



Petty Principles: Leading in the Midst of a Crisis

Tanjula Petty, EdD • April 6, 2020

We have all heard the cliché that just as the sun shines, it will surely rain. I am even guilty of saying there are no two days alike in my world as each day brings a unique experience or challenge to be resolved. I believe I speak for all higher education administrators in saying that while we have had some difficult days, none compare to those we have recently faced as relates to the COVID-19 pandemic and preparing our campuses to be responsive. Sadly, this is not the first time some of us have had to ready our campuses for emergencies. As I reflect, it was only three years ago—while I was serving as the vice president of academic affairs at Albany Technical College in Albany, Georgia—that the community was hit by two massive tornadoes within the span of 10 days. This devastating event entailed the destruction of homes, damaged the technological infrastructure of the campus, and resulted in many fatalities.

On account of this past experience, I believe I was more able to use emotional intelligence in making sure that my current institution, Alabama State University, covered all its bases as we approached the COVID-

19 crisis. Emotional intelligence is essential for higher educational administrators to effectively balance the multiple challenges of leading various initiatives, including unexpected emergencies. Emotionally intelligent administrators are able to connect with stakeholders in ways that produce efficient and effective results to continuously carry out missions and visions. Below are some emotionally intelligent strategies to help higher education leaders be proactive rather than reactive as they face the current crisis.

Prioritize the health, safety, and well-being of your faculty, staff, and students

Safety on campus is a primary concern and is a joint responsibility of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. At the forefront of your conversations with your leadership teams must be how you must protect your staff, students, your organization, and potentially the public as we are dealing with “social distancing.” It does not matter what decision you make; there will be some backlash. But there are no two institutions that will handle this situation the same. You must make the best decision for your institution. In the age of social media, students will take to the internet to vent their frustrations, and when faculty disagree with your decision, you can expect many emails about their perceptions. Once you make a decision, however, stand by it and do not waiver, especially if you know what is in the best interest of all involved. I always ask this question in a crisis: Are my decisions ethical, legal, and moral? Are they in the best interests of faculty, staff, students, and the public? If you can answer yes to those questions, you have made the right decisions for your respective institution.

Engage and involve all players

Make sure all the right team players are at the table and represent every critical area of your institution. As your leadership team meets, it is important to have academic and student affairs present as instruction and student activities may be impeded. For example, at Albany Technical College, we delayed instruction for four weeks after the tornadoes, which meant ensuring faculty were prepared to restructure course curriculum to meet the challenges we faced. Student activities were delayed and had to be rescheduled. In the case of COVID-19, like many institutions we have allowed students to return home, in turn having to transition over 1,700 face-to-face courses into the online format. As relates to the students, especially the class of 2020, we find ourselves canceling and postponing commencement ceremonies. Additionally, communications or public affairs must be present to ensure that the messaging your campus rolls out is consistent. Importantly, facilities, public safety, operations, and technology personnel must be present to offer feedback from their respective areas. It is at this time that you must explicitly spell out goals so that everyone has the same agenda and can achieve optimum outcomes for the institution. Everyone’s safety should be on the agenda and a priority action item.

Follow your EOP

Your institution should have an emergency operations plan (EOP) that outlines how it will respond to emergencies such as pandemics. Ensure that your staff has annual training and possible situational training on the procedures in this document. The one thing I have been most appreciative of at my prior and current institutions has been the annual training done to help prepare the campus for the “just in case.” Well, the “just in case” is upon us, and we must be responsive. Importantly, appoint someone to maintain, oversee, and be responsible for updating the EOP as well as oversee emergency readiness on campus. The EOP should guide your actions in all scenarios.

Be prepared to execute

If you are like me, you've been lucky never to receive a crisis alert before arriving at the office in the morning. Events just happen, however, and you will need to be prepared to execute what is outlined in your EOP. Everyone will be caught off guard, and to be approaching or in the midst of a crisis is not the time to have long meetings or conversations about what will and will not work. Now is the time for calm and direct leadership. Managing the crisis will require planned responses, efficient communications, and effective execution. There is no doubt you will have to think fast on your feet, work smart, and make informed, data-driven decisions now and in the future.

Provide consistent communication

As a leader in higher education, one of the most important skills you can have is the ability to effectively communicate. I have always been one to get in front of a story by preparing detailed and transparent communications acknowledging the crisis situation. Prepare a communication plan that will speak to all stakeholders. One of the initial tasks should be identifying the internal and external stakeholders who matter to your institution. You will possibly need multiple communications for faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders. Although you are in a critical situation, do not feel pressured to give a premature statement, as it is not advised that you react without adequate information. Make sure that your team is providing the right type of information so you can proceed with determining the appropriate response. Make sure that your communication is consistent, responsive, and transparent. Also make sure that you are sharing the communication through various mediums. Currently, my institution has developed a host website for COVID-19, but we share the information via email and social media to reach as many stakeholders as possible.

Calculate the costs

There are financial costs associated with operating in crisis mode. Therefore, you must monitor the cost of institutional needs to ensure that operations continue. For example, in the COVID-19 pandemic many institutions are finding themselves transitioning instruction and student services online. Institutions are finding creative ways to implement new technologies and provide training to their respective campus communities. There is a price tag attached to such training and new technologies. Additionally, keeping your faculty engaged and prepared to teach effectively online will have a price as well. Additionally, as federal and state agencies reach out to institutions, you will want to be prepared to provide an estimated cost if your institutional is eligible for emergency grants or loans.

I have often heard the quote, "A person's true character is often revealed in time of crisis or temptation. Make sure that you have what it takes to be your best in such times" (Dr. Paul T. P. Wong). Knowing how you will operate during a crisis is one of the most critical lessons a leader can learn. I refer back to the introduction: having emotional intelligence and leading with a calmness will be to your advantage. If you have a leadership role in higher education, there are opportunities that can help you prepare to operate in a crisis situation. Importantly, I have learned to find opportunity in calamity, and I have gained resilience and a vision that sees no barriers. I am committed throughout this crisis to ensuring my institution comes out of it stronger than ever and to remaining ready to serve the needs of our students and community.

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