

How to Keep Your Eyes on the Future When There's a Crisis in the Present

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This is a unique and challenging time, yet it's crucial not to remain overly consumed with the present crisis; we need to reserve time each day to think through the possibilities of how our future, and how the future of our unit and our institution can be different when we all return.

By now, you have received your fill of articles, blog posts, and invites to free webinars all offering well-intended advice on how to cope amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. We have all felt the stress in all areas of our life during this unprecedented time. Despite this stress, most higher education professionals that I have spoken with have indicated that they have adapted to this “new abnormal.” The literature that has been published about this period of uncertainty has been, for the most part, both caring and useful.

Psychologists and other healthcare professionals have warned us not to become too consumed with the future, given the high degree of ambiguity on what might come. In other words, focus on the present state in order to maintain a strong sense of well-being. This is certainly excellent advice, particularly for those who are suffering from increased stress and anxiety. However, I would caution us not to be overly consumed with the present state. It's easy to get buried in the moment, but it's critical to spend some time each day thinking about the possibilities of how your future, the future of your family, and the future of your team can be different when we all return.

If You Can Dream It, You Can Do It

My family and I recently subscribed to the Disney+ streaming service to create bonding experiences during this time. While my wife and daughters have always been interested in Disney's catalog of animated films, I was excited to watch some of the documentaries they feature. *The Imagineering Story* is a series that tells the history of Disney from Walt Disney's vision to Bob Iger's acquisitions, with a particular focus on the creation of the theme parks both in the United States and around the world. The footage of how the Imagineers are given the time and space to use their creativity to conceive future attractions, along with interviews with those involved, is quite fascinating. The Imagineers' slogan is "If You Can Dream It, You Can Do It."

In many ways, don't we also have our own "blank canvas" to work with during this "business unusual" period of time? Of course, our important work must continue. At the time of this writing, I'm finishing up my final week of classes, preparing for student presentations, and grading recently-submitted exams while looking ahead to a five-week summer course. On the administrative side, there are mission-critical efforts in shaping the Class of 2024, staying connected with dedicated alumni, and providing employees with supportive resources. And yet, if the day-to-day necessities consume all of our attention, are we making the best use of our time?

Take Control

I will admit that I have found myself stuck in the moment, focusing on task force briefings and the latest incident rates and wondering just how bad things will be before they get better. For the last several weeks, we all have had very few things in our lives that we are able to control, which can be quite unsettling to say the least.

One part of life that I'm gratefully able to control are my evening walks, especially after a day of being hunched over my laptop. It's an opportunity to get some fresh air, while listening to a podcast to help reframe my thinking to a more proactive state. A couple of weeks ago, I listened to an episode of Patrick Lencioni's "At the Table" podcast. The focus of his consultancy, The Table Group, is on building healthy teams. The title of this episode was "Let's Not Go Back to Normal." In his comments, he states:

"We will either emerge better or worse from this crisis."

I found this to be an overly simple and yet profound statement. In fact, I sat with that comment quite a bit and thought about it as it relates to me, my family, friends, students, clients, and colleagues. I came to the realization that I might "emerge worse" because I was simply reacting to the world around me. I needed a strategy that was going to put me in a better frame of mind while hopefully helping those closest to me, as well. Most importantly, I needed to stop viewing this as only "a challenging time" and more as a "window of opportunity."

(In saying this, I acknowledge that for some of us or for our colleagues, this time is more than just challenging. Some have lost a loved one or had a loved one become sick. In urging that we adopt a future-focused mindset and focus on our growth and learning so that we can emerge stronger after a crisis, I in no way mean to diminish the very real grief that some of my colleagues will face during this time.)

Below are four strategies that I recommend you, as higher education professionals, consider during this time. These strategies will provide a better sense of control for you and members of your team.

We have a tendency to want to fill our schedules during periods of uncertainty. Maybe you are participating in an exhaustive number of Zoom meetings or working on projects that you were hoping

to complete earlier in the academic year. I recommend you schedule a minimum of one hour each day dedicated to what I call “Clean Slate Time.”

Our future is a “clean slate.” Reframe this time of crisis as a window of opportunity and ask yourself: Who will you become? What will be different? How might your leadership evolve? I suggest you spend your “Clean Slate Time” outside of your house (walking, if possible). Maybe listen to a podcast for half of the time; then reflect afterward.

That is just for you. As leaders, we also must be diligent to schedule “Clean Slate Time” with our teams, too. I suggest doing this at least once a week. Your role will be to facilitate the discussion, and the purpose of the discussion is to envision the possibilities of what your team will be like in the future. This can also provide opportunity to “hit the reset” as a team - see Strategy #2.

Strategy #2: Hit the “Reset”

Behavioral economist Dan Ariely argues that when you establish rules for yourself, you are creating a standard to be adhered to, not only by yourself but by others as well. If you are like me, you may have developed a set of rules (or habits) at some point only to see them implode under the pressure of mounting obligations on campus and at home (and this may have been the case well before any talk of a pandemic). Our physical, emotional, intellectual, and social well-being has suffered because of this. “No time to work out today.” “I’d like to attend that workshop, but I’m up against a deadline.” “I’m going to have lunch in my office to catch up.”

Let’s take this time to hit the “reset” button. Think of the important areas of your life (e.g., relationships, health, financial, personal growth). What are four to six rules that will help you be healthier and more engaged in your personal and professional life? To provide you with some examples, here are my own rules:

- Complete a Five-Minute Journal each day, answering the following:
 - I am grateful for...
 - What would make today great?
 - Daily affirmation. I am...
 - 3 Amazing things that happened today...
 - How could I have made today even better?
- Read my purpose statement, values, and goals at the beginning and end of every day.
- Check emails/texts *only* at 10 a.m., 3 p.m., and 8 p.m. ... that’s it!
- Exercise six times a week rotating strength training and running.
- Listen to one podcast each day.
- Network with a minimum of five new or existing contacts each week.

The key is to create rules that you are able to measure every day. For example, you might want to create your own scorecard putting a “checkmark” next to each rule that you adhere to for that day.

This is also a time for teams to “hit the reset”:

- Does your team have a charter that identifies the team's overall purpose and how it aligns to the mission of the institution?
- What is your team’s code of conduct?
- How do you handle conflict?
- How do you hold each other accountable?

Creating a team charter that everyone commits to will serve your team well in preparing for the future.

Strategy #3: Be Less Task-Focused and More People-Focused

One of the higher education leaders I coach admits that she is as task-focused as they come. In fact, her DiSC profile is compliance/dominant “CD,” which means she likes to get things done and get things done the right way. In the past, she has acknowledged that her drive to “get to the point” in her conversations with team members and her tendency to overanalyze things can become unproductive. However, in our most recent conversation, she identified a breakthrough. To her credit, she is taking extra time to connect with her staff. There is no agenda, and she is not asking for a progress report. Her motive? To truly hear how everyone is doing. She said this has made a tremendous difference in her working relationships despite the remote interaction.

Earlier this week, I had the fortune to have Paul Yater, Chief Information Officer and Head of Human Resources at 84 Lumber, a \$4 billion building materials supplier, speak with my Human Resource Management class about how his experience at Dickinson College helped to shape his professional journey, as well as the policies and procedures he has established to support the well-being of their 5,700 associates. During the call, I asked Yater to share how he feels the workplace will be different once we emerge from the pandemic. He said, “I certainly hope we focus more on our relationships, less on ourselves and more on one another.” I think we can all agree that such an emphasis will build stronger teams and organizations.

If you have been diligent in reaching out to others during this time, be sure to continue and don't stop this practice when we do get back to our campuses. If you haven't been connecting as much as you would like, it's the most important leadership practice you can do. Make this a time to cultivate your network both inside of your institution and beyond. Once again, there should be no agenda for these connections. Just find a few minutes to see how others are doing. They will thank you for this and remember that you cared.

Strategy #4: Never Quarantine Growth and Development

During this time, some institutions have postponed professional development opportunities until the future provides a bit more clarity. Don't let that serve as permission or excuse to stop learning. Gandhi said, “Live as if you were to die tomorrow, learn as if you were to live forever.” Now is the time to get creative. A time to learn virtually from one another and from other institutions. A time to find [coaches and mentors](#) that will support you and your teams in the journey that awaits. When it comes to webinars being offered, it can be challenging to separate the wheat from the chaff but [solid programming is out there](#), which can provide enormous benefits to help you and your staff see things differently.

Professional development may be more important now than ever. A December 2019 survey by Academic Impressions found that 84% of higher-ed employees see professional development

opportunities as "very" or "extremely" important to them and to their work, and that the percentage is higher among women (85.5%) and ethnic minorities (85.8%). According to Academic Impressions:

"During times of uncertainty, professional development (PD) is more important, not less. Right now, existing mindsets and approaches to our work need to be challenged. Creative solutions need to be sought, identified, and shared. And staff from under-represented groups need better access to training and PD. Now is the time for institutional leaders to invest in PD in a more focused and intentional way, and to demonstrate that they care about their people and about building their capacity, and to make sure they are leveraging the full learning potential of their staff during a time when we need to connect and learn more rapidly than ever before."

Build momentum by creating a learning culture for your team that will continue when you return to campus. What are the areas that you would like to explore individually and collectively? Create a learning agenda and share it with your colleagues? Studies have shown that investing in our own growth and development can lead to a positive shift in our mindset.

Closing Thoughts

Each of us are guilty for saying, "I'll do this when I have more time." While the current environment is less than ideal for most of us, we most likely have greater flexibility than ever before. Professor and coach Ann Betz asks, "If you look back on this time, what do you want to remember about yourself?" What a powerful question we all must ask ourselves.

What all the strategies above allow us to do is position ourselves and our institutions to better handle the ambiguities ahead – to emerge from the crisis stronger, more self-reflective, more playful, and more connected than we were when we went in. Find your "clean slate" and get started.