

Leading through Health System Change: Revisited Through the Lens of Coronavirus



In July 2013, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and in partnership with the National Network of Public Health Institutes, the Georgia Health Policy Center launched *Leading through Health System Change: A Public Health Planning Tool*. The tool was designed for public health practitioners, at all levels, to practice using adaptive thinking as they grappled with the many questions presented by health reform and health system transformation. The Planning Tool was used by more than 3,000 public and private organizations, relaunched in 2016, and sunsetted in 2019.

Now more than ever, the principles of the Planning Tool apply as we turn our attention to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The tool was designed to move people to a planning mode in the midst of intense uncertainty, much as we now face. It was focused on two things to move leaders through the uncertainty brought on by health system transformation:

- The difference between technical and adaptive challenges
- A five-step planning process



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The COVID-19 pandemic is an adaptive challenge. According to Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky in *A Survival Guide for Leaders*:

- Technical challenges, while not simple, are solvable. Through research and practice, effective approaches have been designed and adopted even if they require intense skill and expertise (even things like brain surgery).
- Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are often being seen for the first time. There is no expert — no one with “the answer.” Solutions require both experimentation and innovation.

The coronavirus response presents both types of challenges for leaders. Some are routine and technical, while others are adaptive and require planning, building partnerships, gathering information, and building capacity. According to Linsky and Heifetz in *When Leadership Spells Danger*, “Successful adaptations are both conservative and progressive. They make the best possible use of previous wisdom and know-how. The most effective leadership anchors change in the values, competencies, and strategic orientations that should endure in the organization.” Leadership, especially during the pandemic, requires a diagnostic capacity that identifies the forces at play and that constantly shapes the response.

The five-step planning process was key to helping teams focus on the actions that lead to innovation and strategic thinking. Below, we have updated the five steps from the Planning Tool to be applicable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

STEP ONE

Define the Question

What is it that you want to know? Is the question unique to your organization or do you think it might apply to others? Is everyone on the same page as to the question you want answered?

STEP TWO

Collect Information

Collect information about your question related to the coronavirus. What exactly is known? You may have to go directly to experts or read what others have said. Are there new approaches or ways of thinking about your question being practiced in other states? Chances are you will be able to learn something about your question from others. Gathering information is one place to start. You may want to collect additional state and local information.

STEP THREE

Determine Feasible Options

When you think about your question, what are the possible options available to you? What are the trade-offs? Are there any local trends you should consider? Remember that you are working in a fast-changing environment. There should perhaps be an emphasis on feasibility.

You will likely never have enough time or money to do everything you would like to do.

STEP FOUR

Apply Adaptive Actions

The planning tool described six adaptive actions you can apply to the option with which you choose to move forward:

- **Inform Decisions** — Decisions related to the virus response are rapidly updating, creating a tremendous opportunity for leaders to educate policymakers and service providers through community forums, social media, responding to government requests for comments, being networked to information, and convening diverse stakeholder groups.
- **Educate Others** — Those who understand more about the pandemic and its potential impact on communities can educate others at the state and local levels. Community leaders play a role in convening stakeholders in order to understand better how the coronavirus pandemic will impact partners. In the process of educating others, information should be neutral, simple, accurate, and accessible to all.
- **Plan Under Uncertainty** — Because the coronavirus response is fast-changing, leaders are faced with the daunting prospect of making decisions without complete information. Like jazz musicians, strategic thinkers must be improvisational in their thinking and planning. Some ideas to help health leaders plan under uncertainty include identifying the most likely scenarios and then using them as a foundation for planning; pursuing good ideas, even in the absence of complete information; building good information systems to track progress and identify needed adjustments; and looking for “win-win” opportunities that can be created through collaboration with multiple partners.
- **Stay Abreast of New Information** — Given the fast-changing nature of the current environment, it is challenging to stay on top of all the regulations, administrative decisions, and guidance that has been, and will continue to be, issued. Even more difficult is sorting out what this information means and how it should be used. Still, adaptive leaders must identify reliable sources and stay abreast of new information.
- **Create New Partnerships** — New collaborations are critical to the success of the pandemic response. Some of the partnerships needed to respond to the pandemic may involve coalitions among public health, community health centers, provider communities, hospitals, businesses, universities, social service organizations, community-based and social service organizations, the faith-based community, state and local government authorities, senior centers, and transportation entities. Effectively forging such partnerships requires a neutral, respected convener who is ideally not an entity that stands to directly benefit from the partnership.
- **Build Capacity** — It may seem counterintuitive to think of building capacity during a crisis, but sometimes it is exactly what is needed. Types of increased capacity might include workforce or information technology. What are the obstacles to building the capacity you need? What are the work-arounds? With whom can you partner?

STEP FIVE

Create a Simplified Implementation Plan

The last step in thinking adaptively about questions related to the pandemic is creating a simplified implementation plan for the way in which you have chosen to respond to your original question and the adaptive actions that will help you respond. Thinking about three fundamental factors for the actions you will take will help you to gain clarity about what is feasible: staffing, budget, and a management plan.

Questions that will help guide you include:

- What expertise is needed to initiate new activity? Can some of the activities be absorbed by partners? Can any activities be undertaken by volunteers rather than paid staff?
- What are the start-up and ongoing costs? What are potential sources of revenue? What roles can partners play in sustainability?
- What has worked well in managing your current activities and relationships? What could be improved? What management functions will be required of your new actions? What is the best strategy for managing these functions? Do you need to employ a project coordinator, or can the coordination role be managed by your staff or undertaken by partners?

Being faced with something as uncertain as the coronavirus pandemic can paralyze us into inaction. Now more than ever, the nation needs adaptive leaders who can assess the challenges they are facing as being technical or adaptive, apply adaptive actions to adaptive challenges, and put planning into action through a five-step planning process. The principles of Leading through Health Systems Change remain more relevant today than ever.

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