

# Redefining Leadership: Finding Balance in Recovery and Renewal

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by [Beth Steinhorn](#) | Oct 8, 2020

Beth Steinhorn, president of VQ Volunteer Strategies, is a leader in the field of strategic volunteer engagement. A popular speaker, trainer, and author, she has extensive experience in the nonprofit sector.

In our recent [blog](#), we explored the importance of making the case for volunteer engagement as a strategy to sustain your organization. An important part of making the case is demonstrating how engaging volunteers (and doing that well) can continue to support and enhance our organizations' mission delivery at all phases of this global pandemic crisis. This means that we must continue to reinvent and reimagine engagement as our communities shift from response to recovery. Yet, no matter how effective the quick and nimble adaptations to the crisis have been (think: adapting home visits with seniors to online visits using tablets, engaging a whole new cadre of volunteers to provide virtual exhibit tours, or convening a team of volunteer medical advisors to provide guidance regarding safety protocols), the skills we leveraged to quickly respond may not be the same skills we need to support this next phase.

According to *Harvard Business Review*'s "[Leading into the Post-Covid Recovery](#)" (by Mete Wedell-Wedellsborg)

Crisis leadership is a double-edged sword: The same skills and reaction patterns that allow you to perform well in an emergency may become destructive when you try to return to (something resembling) normal.

For example, determination and attention that served well in the immediate onset can become micro-management or intrusion, while a tendency to empower a team could be perceived as withdrawal as things return to "normal."

So, what do experts recommend and how can we adapt these recommendations for our roles as volunteer engagement professionals? Here are our thoughts on the matter.

**Focus on renewal not recovery.** We are in this for the long haul. Expecting that a single day will come when we are liberated from the stresses and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic will, sadly, be an exercise in frustration. We will likely never go back to the same "normal" in which we operated in January of 2020. Yet, that isn't all bad. Many strategies that are now proving vital were already in the works or overdue anyway. For example, volunteer-taught adult education programs that only were delivered in person in January 2020 are now attracting new and different participants as courses are being offered both in person and virtually. We see the same expanded reach in volunteer-led support groups that have shifted to virtual or hybrid.

## Redefining Leadership

Take this opportunity to assess which innovations of today will continue to serve you well into the future. How can this be a renewal of strategy? Have you piloted or expanded some online training? Developed new ways to connect with clients? Attracted a new pool of volunteers? Persuaded colleagues to engage skilled, pro bono volunteers to address these new needs? Which of these approvals can become not only part of your response efforts, but part of the way you do business ongoingly? When you answer that question, you will have embraced “renewal” rather than “recovery.”

**Recalibrate your team.** This crisis has forced all of us to work differently with each other – and get to know our teammates (both paid staff colleagues and volunteer partners) in new ways. Take this opportunity to debrief with each other, consider the evolution of your relationships, and acknowledge the previously hidden talents that may have emerged during the crisis. Have new volunteer leaders emerged as a result? Before you consider going back to “the way things were,” explore how some of these recent developments can be leveraged moving forward. Is there a newly discovered tech guru among you? Have team members been able to bond over challenges of schooling similarly aged children at home? Have you seen, for the first time, one colleague’s ability to stay calm, collected, and focused amid change and uncertainty? All of these are valuable learnings and the skills or gifts should be leveraged moving forward even as the constant crisis-mode begins to wane.

As Wedel-Wedellsborg notes, “True, not every team or leader will come to the same conclusion. But all teams can benefit from conducting a targeted search for the positive outcomes of the crisis and reflecting on how their relationships with each other and their work has changed. Carving out time for this kind of debriefing can both be therapeutic for the team and propel the forward motion you need.”

**Reopen with attention to the small stuff.** While it may seem counter-intuitive, many are realizing that reopening is actually more challenging than shutting down. Shutting down was one act, the reopening likely includes myriad little decisions about all sorts of practical things. With volunteer engagement in mind, those decisions will include such things as the safest number of volunteers serving at any given time, which roles must be done on sight and which can continue remotely, what kind of protective equipment is needed and who provides it, which volunteers are eligible for which roles, how does all this relate to traditional hours tracking and recognition levels, and so much more. Paying attention to the small stuff, and engaging the input from your team (whether they be paid colleagues or volunteer partners) as well as consultation with the risk management department and leadership will be vital. And, of course, communicate. Communicate. Communicate.

Again, Wedel-Wedellsborg sums it up well:

As a crisis evolves, your leadership approach needs to change. In the emergency phase, leaders must move to the frontline and fight the fires. In the regression phase, leaders need to step back and contain the emotional turmoil of their teams. In the recovery phase, leaders must strike a new balance between guiding a smooth return to normal while keeping up the pressure to renew and rethink the future.

## **Redefining Leadership**

How are you balancing the need to pay attention to the small stuff against the opportunity to renew and innovate? If you have a natural strength for one, but not the other, then consider engaging a partner to help you with the balance. We suspect you have a skilled volunteer in your midst who would be happy help you focus on the details to free you up to lead the innovation – or vice versa. Or, you have a colleague on your team who will gladly partner with you. You don't have to do this alone. Engage others with you or embrace the mantle of leadership on your own. But consider carefully how you shift your leadership style as we all move into the next phase of this challenge — renewal.