
OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN “ADAPTIVE RECOVERY”



In engaging with mid-career leaders across academic medicine this year as part of leadership development programs, it is clear to us that the COVID-19 pandemic has both exacerbated long-standing challenges and created new ones. These leaders are carefully chosen to take part in year-long programs at critical points in their careers — usually right before a promotion, or soon after. This is the time for them to build their practice, their lab, or their national network and win a longer-term seat at key tables. However, the events of 2020 have stalled or stopped efforts these leaders have been advancing. Some challenges they have encountered include:

- The clinical mission has edged out research and education in many systems, out of necessity, leaving some clinicians scrambling for time to ensure academic advancement or viability of their research.
- Financial uncertainty looms large. Many organizations have faced furloughs and cuts, and hiring freezes put increasing workloads on the plates of fewer people.
- There's little space for strategic serendipity: remote work limits informal access to senior leaders. There is no longer the possibility of a hallway conversation with the Dean after a meeting. Limited visibility has become a major challenge for people who are vying for executives' attention.
- Faculty and staff are worn thin. The blending of personal and professional spheres and the breakdown of educational and other systems has put additional pressures on caregivers and reduced the ability for people to fully immerse themselves in work.

Intensifying the pressure and complexity is the need to live in limbo, seemingly navigating new degrees of ambiguity with each new month. Juliet Kayyem, a national expert on international security at the Harvard Business School, has described the stages of crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic and coined the term “adaptive recovery” to describe the long, slow stage we find ourselves in today, with an unknown endpoint post-vaccine. It rightfully suggests we will not find ourselves in a new normal at that point, but in a true new future state. At its best, the unstable status creates a longer-term space for learning from the innovations that have been put in place to address the peak of the crisis and the infrastructure for new ways of working that would have taken years to build. At its worst, adaptive recovery makes necessary multi-year planning feel superfluous and stymies linear processes — like making tenure.

How can mid-career leaders proactively move work forward? What are some key things to help to steer one's approach during adaptive recovery? It might be worth considering

“slowing down to speed up” — taking a deliberate and intentional approach to understanding the context and building strong bridges with and to others. Ideas for taking those steps include:

- **Refresh your view** — Disruption of routines has led people to examine their assumptions about values and priorities. This might be an opportunity to take stock of your professional goals and ask yourself how you can best achieve them.
- **Go lateral** — One common experience across the conversations in the mid-career sessions has been feeling isolated this year, and participants shared an aspiration to feel reconnected. There is critical potential to deepen ties to peers, starting with those whom you know best.
- **Bake with the flour you have** — In a time when it is fundamentally more difficult to meet new people, much less form strong ties, it makes sense to invest in development of existing relationships. Those who have laid the groundwork over time have a significant lead.
- **Redraw your mental models** — The organization that you were part of in February 2020 no longer truly exists. Study how the pandemic changed the pace, priorities, and values of leaders and leadership. Chart paths to advance your ideas, secure resources, and broaden your network.

The notion of adaptive recovery from COVID-19 sets the stage for gaining a deeper understanding of the shifts your organization is making and how you can play a part in advancing toward the new future.

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