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W H I T E P A P E R

# Crisis Leadership

Lessons from San Francisco's Management  
of the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Paul Ablack

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LESSONS FROM SAN FRANCISCO'S MANAGEMENT  
OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**By Paul Ablack**

Compelling stories about successful leadership are inspiring. Some of the most profound accounts are being demonstrated in real-time during the COVID-19 era.

Two of my favorite books are “Good to Great” by James Collins and “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” by Dr. Stephen R. Covey. These renowned works provide engaging leadership insights that are solid foundations in the ever-inviting challenge of personal and business growth.

There are five principles I gleaned from these books. I transitioned from corporate America in 2003 to establish a data and analytics software company that I successfully grew to the point of acquisition in 2019. During my tenure as CEO, we applied these five principles and generated concrete, metrics-driven results.

Today in 2020, we face the COVID-19 pandemic that developed quickly into a raging national and global threat. It is arguably society's top leadership challenge. Choruses of voices spanning the political spectrum are focused incessantly on the leadership, or lack thereof, by our government, in response to this menace.

Hence the question, “Could better leadership at the national level have saved more lives?”

In August, an article appeared in Wired magazine ([www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com)) entitled, “San Francisco's Immune System” by Daniel Duane. A light bulb turned on for me regarding how San Francisco city leadership approached the COVID-19 pandemic and the results they achieved in containing the viral spread.

The leadership executed by San Francisco Mayor London Breed can be fully appreciated through the lens of these five principles:

**Five Principles of Leadership:**

1. Leverage Experience and Expertise
2. Unite Around A Common Vision
3. Align The Stakeholders
4. Assess and Manage Risk
5. Empower Your Leaders

**Leverage Experience and Expertise**

Those who have worked for a large corporation have probably experienced the “new” boss dynamic (most often regarding the ambitious type). This type of boss is excited and tells his/her subordinates about the great “new” concept that will fix the current “situation.” Organizational veterans know, however, that the same idea failed two years earlier. Rather than appear not to be team players, everyone proceeds as instructed. Unfortunately, this behavior is the norm rather than the exception and often produces workplace hardship and failed initiatives.

Great leaders can look back to the past to see what can be learned and how those lessons, adjusted for the present, can be applied to the current situation. They also seek counsel from those with experience or knowledge who can help find the right solution.

San Francisco’s history included the AIDS epidemic of the late 1980s. Therefore, the city already experienced the destructive force of a pandemic, which provided clarity and a shared understanding of what COVID-19 could become. The experience enabled city and county leaders to act with urgency even though the threat did not appear imminent. San Francisco was also home to a cadre of experts in their respective fields that had direct access to, and respect of, the person in charge, the mayor of San Francisco.

**Unite Around A Common Vision**

The city’s history created a foundation for a shared vision of the serious threat they were facing. The key stakeholders included the mayor, the Department of Health, the UCSF School of Medicine, major employers, minority community leaders and residents. This highly diverse group did not need to be convinced about the severity of the threat. Rather than holding long debates about the reality of the virus or the effect of mask-wearing on their personal freedoms, they focused on a single mission: to save lives in the City/County of San Francisco.

## **Align The Stakeholders**

Aligning stakeholders is about overall organizational alignment. A good analogy of the power of alignment is a competitive rowing team. There are six or more people on the boat. Each person has a crucial role in affecting the outcome of the race. They must row with perfect cadence and synchronization to give the team a realistic chance of winning. Business and life are no different. Drawing hard lines due to differing agendas or personality differences is irresponsible in a crisis.

In the case of San Francisco, alignment was primarily based on respect and trust among the stakeholders. The Director of the Department of Public Health, Grant Colfax, had the respect of the mayor. For example, Colfax requested the mayor to act in February 2020, when the Federal Government took no action. While it was difficult for the mayor to hear this counsel, she trusted Colfax and reacted swiftly, issuing an emergency declaration.

There were other good examples of alignment at that time. San Francisco and San Francisco County were both under the mayor's leadership, thereby avoiding the usual jurisdictional squabbling. The city hospitals were also aligned because the medical advisory group included the Health Department and the UCSF Medical Center. Contrast this to what happened in New York City as COVID-19 resources were poorly utilized. Patients died in hospitals that were under-resourced while beds sat empty in well-resourced hospitals. The root cause of these patient allocation errors came down to differing agendas, poor communication, and protection of reimbursement dollars (Source: Michael Barbaro, *The Daily* podcast, from The New York Times).

Finally, the alignment in San Francisco was also evident with large employers like Twitter, Google and Salesforce. By the first week in March, they asked employees to work from home while the rest of the country was still debating the virus's severity.

## **Assess and Manage Risk**

Emergency preparedness is the process for getting ready for incidents that "may" happen. When disaster strikes, the consequences of being unprepared can be drastic. Those living in areas affected by hurricanes and tornadoes know this all too well.

In San Francisco's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the time to prepare was compressed. Nevertheless, leaders acted quickly and effectively to implement a plan. Courageous leadership can be very lonely when facing a tough decision in the face of conflicting information. This was the case with Mayor Breed. She had very little evidence to justify the broad actions she was being asked to take by her team of advisors. But she did act, and those actions proved to deliver a dramatic impact on saving lives in the coming months:

Date	Context	Context/Action
January 27, 2020	US Cases/Deaths: 9/0 S.F. Cases/Deaths: 0/0	Mayor activates the Emergency Operations Center.
February 25, 2020	US Cases/Deaths: 63/0 S.F. Cases/Deaths: 0/0	Mayor declares a local state of emergency.
February 26, 2020	U.S. Cases/Deaths: 63/0 SF Cases/Deaths: 0/0	Twitter instructs all employees to work from home immediately. Lyft, Apple, Google, Facebook and Salesforce all follow Twitters actions.
March 2, 2020	U.S. Cases/Deaths: 68/0 SF Cases/Deaths: 0/0	The mayor informs S.F. residents via Twitter to “prepare for possible disruption from an outbreak.”
March 6, 2020	U.S. Cases/Deaths: 217/11 SF Cases/Deaths: 0/0	Mayor issues public health orders including restricted visitors to largest nursing home.
March 13, 2020	US Cases/Deaths: 1,268/36 SF Cases/Deaths: 15/0	Mayor initiates “Shelter in Place” order. UCSF biochemist Joe DiRisi convinces the California Governor to allow San Francisco to develop their own testing.

Another critical element of San Francisco’s risk management strategy was to reach out to those communities’ leaders with the most significant risk of exposure to the virus. The African American and Latinx communities’ leaders were informed so they could quickly mobilize campaigns at the neighborhood-level to implement preventive measures.

**Empower Your Leaders**

The root of empowerment is trust; trust that the people upon whom you rely will do the right thing regardless of the circumstances. Leaders need to identify, recruit and develop a highly talented team. Then, the team is given the latitude and the support to make critical decisions.

In San Francisco, the mayor had access to an “A-Team” of highly skilled experts in their respective fields. This team included Grant Colfax, the Director of the Department of Public Health; Dr. Diane Havlir, Professor of Medicine and Chief of UCSF’s HIV/AIDS Division; and Dr. Joe DeRisi, a UCSF

biochemist. Though it was an informal advisory group, this team had the respect, attention and support of the mayor.

The advisory team knew that testing would be critical to their success in saving lives. Eight days after an executive order by the governor, a UCSF lab, in collaboration with a nonprofit research organization, was ready to administer over one thousand COVID-19 tests per day. This is a testament to innovation spawned by empowerment.

## The Results

As of late June, 2020, San Francisco County reported 5.9 deaths per 100,000 residents. The figure for Dallas County (TX) was more than 6 times more, and 17 times more for Los Angeles County (CA) and Suffolk County (Boston, MA). As of September 15th, 2020, the death rate for San Francisco County increased to about 10.3 per 100,000 residents, as the pandemic surged in late summer, but still about 84% lower than the US death rate of 60.7 per 100,000 (see chart below).

The numbers show that San Francisco demonstrated effective leadership during the early days of the pandemic. What could the impact have been if applied on a national scale?

If the US overall had an overall death rate per 100,000 comparable to South Korea and San Francisco, the total number of lives that could have been saved would have been 176,432 and 165,525, respectively.

Geographic Region	Year*	Deaths Per: 100,000*	Extrapolated to USA Pop. 2020**	Lives Saved***
United States	2020	60.7	199,410	0
South Korea	2020	7.0	22,978	176,432
San Francisco	2020	10.3	33,885	165,525
World	2020	12.0	39,391	160,019
Sweden	2020	57.9	190,062	9,348

\*Reported as of September 15, 2020 (via [worldometers.com](http://worldometers.com))

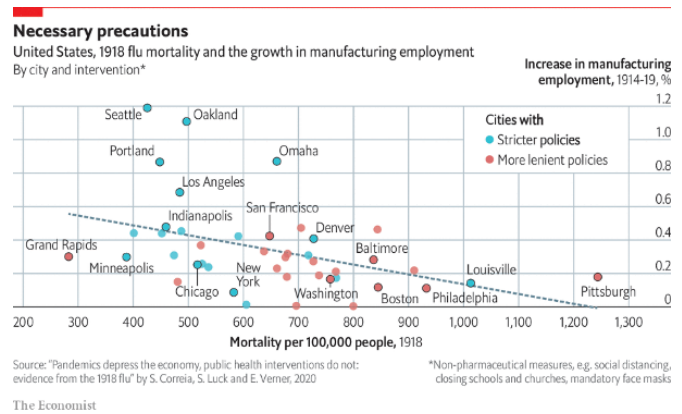
\*\*Applies the Deaths Per 100,000 rate for this region to the United States Population.

\*\*\*The difference between the Actual death toll in the US and the Extrapolated Death toll.

## Impact on Economy

The impact of COVID-19 on the economy has been significant. Many states have opted to loosen the restrictions on their residents to keep the businesses afloat. This leads to a final question, “What are the long-term economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the County of San Francisco, due to their tight restrictions?”

This is not an easy question to answer, but an article in *The Economist* is illuminating. Based on available data (see chart below), during the 1918 flu pandemic, those cities that put tight restrictions on their residents achieved a faster economic recovery than those that did not.



## Conclusion

The leaders in San Francisco realized significant results through actions reflecting these five principles of effective leadership. If these had been applied on a national scale, conceivably, over 100,000 lives could have been saved. This is a stark reminder that intentional and strategic leadership can make the difference between life and death.

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