

Leading During COVID-19:

Five Takeaways for Successful Physician Leadership



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COVID-19 has changed healthcare forever, and leadership within healthcare systems and organizations has never been more important. Whether you are leading in an operating room, an integrated emergency care team, or a senior management team, successful leadership starts with self-reflection.

We've identified five takeaways for effective physician leadership during COVID-19.

1. Improve outcomes by analyzing your own presence.

How can you lead in a U.S. healthcare system that needs fixing? It starts with what you can control – yourself. As a physician, you have the power to influence those around you – through the way you carry yourself, how you communicate, or how you confront the challenges in front of you. Analyze your presence: How well are you inspiring those around you? Take baby steps to improve your performance. Always consider what is happening around you, and learn from it. Ask yourself: Did that appeal to me? Would I do that? Learn from those actions. Maintain a high level of self-awareness when it comes to your own leadership.

You have more power to influence outcomes and improve the environment for your colleagues and patients than you think. Create an island of functionality in a sea of dysfunctionality.

2. Be an empathetic listener and leader.

During a crisis, a good leader adjusts where they're speaking and how they say it. Speak to the emotional needs of your audience first. You must deliver a presence that not only reassures, but also effectively delivers information about where the organization is headed and what the employees can expect.

Ask yourself: Are the people I work with personally connecting with me? Even the most rational scientists are emotional beings. Our brain immediately asks: friend or foe? During COVID-19, those needs are amplified. Effective physician leaders connect with their colleagues in a way that resembles a physician-patient relationship. If colleagues see that you are empathetic, they're going to listen to you and be persuaded by what you say

3. Understand the cultural context in which you lead.

Stay cognizant of your communication style, especially during a crisis. Capture your colleagues' attention by marrying your communication style with the cultural context you're in. Consider what is needed at that moment and how it could best be received.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first started, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern took to Facebook in a video address from her home. This isn't what you would expect from the prime minister, and it catches your attention. She's relatable and real. She keeps her address simple in order to connect with as many of her constituents as she can — asking them to stay home and follow her instructions. This shaped New Zealanders' behavior from the onset of the pandemic.

On your leadership teams or at a patient's bedside, make sure your communication fits the moment. Capture their attention. Let them know you're in this too — without appearing selfish or egotistical — and let them know you have their best interest at heart.

4. Remember: It's WE not ME.

Our brains are constantly evaluating leaders' motives, either embracing leadership or pushing it back. If leaders appear to be focused on themselves and don't appear motivated by what's best for their constituents, there will be no buy-in from the team. Egos are the most toxic forces in business and leadership. Live in the moment with your team. Show that you get it and that you are here for them. Maintain a sense of community, and stay honest and genuine. Consistently ask yourself: Does my team think I'm on the side of ME or WE?

5. Stay honest and factual after a mistake.

We all make mistakes — from small ones to bigger ones. When you make a mistake, the most effective way to recover and build back credibility is through an honest and simple address or discussion. Never be defensive or wallow in self-pity. Deliver facts explaining what you are going to do and what the next steps are. Focus on what will fix the problem — remembering honesty always receives praise.

These takeaways were developed from the physician-focused webinar series presented by the [Physician MBA Program at the Indiana University Kelley School of Business](#). The series features Physician MBA faculty who share best practices, strategies, and tools for physician leadership and managing through the COVID-19 crisis. [You can watch the full webinar here.](#)

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