

Tod Bolsinger, “Guiding Your Church through the Pandemic.” (Fuller Theological Seminary: Pasadena, CA, 2020), <http://formation.fuller.edu/courses>. Accessed May 11, 2020. Used with permission.

Lesson 1: Vulnerability is Key



Reflect (15 minutes)

Who are the people who have most shaped your church’s culture and decision making?

How do you feel when you are facing a decision-making moment that is beyond your expertise or knowledge?

You can’t get to courage without rumbling with vulnerability. Embrace the suck
– Brené Brown (*Dare to Lead*)

Introduction

I called to check in on my 77-year-old father recently. He lives in Salem, Oregon; I am in Los Angeles. Both of our states are under a “shelter in place” order because of the coronavirus pandemic and, by any descriptor—especially with a number of underlying conditions—my dad would fall into the most vulnerable to COVID-19 category.

“I’m just staying in my cave,” he told me several times. I saw a picture on Instagram of him playing cards with one of my sisters. I was relieved. I asked him, if in his lifetime he had ever been through something like this. “Maybe when polio was a big deal and they made us all eat pink sugar cubes [an oral version of the vaccine] but, nothing like this, really.”

Nothing like this, really.

Emotional Distancing

That comment made me want to join my Dad in his cave. At least emotionally. I could feel my own anxiety rising, my mind flooded with contingency plans for both my Dad and the rest of my family all scattered across three different states. On top of that, this unprecedented moment has far reaching economic, social, and spiritual ramifications for the school where I work, for church leaders that I coach, and for the 60 members of my own team. Yes, I’m being disciplined about social distancing, but when I get overwhelmed, I can feel myself emotionally distancing, too.

Facing a Vast Wilderness

Adaptive leadership is called for when you are facing something you have never faced before. A term made famous by Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues at Harvard, adaptive leadership begins the moment you find yourself without expertise and when you are truly facing the unknown. It is that daunting moment when someone is looking to you for direction and you have to take a deep breath, exhale slowly, look into their frightened eyes and admit, “I have never seen anything like this. Right now, I really don’t know what we are going to do.”



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No More “Fake It Until You Make It”

This is always the most critical moment for me in any crisis. I was raised to believe that experts have answers and that the best leader already has a great plan figured out. I learned to “fake it until I make it,” and I often fear that if I admit my inexperience or inability at moments like these, then I’ll be disqualified as a leader. It took a long time for me to learn that when my expertise is exhausted, the leadership moment has arrived. The first test of leadership is admitting that out loud.

Trust Through Transparency

You may balk at this type of confession. It may be very difficult for you to admit to yourself that you have few tools to negotiate this new reality. And even if you can admit this, you may have been trained that it is better to keep that information to yourself so that your people don’t lose confidence in your leadership. But as Andy Crouch, Kurt Kielhacker, and Ken Blanchard have said, “Trust is built with transparency and honesty about our situation, framed appropriately for each person’s particular stake in the venture. We need to be overcommunicating with everyone in our organization’s ecosystem, often with a new degree of openness about the challenges we are facing. At the same time, trust is built (to borrow from the great leader Max De Pree) when leaders bear vulnerability and pain rather than inflicting it on others.” Displaying appropriate vulnerability is an art, not a science, but a crucial art nonetheless. It takes practice to process and share our own concerns without adding them to our congregation’s anxiety.

Leading Beyond the Blizzard

Andy Crouch, Kurt Kielhacker, and Ken Blanchard of Praxis challenge leaders to think through the long-term disruption of COVID-19. They suggest three metaphors: a blizzard, winter, and a little Ice Age.

If the crisis generated by COVID-19 is a blizzard, it will be over soon, we will all emerge from our shelter, and resume life roughly the way it was before. Our job in a blizzard is to wait it out...

Winter might begin with a blizzard, but it is a season lasting months, not a single event. In cold climates, winter means that periodic acute events (blizzards) punctuate a continuous period in which human activity must adapt to bitterly inhospitable conditions...

[“The year 1816 is known as The Year Without a Summer.”](#) the Wikipedia entry on the subject begins. The eruption of Mount Tambora in what is now Indonesia led to a worldwide ash plume that reduced solar radiation, causing widespread crop failures and unprecedentedly cold temperatures, with frosts recorded across Europe and North America even in the summer months. 1816 came toward the end of what is known to climatologists as “The Little Ice Age,” a several-century-long reduction in temperatures in the northern hemisphere that shaped European history in profound ways.

The metaphor is obvious. Just as winter is more chronic and long-lasting than a blizzard, and requires different sorts of adaptation, which are in many ways more far-reaching than merely hunkering down for a few days or weeks — so there are even larger-scale events that reshape the climate through countless successive seasons... A generally accepted timeframe for the wide deployment of an effective vaccine — though there are huge uncertainties here — is 18 months. But 18 months is not a season — it is, for many purposes, more like an age or an era.

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Reflect (1 hour)

In a journal or with a trusted confidant, explore your history with being and feeling vulnerable. What were the messages you learned in your family or in your early professional life about admitting your need for learning, advice, counsel, or admitting mistakes? How do those messages shape you today?

How might you think about communicating in such a way that is *both* honest about the uncertainties that your church is facing and will help build trust in your leadership?

FULLER FORMATION is offering every resource for the formation of Christians and leaders for free until July 1, 2020 by signing up for the link: <https://formation.fuller.edu/courses/guiding-your-church-through-the-pandemic/>.

More resources on leading in uncharted territory are available at depre.org/uncharted.

Dr. Bolsinger will participate in a zoom conversation on Wednesday, June 10 at 1:00 with those who register for the online course through Fuller Formation. Watch the presbytery newsletter for more details.