

# Leading Ways Amid COVID-19: How to Lead When It Really Matters

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

*"It was the time when they loved each other best, without hurry or excess, when both were most conscious of and grateful for their incredible victories over adversity."*

– Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

**A**s COVID-19 has thrown an unanticipated left curve to businesses across the nation, it is essential for leadership to retain a strong grip on the things that really matter and guide organizations strategically, deliberately, and transparently. Following are guiding steps to leadership in this uncertain time:

## 1. Take the Lead

Right now we need leadership and action, not overreaction. Things are moving quickly. If your organization isn't keeping up, it is important to get ahead of things like travel, meetings, contacts, and work locations. Your metered response will make everyone feel that things are being done. Ask for commitment and action from your team as that will give them a sense of efficacy. Lastly, better now to ask forgiveness than permission. This is a test of real leadership.

## 2. Affirm the Uncertainty

Things seem uncertain because they are. Affirm that. This is not the time for false bravado, half-truths, and saying it will be fine. None of these will make things better — they will only feed the uncertainty and doubt. I recently wrote about leading in [uncertain](#) times. Now might be a good time to review these tips, which focus on how to show up when it is hard.

## 3. Connect to Others

As the opening quote reminds us, now is a time for connection to others, at six feet apart of course. We will all do better when we pull as a team and watch out for one another. Make sure that you encourage this basic human sentiment in your words and actions, and find those better angels in each one of us.

## 4. Value Priorities

In these times we can see what really must be done, do it, and extend grace to ourselves and others when some things fall through the cracks. Real leaders understand and act on these principles.

## 5. Avoid the Bunker

Yes, you are working at home away from your colleagues. Yes, the kids are there. Yes, it is dislocating to be out of your routine. But do not isolate yourself from life. Get outside, play with your kids, read that book — do the simple things that make life worthwhile. While you may be physically isolated, do not isolate yourself from what you love.

## Leadership Tips



*Leadership Tips* is an ongoing series produced by the Center for Health Care Strategies' Medicaid Leadership Institute in collaboration with O'Neil & Associates.

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).

These are going to be challenging times — let all of that leadership strength shine through.

## 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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