

# Some Tools for Leading During The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Time of Uncertainty and Fluidity

During any kind of crisis, such as the COVID virus pandemic, people look to leaders for guidance on what to do, what to expect and how to act. The need for strong, calm, trustworthy leadership is more important than ever. Women religious leaders have a unique opportunity and responsibility to assist their members and all those impacted maximizing trust and minimizing stress.

## **Make self-care a priority**

Taking care of yourself and the other members of your leadership team is critical. You need emotional support to function well – to be able to ask for help and seek support. Check-ins – which may be via technology are critical to making decisions and for understanding how each leader is coping with this evolving reality. Developing a personal health plan that you share with the other leaders is one way of supporting each other.

## **Face Your Emotions**

Recognizing and managing the emotions of the situation, yours and others, can help with individual and group coping, helping people to feel safe and eventually to a new normal. It is important to do what you can to reduce the emotional stress. Naming and understanding the feelings that are typical in response to this type of crisis, their messages and how to express feelings in a healthy way will go a long way in helping everyone to cope.

## **Manage stress**

People look to leaders to be calm and deliberate in their decisions and actions. Leaders who react to stressful events in highly emotional ways can add to people's stress and anxiety. Leaders can start by slowing down, taking stock of their stress and understanding what is causing an emotional reaction. Even when facing the demands of a high-profile crisis, leaders must take breaks to reset and refocus.

## **Seek credible information and Share information with empathy and optimism**

In their communications, leaders should recognize the uncertainty and anxiety people are experiencing. This is especially important when leaders are communicating decisions that might add to people's stress, such as a efforts to ensure social distancing, better named physical distancing. People who are anxious need their leaders to give them hope and a sense of control. A loss of control can contribute to a sense of helplessness. Leaders should make it

clear that there is a path to a better future and let people know how they can contribute.

Information is powerful because it:

- Reduces emotional distress caused by the unknown
- Diminishes fear
- Provides guidance
- Demonstrates concern, involvement, knowledge and action

Key information is best handled with the 3Rs: review, repeat and reinforce via multiple delivery methods.

Suggesting specific steps people can take will help them manage stress and worry and build hopefulness. (see *Coping With This Pandemic*)

### **Use credibility to build trust**

Credibility is a combination of expertise and dependability. Leaders gain credibility when they demonstrate that they understand the risks and ramifications of a situation. At the same time, leaders should not expect that they know all the answers. Good leaders admit when they don't know the answer to a question and defer to other experts — such as scientists or policymakers. They also let others know that they will return with more information when they have it.

### **Be honest and transparent**

To increase trust and connection, leaders deliver disappointing news in a clear, straightforward way and avoid giving a false perception that everything is OK. Effective leaders don't hide bad news, which rarely stays hidden. Leaders who don't share all the facts quickly become less credible, and that type of leadership can lead to more panic and overreaction.

### **Relationships matter – especially in time of uncertainty**

It is important to continue to build personal relationships, with each other, staff and members. Treating each person with sincere consideration and genuine concern, listening and responding to what they are saying are signs of respect and needed to build trust.

### **Be in regular communication**

Good leaders establish a communication routine that people can look to with reliability. When communication stops, people are prone to imagine the worst. Be clear about what you are doing about the pandemic, remembering that what you initially put in place may have to evolve.

### **Provide a forum for feedback**

People will have questions and will want to offer suggestions. Leaders gain trust when those they support feel involved and heard. While leaders can't collect and respond to everyone's feedback, they can provide reasonable, appropriate channels for questions and suggestions.

### **Be present, visible and available**

As much as possible, members need to "see" you and it is important that members know how to reach you or someone designated to help them.

### **Urge physical distancing and safe social connection/presence**

The term social distancing may be misleading. In order to stop the spread of a contagious virus, individuals need to keep physically separate. Staying socially connected or present to others is critical. Helping members to connect, be present to other members and to family, including via technology, will support their coping and mental health and overall well-being

### **Ensure care for your care givers**

Care givers are the front line of care and of defense. Attending to them, supporting them, hearing from them, especially any concerns they may have, are essential for the effective delivery of care and for their well-being.

### **Be a role model**

When people aren't sure how they should behave, they look to leaders as role models. Leaders must behave consistently with what they are asking others to do. Leaders need to be the first to embrace new policies such as cutting back on travel and practicing social distancing. People will follow the example of leaders they respect.

### **Practice self-compassion**

At a time of uncertainty, high stress and uncharted waters, leaders find themselves reacting and making mistakes. Reminding each other and your members that everyone is doing the best they can is helpful. When we are compassionate with ourselves it empowers us to choose next steps with an increased sense of calmness. You feel you can move forward, be more engaged in today, more curious and available. A gentle reminder: Self-compassion enables other compassion.

### **Learn from the experience and look at recovery and begin creating a new normal**

As the crisis transitions from its urgent phase, it will be important to process what happened, learn from what and how you responded and begin to create a new normal for you, your staff and your members.

## **Be A Spiritual Leader**

Last, but not least, be a spiritual leader, at a time when doubts and worry can easily take over. *One of the fundamental roles of religious leaders is to help their members embrace their religious life journey in faith and trust, and with a profound belief in a good and provident God. The call to being a spiritual leader in these turbulent times is not for the faint of heart. Yet, with trust and belief in a provident God, the leaders' moves forward will allow those whom they serve to find a future that cannot be imagined by staying in the comfort of the known. As Carl Jung wrote, "Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your heart. Who looks outside dreams; who looks inside awakes." Leaders are called to spiritually walk with their members and the congregation's extended web of relationship in order to unleash a vision of the heart that awakens the charism in this connected and global world. (Mark Clarke, Spiritual Leadership for a Pioneering Community)*

Sources and Resources:

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