innovation, self-authorisation and team-led development involve internal devolution for institutions but they also imply devolution nationally. Amongst the features of the emergence from lockdown was the disparate experiences of the four nations of the United Kingdom, with resultant political challenges, the sense from the nine city-region mayors that London-centric decisions did not respond sufficiently to local differences in circumstances, and, indeed, the acknowledgement by government that the virus would be contained in different ways and at different speeds in different areas. This variable geometry of emergence is, of course, a challenge for a highly centralised nation like England. It's already clear, as the education and training systems of devolved administrations diverge from practice in London, that devolution poses challenges for national policy-making. Nothing, it seems, irritates a devolved administration than the sense that 'they' – at the 'centre' – do not understand local sensitivities or needs. But the implications of this for local education and training systems are yet to be worked out. It's almost certain that they will be worked through political processes and arguments. Some of that will be painful. As local economies respond at different paces, as the skills demands and needs diverge, as patterns of deprivation, need and poverty vary, so the demand for local leadership will grow louder and more insistent, and the case for it more compelling. Here as elsewhere the crisis and the response to it impose both challenge and opportunity. Initiatives need to be taken locally, and accountability needs to be held locally. That will involve extensive changes to funding and accountability regimes. Moving toward them will not be easy; there's too much at stake. But for leaders the opportunity is there: to seize local initiatives, to create and operate regional systems which are genuinely responsive and to make a difference. It will require imaginative and open-minded system leadership, and it will require the co-ordination of initiative amongst quite different players. No-one will find that easy; some will find it uncomfortable; some will actively resist. Mistakes will be made, and sensibilities offended. But without that, we will not see the sorts of provision which quite different localities need as they navigate their way through turbulent change.

## 6. LEARNING

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*That is what leadership is all about: staking your ground ahead of where opinion is and convincing people, not simply following the popular opinion of the moment.*<sup>12</sup>

Imagine, for a moment, that it is 2023. How will you look back on that strange period in the Spring of 2020 when institutions dissolved, households were confined and economic activity ground to a halt? Will you look back on it as a moment of transformation, a point of inflexion when things took a decisively different turn? Will you look back on a blip, weeks of difference, after which, haltingly at first, and then with increased certainty, conventional routines re-asserted themselves? The problem with inflexion points – moments after which nothing is quite the same – is that they are almost always overstated. There have been other moments of potential about which commentators said at the time that they would produce decisive change, but after which convention re-asserted itself. The death of Princess Diana in 1997 brought the nation to a moment of shared and public grief, but the moment passed. The near-collapse of the banking system in 2007 was a profound shock to the world's economy and created hardship for millions, but the institutions of capitalism proved themselves to be not so weak as some had feared and, no doubt, others had hoped. Decisive turning points may be for the movies rather than for real life.

There are good reasons why change is more complex than ideas about moments of inflexion suggest. In most cases, there are powerful forces for continuity in other parts of lives and society which restrain the processes of change and reflect the power of institutions, practices and cultures in other parts of society. There are always other, deeper forces at work. Most historians conclude that points of crisis serve to accelerate, or to delay, developments that were already at work. The long term is often a more powerful force for change than the short term. What we think of as 'normal' has evolved for a reason: a product of the interaction of stimulus and

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<sup>12</sup> Kearns Goodwin, Doris, (2018) *Leadership: Lessons from the Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson for Turbulent Times* (Viking).



environment, structure and process, generating an ecosystem which has enormous stability. It's why bringing about and sustaining complex cultural and organisational change is so very difficult. And there is always contestation: there are always those who want change and who are impatient to see it in turning points, but there are also those who, with a vested interest in the status quo or a cultural inclination to prefer stasis, resist it. Inevitably, in the months following the COVID-19 lockdown and the economic and social challenges which emerge, we will see these differences fight. A confident prediction is that it will not be predictable.

But the question can be phrased, perhaps, differently. Looking back from 2023, what will your learning from the experiences of 2020 have been? How will you have processed that learning? And, most important, because we are all participants as well as observers, what will you have done with that learning to open up the conversation between constraint and possibility?

In 2009, Ron Heifetz and his colleagues published a now widely read article in *Harvard Business Review*. It captured the spirit of the time: it was entitled 'Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis'.<sup>13</sup> The article appeared soon after the 2008 American presidential election; the financial crisis triggered by the banking collapse was at its height. Leaders were assailed by the need to respond rapidly to fundamental challenges. For Heifetz and his colleagues, the issue was not the financial crisis – profound though it was. The issue was that the state of crisis, or rapid, discontinuous change on multiple fronts, was becoming, as they put it, 'permanent'. In response to the crisis, Heifetz essentially restated the model of 'adaptive' challenges he had set out in his 1996 book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, which had a number of characteristics. They were situations where there was no necessarily agreed definition of the problem, where different perspectives meant that different actors saw the problem in different ways, and, partly as a result, there was also no agreed definition of what a solution looked like. This was not crisis-management where the priority was to restore normality, nor an everyday

and routine management problem which required a fix. Such challenges revealed what Heifetz called an 'adaptive gap' between the present state and what was required. Adaptive change required leaders to engage in sophisticated leadership across many domains – this was 'adaptive leadership' which involved leaders challenging their organisations, or societies, to bring about fundamental change.

For Heifetz, adaptive leadership depended on grasping six principles for action. It required leaders to 'get on the balcony', a position from which they could simultaneously 'be seen' and 'could see': a place from which to observe patterns in the wider environment as well as what is over the horizon. It required them to identify the 'adaptive challenge', a challenge for which there is no ready-made technical answer, and which required that gaps between values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour be addressed. It required them to 'cook the conflict', ensuring enough challenge and 'discomfort' that the challenge could not be avoided. It required that they 'maintain disciplined attention' on the task to be addressed. It required that they 'give the work back to the people', who needed to take responsibility for resolving the adaptive gap, and it required them to 'protect the voices of leadership from below', since ensuring everyone's voice is heard is essential for willingness to experiment and learn.

It turns out, though it may not have been apparent at the time, that leading in a crisis is relatively easy. It may be demanding and exhausting, but the decisions to be made are, by and large, sequential, and teams are united around the dynamics of the crisis. It can even be energising and engaging. But leadership out of a crisis is far from easy. Adrenalin levels have fallen; the immediate unity of purpose around responding has begun to fray; pre-existing tensions come into the picture; the number of questions to be answered multiplies; there are fewer obvious stepping stone or handholds; the sequencing of questions not only breaks down but plays into other tensions. The order in which questions get asked, and the importance accorded to them, is contested. Leadership out of a crisis is exceptionally difficult. 'Adaptive change' remains a compelling account of the leadership challenge, but the complexities of the COVID-19 lockdown, and the ways in which it might work itself out as the economy and society emerge from lockdown, are of a different order. This is crisis as systemic, and the demands it makes on leaders, systems, processes and organisations are exceptionally deep.

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13 Heifetz, R.A., Grashow, A. and Linsky, M. (2009) 'Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis' *Harvard Business Review*, July-August <https://hbr.org/2009/07/leadership-in-a-permanent-crisis>

There are difficult questions which play into challenging questions about value. Policies begin to firm up around a 'new' normality. Organisational practices stabilise, and perhaps begin to re-ossify. There is a recognition that things need to be different, but there are also hard questions about which aspects of the past will be retained and which will be lost. 'Change' can be a compelling mantra for leaders, as can 'innovation', but specific changes and specific innovations are more challenging – all will have their advocates and critics. Leadership out of a crisis brings back into play competing value systems and purposes.

There are profound change processes going on in economy and society as a result of COVID-19 – at every scale – local, regional, national and global. And there are countervailing forces which will resist change. There will be new opportunities and troubling challenges in local education and skills systems, where the general and the particular will intertwine. There will be tough issues in leading institutional change, working out how to reshape and redesign organisations which have, so to speak, lost much of their pre-crisis organisational form. There will be challenges in leading, and in holding together teams within and across organisations. And there will be profound personal questions about the sorts of leader we have each found ourselves to be in a period of destabilising crisis which has questioned so many of the norms for organisations, teams and people. Many of these grand large-scale challenges will come down to the commitment, imagination and courage of individual leaders. None of this is easy, and none of it is short-term.

Leadership is not, ever, a completed task or a finished journey. We're all of us shaped by the experiences we have as leaders, and in turn we shape the sorts of leaders we are. The continual dialogue between experience and reflection, between self and role, between retrospect and prospect, shapes leaders: it's one reason why leaders who try to transport success from one setting to another without that intervening reflection and renewal are rarely successful. They've failed to understand, in zookeeper Mr Flood's terms, that all lions are different. And so the experience of leading into, through and out of COVID-19 will change leaders and reshape leadership. The argument here has been that that is true for individuals, teams, institutions and systems. In each, it turns out that there are competing

dynamics, different questions and different challenges. There are common themes, but there are not direct equivalences, and unpacking the relationship between the different layers will be demanding.

At the root of this paper are my own reflections and observations; I have no clearer sense of where institutions, structures and routines will last than anyone else. I am – as I write in mid-May 2020 – probably as tired as anyone else. I'm certainly no better at this, and probably a good deal worse, than others. I've learnt a good deal by listening hard to what others tell me about the ways they have navigated their teams, their organisations and themselves through the crisis so far, and talking about the bewildering way in which the questions seem to get more complex and just harder. Part of what we all need to do is to keep looking, listening and engaging as deeply as possible, sustaining the reflection on what has been, what is and what might be.

Leadership always depends on difficult questions about self, about the sort of leadership we can offer and the way it emerges from our persona and is tested in different settings in organisations. In this paper, I've set out my thoughts and reflections, drawn from the experience of leading an organisation through the COVID-19 crisis, of developing a regional economic and social response, and of talking to other leaders in and beyond education. There are always challenges and opportunities in moments of crisis; there are opportunities in the challenges, and challenges in the opportunities. The test of leaders is not simply in responding to crises, but in shaping the futures which could be opened up in periods of enormous change. This is a moment of profound challenge and real opportunity for leadership and leaders, and one whose spirit is not captured by casting a tartan blanket over a plastic table.



## M O N O G R A P H

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