

## Some General Rules for Uncertain Times

By Ed O'Neil, Principal, O'Neil & Associates

**B**ill was one of the most effective agency heads the state ever had. He had risen quickly through the ranks with a series of successful leadership assignments that not only accomplished great things, but also left him with an admiring network of leaders throughout the capital and in his leadership team. But his first real setback was a big, and very public, failure around the roll out of a new public-private partnership that not only failed to deliver, but had some serious accusations. These accusations were not against Bill, but were against his private sector partners of self-dealing. His “golden touch” reputation was more than a little tarnished. Not having any experience with adversity, he didn't know how to respond and walled himself off from his network and even his own team. He was suddenly taking every opportunity to travel out of state to any location where the questions would cease.

Liz had a very different problem. Her department had just made a very important discovery that led to the CEO of the corporation using the department's success as the best example of where the entire company needed to go in the future and promising that he would be investing significantly in this work. Everyone on her team was ready for the circus to come to town with something for everyone. Wish lists were dusted off and began to appear on her desk. She wanted to be sure that she moved in just the right way, so she thought she would let them enjoy the good news while she took time to make some decisions about redirecting their work. She didn't notice that every day she failed to communicate something led to more distrust, anxiety, and withdrawal by the very people she thought were enjoying the moment.

Whether they are good or bad, uncertain times can be very dislocating for any organization. It might be a new organizational leader, potential lay-offs, policy change at the corporate or national level, a challenging new program, a disappointing outcome, or the loss of a key team member. When your universe gets hit with a wrinkle of uncertainty, it is important to respond in the right way. Here are some steps that I have found useful:

- 1. Be Present** — A physical presence is needed during an uncertain period — this is not a good time to be absent, if possible. If the disruption is an opportunity, it is likely to come with some increased travel demands to fully secure it. If the change is not so positive, you may be tempted to take more than your usual number of days away to get a break from the situation. Resist this in either case. Even if some things move a little slower, get delegated, or you have to sit through the angst, it is important to physically be there to keep all engaged in the right way. In addition, you will need to be fully engaged with them emotionally by being aware of what is going on with them and the changes.
- 2. Be Transparent** — This does not mean that you talk endlessly and speculatively about the situation. It does mean that as information comes to you, time is taken to share it with your team, group, and organization. Letting people know that you will be as open as possible does not mean that you should be completely transparent as some information may be highly speculative, sensitive, or not for broad public consumption. A commitment to open communication will likely mean that there will be more formal time dedicated to sharing any new information. This is a great opportunity to encourage more direct questions from the team, a candid response from leadership, and more practice of saying, “That is a good question, but I cannot fully respond right now, but I will when I know or understand more.” It is essential that you focus on what is known, not the fear-driven gossip

### Leadership Tips

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The series is designed to provide general guidance to help leadership of state agencies and their senior managers develop and refine the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs. To view the full series, visit [www.chcs.org/leadership-tips](http://www.chcs.org/leadership-tips).



and speculation that will be most of what is discussed among employees. If there are rumors that emerge and seem to take on a life of their own, address them quickly, directly, and candidly. Do not speculate on the source, just be as clear as possible about the facts at hand.

3. **Be Positive** — Uncertainty is easier if you deal with what is known, and you are able to indicate faith in whatever process is being pursued. If you have a positive attitude, others will focus on this for coherence in dissonant times. It is important to remind team members that they have done and currently do good work. Their good work has value for them and their professional life, independent of what might come out of the process. Do not be overly or widely optimistic about the future, this will make your positive attitude seem unrealistic and thereby discounted and devalued.
4. **Be Empathetic** — Many people who report to you are your peers, and they will have feelings ranging from being mildly anxious to distraught. This will impact their work and probably change some of the patterns that you have. There are two things that you can do that will be helpful for them. First, acknowledge your own concerns. Directly and discreetly say, “Yes, this troubles me as well.” Then tell them what you are doing about it. Share whatever is on your list of coping strategies, i.e., remaining positive, doing the work you control, exercising, sharing with a few others, trying to see it in the larger context, and reflecting on all of the good work the team has done in the past. Second, when uncertainty is at hand, you can help by being an understanding person and remembering that this is a unique situation. Try to suspend judgement about your employees/colleagues, or what is driving them. It will help immensely if you take the time to sit with them one-to-one, indicate that they seem stressed, and offer them a chance to talk. Encourage them to stick to the known facts, not speculations, and to affirm all of the positive dimensions of the current reality.
5. **Be Self-Aware** — You may see it better than most and be following all of the rules above, yet fail to see that the anxiety is creeping up on you as well. You need to be mindful of this, particularly if you are in a situation in which you are “taking care” of others. When you feel an emotional response welling up, do not deny it or explain it away. Experience it and then ask yourself if this is rational, not in the immediate moment, but in the larger context of your life and career. Be sure to share your feelings and anxieties with a partner either at work or at home. At home, there will be similar anxieties and it will not help if you do not mention them. Talk about them in the way you deal with other problems. Hopefully you have a good work–life balance. This is a time when you will need to call on those life resources including partners, family, friends, avocations, and exercise. At a time when work may seem to be at risk, don’t let it further become the only focus of your life.
6. **Remember Leadership Class** —If you have taken one of the well-known leadership psychometric instruments, such as MBTI or FIRO-B, now is a good time to look at them again. In times of stress you will go to your preferences, whereas countervailing preferences may in fact be what is needed for the situation. For instance:
  - Extroverts might gossip too much;
  - Introverts might not talk enough about the situation;
  - intuitives might try to get the big picture when it is not possible at this time;
  - Sensors might focus on irrelevant details and draw too much from them;
  - Thinkers may focus too much on the work at hand and not see that the walking wounded need to talk;
  - Feelers might spend a little too much time caring for everyone;
  - Judgers might start making all kinds of decisions that really need to be postponed; and
  - Perceivers might take a holiday from any decisions, even those that are needed.

- 7. Be Proactive** — Even if you follow every suggestion here, it will not keep you from periods of anxiety. When they occur, give yourself some grace and allow that it is happening to everyone. Direct your energy to work that needs to be done, regardless of what finally shakes out in the organization. There are always things that your team and you control regardless of the swirl that is happening. Get yourself focused on what you can do, do it, and invite others to join you. Celebrate the successes — even in a world that has turned a bit upside down. This is what drives your work and what you enjoy. Place the energy somewhere it is useful, and you will be a good role model for others.

## About Ed O’Neil

Ed O’Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O’Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (School of Nursing) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). At UCSF, he served as the director of the Center for the Health Professions, a research, advocacy, and training institute that he created in 1992. His work over the past three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit [www.oneil-and-associates.com](http://www.oneil-and-associates.com); contact Ed O’Neil at [herringoneil@gmail.com](mailto:herringoneil@gmail.com).

## About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. In addition, *CHCS Medicaid Academies* provide policy and leadership training for senior Medicaid staff as well as colleagues across partnering state and county agencies. Ed O’Neil has advised numerous MLI Fellows and Medicaid senior managers over the past decade. To learn more, visit [www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders](http://www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders).

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