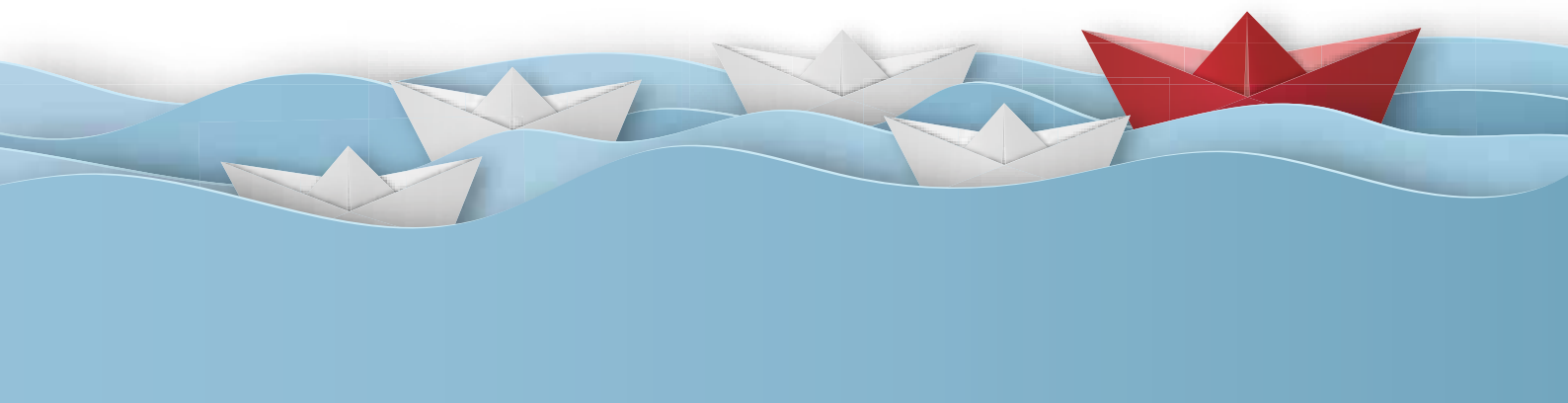


# Leading in turbulent times

A guide to help you to manage your own feelings and supporting your team through disruptive change, and the leadership skills you will need to demonstrate to communicate more effectively.



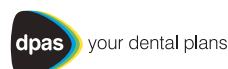
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# Leading in turbulent times

**Whether we want to face it or not, we are experiencing a period of tremendous change as the COVID-19 pandemic touches every aspect of our personal and professional lives. Dentistry, just like all other sectors, is trying to manage the immense challenges following the impact of coronavirus which has escalated rapidly over the last few weeks. With no end currently in sight, principals and practice owners have been handed the dilemma of how to protect the health and well-being of their staff and patients versus the financial impact this will have on their business.**

NHS dental practices are now only able to see patients requiring urgent care and they, together with mixed and private practices, will encounter similar financial hardships that other industries face, regardless of the availability of Government support packages. Some practice owners will have had business continuity plans in place, but many others are having to adapt to events as they unfold. This has led to dental practices temporarily closing due to social distancing measures and staff at dental surgeries that do both private and NHS work being furloughed.

Practice Plan and Wesleyan Bank have supported the dental sector for over 25 years and that remains a constant even in these uncertain times. We recognise there are multiple pressures on leaders right now, from the logistical and financial elements of running a business, through to motivating yourself and your teams. This guide will help you to navigate leadership in turbulent times by knowing how to manage your own feelings and supporting your team through disruptive change. It will also highlight the leadership skills you will need to demonstrate to communicate more effectively.



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## Keep communication channels open

Uncertainty and anxiety can understandably drive dentists to become very self-focused. Some practice owners will prefer to keep a low profile and say as little as possible when things are up in the air. Some may not regard themselves as being natural communicators, while others may prioritise protecting themselves and their families. However, given that your team are having to process the same fears as you, now more than ever they need good leadership where they feel included and valued. Maintaining a wall of silence can create unnecessary negativity, which can further fuel uncertainty and make it difficult for employees to trust the workplace culture and its leadership.

Leaders that are focused more on what a particular moment in time means to them have the tendency to unknowingly create tension with their team members instead of finding ways to engage them. Take a moment to reflect on how you can best support them through change during the present crisis by asking yourself:

-  How do I see my role as a leader during the current changes that I am leading/responsible for implementing?
-  Which behaviours are vital for me to demonstrate?
-  How will I involve and communicate with my team/s to help them transition (appreciating each will need communication tailored to their personal situation)?
-  How can I manage my own concerns whilst leading through the transition?

When things are running smoothly, principals can be forgiven for thinking that any people-related issues can be handled by their practice manager. The unique situation posed by COVID-19 has caused significant concern for staff, patients and suppliers. Now is not the time to bury your head in the sand and take a step back as distrust and disruption can be avoided with honest, direct and frequent communication. It's essential to maintain regular dialogue to explain what is happening and how this affects the business and the individual. Even if the update is no update, the fact you have taken time to check and speak to someone really shows that you care and are putting people first. It's impossible for you to have all the answers, but your team will be seeking strong leadership and clear messages to gain short-term reassurance that things can eventually return to normal.

## Develop strong relationships









Acknowledging and addressing the uncertainty of the current situation will help create a trusting and loyal culture. This can only be achieved by you understanding the burdens your team are facing and offering them practical tips and support to enable them to move forward.

At present everyone is on a different emotional rollercoaster, from harbouring concerns about their career to juggling additional responsibilities at home which may extend to looking after children, the elderly and family members who are vulnerable and/or self-isolating. Dentists who are still working will be worried about COVID-19 contamination and be nervous that the virus could be transmitted from asymptomatic patients needing urgent treatment.









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People cope in different ways when confronted with unpredictable, fast-moving situations and experience a range of feelings which include shock, denial, blame and upset before they are willing to move forward. The following tips outline the characteristics leaders should display to help individuals work through this process:

-  Listen to your staff with empathy
-  Be approachable. Give them time to speak so that you truly understand what they are feeling
-  Be patient and friendly
-  If they become angry, remain calm, allow silence to slow the conversation down
-  Reaffirm any changes you are introducing to the practice and to their personal work situation, outline the reasons why and check for their understanding
-  Acknowledge that any changes are difficult and reassure them that it is ok to feel what they are feeling
-  Provide structure and involvement – discuss any future proposals you are thinking of introducing to the practice and encourage their feedback and input
-  Don't attempt to sugar coat things, or appear ambiguous or patronising about the challenges that lie ahead.

While it's necessary to keep staff fully in the picture based on the latest developments, communication is a two-way street and it's arguably more important that they know they can approach you with their thoughts and concerns. Even under intense pressure, great leaders are able to engage with their entire staff and create a sense of togetherness. This requires having the humility to listen to a wide range of opinions and focusing on asking questions about how they are feeling in return, such as:

-  How are you looking after yourself?
-  How have you coped previously with change?
-  How are you keeping things in perspective?
-  What coping tactics are you using?
-  Is there anything you need me to clarify?
-  What can I do to support you?

This is your chance to shine and be the leader they want to follow, not the one they have to follow. Prioritising your staff's well-being will help them to remain valued, motivated and optimistic even in turbulent periods.



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## The importance of resilience

How we view adversity and stress strongly influences our ability to succeed, both as leaders and managing resilience in others, which is why having a resilient mindset is vital. Resilience is characterised by how people adapt and 'bounce-back' when things don't go as planned. Although the stresses arising from COVID-19 are viewed negatively, the enforced changes placed upon us offer the potential for transformational growth by developing different personal strengths, improving relationships and appreciating different aspects of our lives, which perhaps we took for granted before.

Resilience is forged through adversity, not despite it. The following elements are essential to learning to overcome and grow from setbacks.

**CHALLENGE** – Resilient people view adversity as a challenge and seek to learn lessons by identifying opportunities for personal growth. They remain positive of their abilities and self-worth. To build resilience within their team, leaders should make their staff feel important, give them recognition and encourage their inputs.

**COMMITMENT** – Regardless of how challenging situations become, resilient people remain committed to their lives and goals, both in and outside of work. They commit to relationships with friends and colleagues, their personal friendships and the causes they care about.

**PERSONAL CONTROL** – Resilient people try not to worry about uncontrollable events that they are powerless to influence and take action over. In contrast, they devote their time and energy to focus on situations that they can control and focus their efforts on where they can have the most impact.

**“Resilience is characterised by how people adapt and ‘bounce-back’ when things don’t go as planned”**

Learning how to accept 'helplessness' and acknowledge 'optimism' enables us to rationalise our setbacks and successes in different ways. This can comprise three main elements.

**PERMANENCE** – Viewing the events of bad events as temporary rather than permanent.

**PERVASIVENESS** – Not allowing adversity to affect other, unrelated areas of their lives.

**PERSONALISATION** – Not blaming themselves or bearing the emotional burden on their shoulders when circumstances beyond their control occur.



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During the COVID-19 crisis there are ways to build resilience. Start with the basics by getting enough sleep and try and get some natural light, fresh air or exercise within the government's guidelines on social distancing. Practice positive thought awareness by not letting negative emotions derail your efforts and try to refocus your outlook by adopting a more optimistic view. Be conscious of listening to yourself when you are talking when something goes wrong. If you find yourself making statements that are permanent, pervasive or personalised aim to readjust these thoughts in your mind by changing the way you are reacting to negative events.

We are not in control of the COVID-19 pandemic and in reality, we will experience many testing days to come as the crisis evolves. However, we do have a choice about how we respond. Try and be a reassuring leader to your staff by being purposeful, not reactive. By communicating effectively and calmly amidst a changing, chaotic environment will aid your ability to make sound decisions and ensure unnecessary anxiety does not filter down to your staff and cause more panic.

## Control the Controllable

Our lives have multiple facets with work, colleagues, family, friends and perhaps children as well. Each version of you has to meet different demands and expectations. Principals and practice owners in particular have to juggle lots of different plates from running a business, managing staff and maintaining the highest standards of patient care. COVID-19 has made an already volatile, increasingly competitive business landscape even more unpredictable.

Many dentists will be feeling overwhelmed but some of these pressures can be alleviated if you master the art of controlling the things which are controllable. So, what can you control right now?

**SWAP YOUR 'TO-DO' LIST FOR A 'SUCCESS' LIST** – To help reposition your purpose and focus, start your day by creating a success list and selecting up to three items that you'd most like to achieve. Leaders that concentrate on short-term goals will often experience positive change, even in difficult times. Celebrating success, however small, during times of uncertainty can also help you to maintain an engaged workforce.

**ALLOW FOR THINKING TIME** – It's easy to get caught up in the panic due to COVID-19 on a daily basis and forget to make time to stop, think and explore better options and more effective ways of managing our personal and professional lives. Where possible, try to block out 30 minutes of thinking time for yourself each day that you can devote to reflecting on your life and business. With a clearer and more focused head, you will be better placed to be more efficient and effective both at work and at home.

**LEAD BY EXAMPLE AND WORK AS A TEAM** – Working closely with your team becomes even more important during periods of uncertainty and this should become the main focus of your leadership role. Spending time with your staff, even if it's remotely via a telephone or video conference call, will help them to feel valued, motivated and optimistic. In good times and in bad, always stay engaged with your team and ensure that the culture is supportive and collaborative so that the workplace environment can remain upbeat.



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## Plan for the long and short term

Given that the business landscape is changing rapidly due to COVID-19, turning any thoughts to long-term planning may seem meaningless. Yet strong leadership calls for devoting appropriate resources to addressing the immediate needs of the practice while maintaining a focus on your strategic goals. The world may not seem quite the same when we eventually come out of the other side. So maybe now is the time to take stock and consider how you can take practical steps to ride the current storm so that you're ready to move forward once the difficulties pass.

If you own a dental practice, what have you learned recently? Involve your staff by consulting them on what you could do differently going forward. By encouraging others to step forward, in times of rapid and unpredictable change you will develop a culture of other leaders who are willing to embrace new ways of working rather than you having to take on this responsibility on your own.

Managing uncertainty is a matter of putting yourself into the shoes of your employees and delivering the compassionate leadership they expect. While this is no easy task, unprecedented times call for leaders to find the balance of being strong, confident and decisive, but transparent and vulnerable enough to express a sense of genuine care and concern for their staff and patients. No one could have anticipated the impact of COVID-19. Listening to your teams and offering empathy may be difficult as you are likely to be managing your own emotions too. But amidst the current crisis offers an opportunity for you to set an example for everyone in the practice and reassure them that you are all together and collectively the business is in safe hands.

**“Managing uncertainty is a matter of putting yourself into the shoes of your employees and delivering the compassionate leadership they expect. While this is no easy task, unprecedented times call for leaders to find the balance of being strong, confident and decisive”**

