



Leading during COVID-19

Conversations with Community Sector Leaders in Victoria

By Russell Jaffe, Anne Smyth, Kinsie Hope and Liz Dimitriadis | September 2020

What's in a conversation?

To support our sector during this difficult time we decided to facilitate a series of conversations using Zoom, with leaders. These leaders oversee organisations, programs and services supporting people in the areas of health, mental health, disability, youth, legal, family violence and cultural inclusion.

As we continue to manage our work and personal lives during the COVID-19 pandemic many CEOs, Board Chairs, Presidents and other leaders of not for profit organisations and groups have been confronted with significant challenges and complex problems; especially in Victoria where we have experienced extended lockdowns and restrictions due to the high numbers of COVID infections and deaths. Our conversations with 17 leaders:

Safe Zoom Room—were provided in a safe Zoom Room where we could openly discuss how organisations were travelling and their issues of concern, without consequences or repercussions.

Small Groups—were in small groups of no more than six participants to enable us to have in depth and interactive conversations.

Peer Support—were facilitated to promote information exchange and learning from each other in a peer support environment.

New Connections—pointed participants to new connections and relationships with leaders they would not normally interact with.

Casual Chats—offered the participants opportunities to casually chat; like they would otherwise do around the office, the lunchroom or carpark.

Key Themes—captured key themes that emerged from each group which were presented diagrammatically on a single page.



In our recent Zoom conversations with 17 community sector leaders, we learned how they and their organisations were travelling; what have been presenting difficulties and challenges; and how they have worked with their Boards and staff to steer their organisation through these uncertain times. Most importantly, and in the forefront were discussions about being able to ensure ongoing, high quality support for their clients, families and communities; while also supporting their staff.

Adapting to new ways of working was central to these discussions. The leaders said:

**Ensuring Effective Board
Governance**

Ensuring strong Board performance has always been a key issue for some CEOs. In some organisations Boards have been shown up as ill prepared for handling this crisis which has added to CEO's sense of isolation and heaped additional pressure on them as they strive to keep their organisations afloat.

Some leaders reported their Boards becoming extremely anxious about the organisation's future, especially staff, their finances and overall resources. This has led at times to Boards 'micro-managing', and wanting excessive detail from CEOs about day to day operations with those CEOs not necessarily receiving the support that they need from their Board. This has meant CEOs have had to put time into guiding Boards, reassuring them, and encouraging them 'back' into their Board (governance) roles. A couple of Boards had, early on, developed a 'Pandemic Register', of all aspects that needed attention in an organisation which has helped reassure the Board and keep their focus on strategic issues.

Accelerating Decision Making

The leaders pinpointed a noticeable trend—that decisions that previously would have been drawn out over several months, have now been made in a matter of days or weeks, circumventing what now appear to be laborious decision making processes. They have been surprised how quickly they have been able to gather data and information and map out a way forward even in this uncertain environment. Further, they have been surprised at times by which staff have been able to cope and forge onwards, compared to others who have struggled without the direct supervision and support of management.



Adapting to Funding and Fundraising Scenarios

It has become clear that the COVID-19 situation has created major issues for funding for community organisations. This includes government funding, client fees, funding from Philanthropic Trusts (whose income was reduced even prior to COVID-19 through reduced interest rates) and private donors. While the JobKeeper funding has allowed organisations to retain most of their staff, it is unclear how this will pan out once this Government support ends.

Major concerns were raised by leaders for the longer term—even pre-COVID, there was considerable pressure on smaller agencies to amalgamate/be taken over by larger entities, as government preference for dealing with fewer organisations became apparent. This pressure is likely to increase as we move forward.

It has become extremely difficult to maintain the same level of fundraising and private donations during this period, primarily due to people's drop in income and hence giving capacity. Corporate sponsorship has taken a major hit, as so many companies are struggling to maintain their business, let alone enter in sponsorship agreements. Major fund-raising functions of course are not able to be held, these developments have also coincided with major pressure on government finances especially due to the drop in interest rates, and cuts to the funds available for distribution by Philanthropic Trusts. Conversely, some agencies have received funding windfalls from Government, e.g. family violence, but these have been primarily one-off funds, and unlikely to continue.

Adapting Human Resource Management Practices

Human resource processes such as recruitment, performance management, managing complaints, training and supervision have required considerable adaptation to operate and manage on line.

Managing Staff Productivity

While there was initial anxiety about whether staff would be productive working from home and on line, it was quickly realised that in the majority of cases staff were very productive and effective in working remotely. However, ensuring transparency of work processes was identified as a challenge. Savings in travel time were seen as a bonus for staff.

Providing Information and Guidance to the Sector

There have been a variety of responses by government departments, peak bodies and lead agencies with some being extremely supportive and others demonstrating very poor communication and a lack of policies.

Doing Service Delivery Differently

COVID-19 has forced a totally different perspective on service delivery. For some agencies, this situation has led to increased engagement (especially of young people and people who are homeless) and a reduction in 'no shows' for health appointments. Online services have now become the 'new normal', with some major benefits in terms of telehealth and tele-counselling. Disadvantages have become apparent too including, the establishment of close rapport with clients, and difficulties faced by those technologically challenged (including Indigenous clients, those who are older, disadvantaged or living with disability).

Supporting disadvantaged, complex and 'technologically challenged' clients, has been the most difficult part of agencies' service delivery. While some groups of clients have benefitted from this type of remote contact, others have really struggled, with added difficulties for women in family violence situations (unable to easily communicate or leave the house). The anxiety of knowing when this will all end and how services will be shaped in the future has added to the stress for staff and CEOs. Overall there will need to be considerable thought put into how to reintegrate clients back in to face to face service delivery.

The Fall Out For Social Enterprises

Social enterprises (especially Opportunity Shops) have taken a major hit, not only in terms of their volunteer involvement, but particularly as a loss of income for agencies. The current situation has also put a hold on any new social enterprise developments.

Making Sure Staff Are Appropriately Supported

Providing appropriate support to staff when they expressed difficulty in coping was identified as a challenge, especially those staff who appeared isolated and at risk or who had difficulties in fully utilising technology. Some staff have thrived in this online environment, while others have struggled to adapt.

This has been a tremendously anxious time for staff, of all categories – those living alone, those in stressful relationships at home; those with small children hence needing home schooling. Naturally, some staff have benefitted from the new norm of working from home, and have enjoyed not having a long commute to and from work; the flexibility working from home

provides; being available for home duties and more personal time with partners; and the reduced pressure of working in a team if working 'solo' suits their temperament.

Some leaders indicated they are also now considering how to 're-integrate' their staff post-COVID, and how they handle future working from home requests – and wondering if this is for the better anyway? This suggests a 'hybrid' model of working needs to be explored for future service delivery.

Supporting Safety and Wellbeing

Staff have been missing the informal staff interactions which take place in the work environment. In some cases this has been stressful for individual workers. Their loss of team interaction and support has left many feeling isolated and somewhat alone. Leaders noted that there have been issues surrounding personal safety for workers living on their own, as well as for workers living at home in an unstable and potentially violent relationship. Often these problems are not overt, but are sensed by the leaders who find it difficult to know how to provide support and ensure safety and a mental health balance.

The leaders also noted staff expressing a sense of grief and loss—loss of the work environment, loss of team support, coupled with a fear that 'things will never be the same'. These losses have brought about a degree of grief among staff, especially those not adapting well to the online environment; and some staff expressing a sense of despair - *'when this will ever end?'*

It was also noted that some staff were feeling a sense of loss at 'what was' (pre-COVID), as well as a sense of personal loss regarding individual plans, including travel and family celebrations. This is also linked to a general sense of fatigue and exhaustion, under the pressure of managing this crisis, supporting staff, managing finances and maintaining communication with all key stakeholders. The concept of collective grief in an organisation was raised for further exploration.

How to Do Strategic Planning?

Strategic planning has created a major dilemma for the leaders. On the one hand, they were at times overwhelmed by the day to day situation, and having to plan for somehow maintaining services while 'pivoting' to a different way of working. On the other hand, they nevertheless knew (without necessarily being able to take any action) that longer term strategic planning could not be discarded, but getting the head space and focus to undertake this task was exceedingly difficult. This was one example of where the leaders have found the conversations to be extremely reassuring, as they heard similar issues facing many of their peers,

including those not necessarily in their particular part of the sector.

Nearly all organisations are faced with the dilemma of balancing the emergency/crisis planning that they have been forced to undertake in recent months, with the need to at the same time plan ahead for a strategic future, updating their Strategic Plans and map out service expansion and development. So many CEOs have simply been in 'survival' mode, coping with the demands of running a service remotely, supporting staff and managing these new logistics - this has prevented them from looking up and considering a post-COVID future.

Re-developing Volunteering

There has been a major loss of volunteers for organisations, as roles for volunteers have dried up. There is a major concern at the effort that it will take to re-engage with volunteers and build up this workforce.

Let's turn the problem into an opportunity!



The onset of COVID-19, while being devastating in many ways, does offer a chance to rethink service delivery and rethink new ways of working, for both staff and clients. The opportunity exists to co-design a 'new normal', in relation to the amount of time staff work from home, how they will operate, and how productivity will be demonstrated. In addition, there is the opportunity to work with clients to define who can manage contact remotely, how that will work, and which clients need face-to-face contact. There might be some savings for agencies (and major savings for big corporations) with fewer staff on site, hence reduced need for rental space.

This may be the time to re-think how everything is done and push the reset button. But what does this mean? It could include:



Working with the Board to reflect on what has been learned, what needs to be let go of, and what needs to be embraced. It's about re-thinking governance.



Work processes and system efficiencies have been demonstrated. How can they be embedded in the 'new normal' to speed up decision-making and reduce unnecessary delays?



Many workers have relished working from home while others have not at all. How can the workforce architecture be re-designed to generate the most productive and satisfying outcomes for workers and clients?



Technology has been a friend to most but an enemy to some. How can we stretch technology so it can be used in context to improve performance and outcomes?



Undertaking strategic planning in the midst of uncertainty is difficult but how can we focus on strategic thinking to help plan for the future?



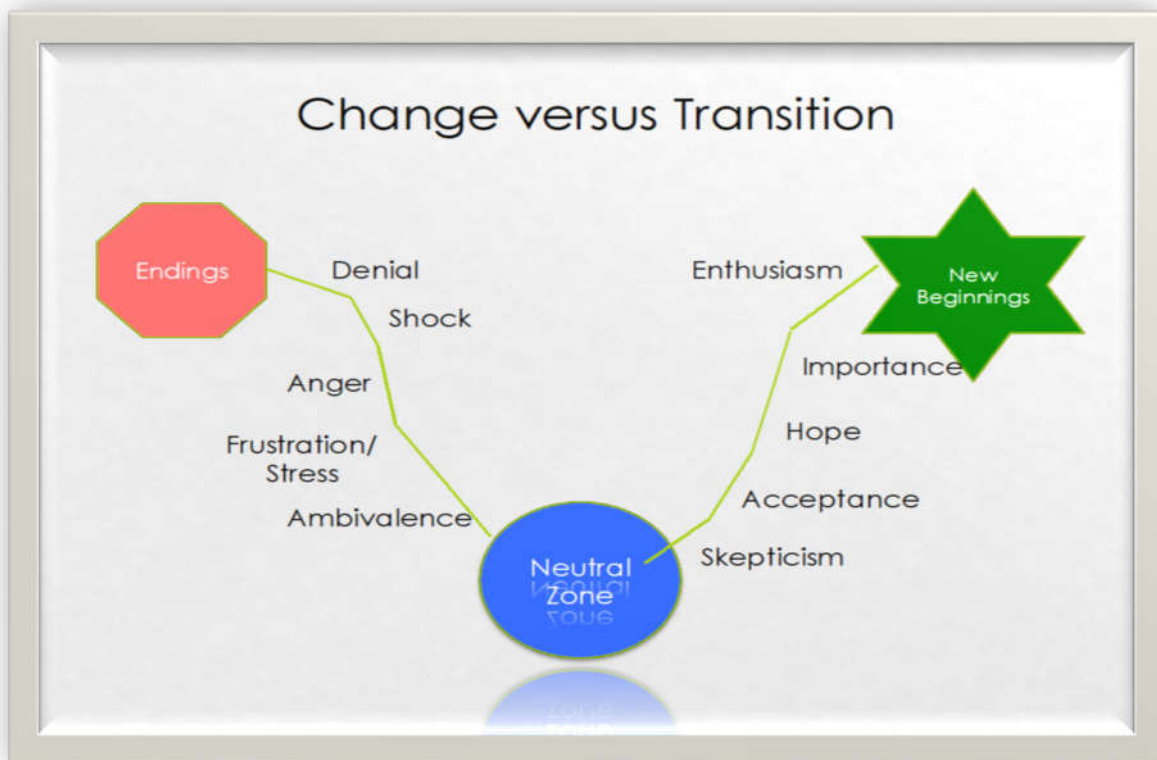
The new normal may require us to continue 'to be in this together'. From an organisational perspective, collaborative relationships may give rise to new opportunities and new ways of forming organisational alliances.

Where to Start?

William Bridges¹ offers us a model to help understand and plan a way to deal with the issues raised by the leaders who participated in these conversations. Bridges makes a crucial distinction between change and transition. He says: *It isn't the changes that do you in - it's the transition*. The diagram below captures the key elements of this model and the ways in which people respond as they move through the phases which are in practice not neat and linear but rather somewhat messy and involve moving back and forth.

Change is about the situation, the things that will be different such as: working remotely, the closing of programs, the redesigning of services and how they are delivered; and a change of strategic direction. The change refers to the outcome, the end product. It is a rational process and concerned with what we need to do, when and how. Managing change requires structures, processes, lists, explanations and training.

Transition is the inner reorientation process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. It is about peoples - emotions, feelings, attachments and values. It's an irrational process and concerned with what we need to talk about, let go of, work through and celebrate. It is a psychological process that requires space, patience, dialogue and time.



Unless the transition between the old and new is managed nothing will be different when the dust clears. That is, the change won't work.

Transition is about working through and managing the losses associated with endings, the confusion and uncertainty associated with the in-between period of adjustment of the neutral zone and the hope and excitement of new beginnings.



LDC Group consultants have been working with government departments, public health and community service organisations for over 30 years. We have seen and been involved in many transitions. Some implemented well, others less so.

Our primary focus in our work with organisations and their leaders is about supporting change that is life enhancing for service recipients, workers, volunteers and communities.

¹Bridges, W, 2001, *Managing Transitions - making the most of change*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, UK