

Addressing VUCA as a Leader

By Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA

Over the past four months you may have run into the acronym **VUCA** to describe the world we now live in — **volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous**. It's an appropriate description for the COVID-19 pandemic, which is compounded by the economic tsunami and is now intertwined with the ravages of racial, social, and economic justice issues left unaddressed for decades.

As an acronym, these four words can run together and lose meaning, so it is worth unpacking them to fully understand the leadership challenge being faced during these unprecedented times.

Volatile means things that have a dramatic scale well beyond what we have rarely, if ever, experienced in the past. It also points to the unstable and unexpected nature of the events that are driving our reality. We have a lot of information about this crisis, but it is **uncertain** where it is headed next. In part this is a function of the number of moving parts and the unprecedented scale, but there are things that simply remained veiled. How will "opening up" impact the incidence of disease? How will the fundamental alteration of the economic system impact the dawning recognition that our economy is unjust? It is the highly interactive nature of so many volatile uncertainties that produces the **complexity**. Given these three, where we go next is difficult and leads to ambiguity. We have faced large-scale natural and man-made disasters in the past, but we generally have a playbook about how they will unfold and how we will cope. For the most part, we are flying blind these days because our circumstances are so **ambiguous**. Without a narrative to follow, our next steps are unclear, uncertain, and can leave us with a vague sense of anxiety as we hesitantly move into the future.

Below are five tips for leaders to address today's challenges:

1. Be as **clear and open** about what is next as you possibly can. Acknowledge where the path is uncertain or less certain, rather than pretend that all is well. Own your feelings about this situation, but do not let them run to despair.
2. Remind your team, group, or organization of what the **vision** was before the pandemic and that direction is still valid, though the specific goals need to be adjusted. Every good vision contains a description of how the organization functions and the fundamental values that it holds — these are strengths you can point to during tough times.

About the Quick-Takes Series

This miniseries, part of the [Medicaid Leadership Exchange podcast](#), provides guidance to help Medicaid leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. The series, which includes companion videos and tip sheets, is developed in partnership with the National Association of Medicaid Directors and the Center for Health Care Strategies through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit www.chcs.org/quicktakes.

3. Today's environment demands **new information**. Fortunately, you are engaged in a host of experiments as workplaces adapt to a new normal during COVID-19, such as:

- Shifting where you do your work — often virtual for most of us;
- Learning how you relate to partners, customers, and clients nowadays;
- Experimenting with how traditional processes work in new (virtual) settings;
- Seeing who on your team has been innovative, resilient, and resourceful;
- Determining which leadership skills are most in demand; and
- Discovering what you were previously doing that was unnecessary or unproductive.

Be sure that you recognize the full range of these experiments and that you have set up a process to evaluate the results and use them as you inch forward. There is deep, competitive information contained at the individual and organizational level for all of this work — don't let it go to waste.

4. Building on this new information that was gleaned from the happenstance of the past few months, **seed some innovations** that can take what was a necessary accommodation to the turbulence and push it to an intentional new future. What have you learned from working at a distance, and what would a next logical step be to extend the trial? If you have developed new partnerships to meet pressing but conventional needs, how can they be used to do something that would not have been entertained in the past?

5. Finally, the past few months may have accelerated the generational passing of the torch. It is my general observation that most younger **workers have responded more easily** to the new demands and have more enthusiastically embraced the opportunity that has come with the crisis. It has also provided an opportunity for some values to have a more emergent and powerful role in our workplaces and society in general, including racial justice, equity, sustainability, and service. Now is the time to turn to those who are young in years or mind and use their experiences and commitments to empower the experiments that need to be learned from and advanced.

About Ed O’Neil

Ed O’Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O’Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the Center for the Health Professions, a training institute that he created in 1992. His work across three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit www.oneil-and-associates.com.

About the National Association of Medicaid Directors

The National Association of Medicaid Directors supports Medicaid directors in administering the program in cost-effective, efficient, and visionary ways that enable the over 70 million Americans served by Medicaid to achieve their best health and to thrive in their communities. To learn more, visit www.medicaiddirectors.org.

About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. To learn more, visit www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders.