
AFFIRMING POST-ACUTE LEADERSHIP

The work of post-acute care and skilled nursing leaders is demanding across technical, clinical, and leadership skills, and can be under-appreciated by others. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, as caretakers of the most vulnerable populations to the disease, the intensity of the work and the experience of patients' suffering was compounded. As *Modern Healthcare* noted, nearly 40% of the deaths from COVID-19 through December 2020 had been in nursing homes, "although nursing home residents only represent about 8% of the country's overall COVID-19 cases."¹ Additional losses impacted homecare, therapy, hospice, and long-term acute care professionals. Leaders at all levels were called on to make difficult decisions regarding care and the business, and to bolster staff in need.



As the pandemic continues to rage, no one is left untouched. Post-acute leadership teams and administrators continue to meet challenges, including high turnover, the work of onboarding, adjusting to new telehealth regulations and opportunities as they shift, and the dimensions of their own relationship to their professional identity and leadership. Top executives of post-acute organizations are fielding clear signals that their people are depleted.

There are ways to respond to these signals that will foster a reset and redirection toward future strategy. First and foremost, if possible, it is important to move leaders away from the day-to-day stress of running on thin margins and handling staffing challenges, to a venue where post-acute leaders can be supported to generate a shared experience of renewal. Supporting colleagues to reflect can form a transitional bridge to enacting leadership. Taking some time away from daily responsibilities gets people excited to advance their critical work, anchored by a feeling of connection to one another.

Below, we share steps to advance those aims.

Acknowledge the challenges your people have faced. When people, even leaders, are strained, one coping mechanism is to avoid taking in the emotional reality of those circumstances. Brushing by the experience can work well in times of crisis, but its effects may show up elsewhere later and unannounced, causing longer-term stress. To be able to move forward authentically, people need to metabolize their experience, in a forum where they feel safe to express how they were personally impacted.

Communicate appreciation for leaders and the work they do. It is critical executives demonstrate care for the well-being of the people whose work advances the enterprise. Teams may need to be reminded how much their work truly matters to top leadership — sharing executives' humanity with theirs. Executives must demonstrate what it means to absorb the experience of leading through the pandemic — beyond the action of simply coping with it. It will take top leaders' full engagement, with a focus on what kind of leadership is needed now.

When considering how to communicate appreciation, go with the preferred mode for those being recognized. Then formulate how to express those thoughts authentically. This candid act will allow the organization to (re)enter the future with fresh perspective, not just a return to the past in a wishful way.

Although executives are responsible for creating the conditions that allow others to lead, including by expressing appreciation, all leaders from the top to the lower levels need appreciation and replenishment. As we identify next, peer connection can make a significant difference for all.

Support leaders to understand they are not alone. One effect of facing unprecedented layers of challenges can be the experience of “going it alone.” This feeling not only deepens the emotional drain on leaders, but also can limit their resourcefulness and demonstration of leadership.

The steps forward need to feature concrete ways to build or rebuild connection. Realizing there are many people — in the organization, and locally, regionally and nationally — who have faced similar realities can expand leaders’ fields of vision to see new solutions. Once in contact with one another, leaders who have felt alone see their peers likely have some helpful strategies to employ. They start to regain confidence, believing again they themselves have ideas to share as well. The focus should be on the long term — as leaders take in the knowledge they can build a true community and relationships with mutual resources, they can regain optimism.

Help leaders experience the agency they have. We know the key to catalyzing future action in leaders includes reestablishing a belief in what they can accomplish. To do this, people often need a mix of inspiration from the top and realization of their own potential. Providing an opportunity to get away from the workplace and be together with peers helps to set the stage for renewal, as people take a step back from their everyday.

The comradery and space for learning will leave leaders feeling like they have new practical means and ideas about what they can implement the next day. Look for what can arm people with approaches to create space needed for leadership and sharpen their ability to make decisions. Explore tools that support leaders’ considering others’ perspectives, dissecting critical incidents, clarifying decisions and communication, and helping to specify aspects of the cultural shift

required to deliver on the scope of change needed going forward. Focus primarily on the approach to leading through a new lens, as opposed to a technical deep dive.

We know the pandemic has been depleting in countless ways, and for leaders responsible for the results of their teams, time for processing emotions and learning new approaches to their work has been in short supply. Rekindling leaders’ confidence, curiosity, and connection will support the energy and drive needed to advance into a yet more uncertain post-acute landscape.

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