

Doing the right thing during a pandemic can create both challenges and opportunities – it isn't easy. Professional managers are programmed to do the right thing even when it's unpopular or not in the manager's best interest. But even a manager who has resolved to do the right thing must struggle to find that right thing.

Formal training provides analytical tools to find the right technical answers and practical experiences hone skills to interpret political boundaries. Skilled managers recognize that the right answers are illusive – a constantly moving target between being technically correct and fitting within the boundaries of political acceptability.

### Bad News – Moving Target

The bad news is that every target movement changes the risk calculation. The sweet spot between technical accuracy (bureaucratic/long-term) and political acceptability (political/short-term) during a crisis skews toward immediacy because the risk of status quo is too high. As political pressures mount, decision-makers are incentivized to show quick results and make the pain stop. This myopic approach favors the short-term benefits at the expense of deeper long-term costs but, in survival mode, political decision-makers need to show immediate results. This is in stark contrast to technical solutions that inherently consider the long-term impacts of every decision. It often places managers in the difficult place of implementing something they suspect will cause future harm – an ethical dilemma.

Balancing these competing interests, without violating ethical or moral standards, takes a calculated mix of art and science and is a sign of a skilled professional manager. Another sign is identifying when every viable option requires compromising either outcomes or ethics. Harvard professor Ron Heifetz describes adaptive problems where the manager must disappoint people at a rate they can tolerate. It's an undesirable position, but it's part of the job and is integral to providing quality service.

### Good News – Institutional Inertia

Along with managing existing conditions, professional managers forecast future events and impacts that aren't obvious to everyone. Proposing (painful) solutions to what seems like an imaginary problem is met with resistance because status quo usually seems like a better option. The good news is that institutional inertia also changes during a crisis because status quo becomes less appetizing than change – any change. The stubborn resistance to change is inversely proportional to organizational anxiety. Risk averse organizations will embrace risk when the benefits of status quo no longer outweigh the uncertainty of change. “We've always done it that way” becomes “What else can we try?” The self-preservation instincts that resist change will diminish during times of crisis, creating opportunities that don't normally exist. This presents a valuable opportunity to make the type of structural changes that can benefit both the community and the workforce.

Take advantage of the opportunity to improve your organization. If you're forced to suffer through all the bad that comes with managing through a crisis, why not also benefit from the

good? But hurry! The window for change is limited because 'death bed' promises and noble intentions are short lived. Seize the day!