

**OPINION**

## **Our current approach to COVID-19 won't work as well for a second wave. We must prepare now**

**JAASON GEERTS**

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Leaders including British Columbia Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry, pictured here on May 6, 2020, have been praised for rising to the task to help stem the spread of COVID-19.

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*Dr. Jaason Geerts is a researcher and consultant for the Canadian College of Health Leaders and LEADS Canada.*

There is no question that the mettle of leaders is being put to the test during the COVID-19 crisis. Many have risen brilliantly to the occasion – New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, Germany's Angela Merkel, B.C. Provincial Health Officer Bonnie Henry and New York's Andrew Cuomo, among others.

Since the crisis erupted, leaders have focused on preparing for an outbreak and on managing emergency events as they transpired. Some have even considered how to recalibrate once the crisis is over.

But the problem is that not nearly enough attention has been given to where many jurisdictions are now, which we call “Stage 3” – the prolonged in-between phase after the escalation and emergency periods but before the pandemic is resolved.

Though often overlooked, there are four characteristics of Stage 3 that suggest the need for effective leadership now is critical.

The first is that news reports with fewer doomsday projections and with announcements of loosening quarantine restrictions can give the impression that the crisis is almost over. Rather than promising relief, however, experts warn that further spikes are almost certain, which presents a definite need for leaders to prepare their organizations for a second wave.

This includes providing crisis training – for both leaders and front-line staff – and ensuring that emergency protocols and supplies are in place should the need arise. Much can be learned from how others have fared, for better or for worse. These preparations should also be informed by an honest, introspective analysis of the crisis performance of leaders and their organizations thus far to identify which successes should be repeated and which measures should be improved so we are better equipped for the next surge.

Second is the fact that while there have been many tragedies, the majority of

people have not witnessed them first-hand – which means that for many the fear is wearing off. We all followed government directives initially because of the grave risk of disaster if we didn't, but most people have been able to avoid the illness and are now desperately tired of staying home. We've missed our friends, dining out, sports, the gym or just one day without the kids at home. That has left people grasping for socially acceptable excuses to “go outside,” armed with a growing sense that infection won't happen to them and that, if it does, it won't be so bad.

Likewise, many who are out of work are anxious to return, while others are painfully aware of the daily damage to the economy and believe it should be kick-started as soon as possible.

This combination of lower fear and higher pressure exposes us to the potential for deadly super-spread events and will make it harder for leaders to motivate people to comply with strict measures again once they've been lifted.

Perhaps the greatest test our leaders face during Stage 3 is striking the right balance between safety and freedom, health and economics, inspiration and regulation, endorsing innovations and preparing for a reversion and compassion and invigoration. These are delicate balances, with the weights on each side still in flux, informed as they are by imperfect information.

The third characteristic of Stage 3 is the rise of severe burnout and mental-health issues. While we have adapted to remain productive during these “new” and “next” normal periods, this limbo-like stage has been dragging on for so long that its toll on us is intensifying on a worrying trajectory. The onus is on workplace leaders to ensure that their staff and they themselves have the psychologically safe space, care, and support they need to process their experience and heal.

An equally important mandate is for leaders to engage their people with purpose and direction, which becomes more arduous the longer this stage lingers. Simply waiting it out cannot be the strategy, given the uncertain timeline for its end.

Finally, the fourth characteristic of this stage represents an important opportunity. This extended pre-resolution period can be used to apply learning from our global experience – what could and should be better – to ensure that, even before the pandemic is over, the world and our organizations are better in remarkable ways.

We have seen miraculous examples of adaptability, innovation, collaboration, compassion and solution-oriented mandates precipitated by this situation. These must be prioritized and sustained if we aren't to waste this opportunity.

The resolution of this crisis may yet be some time away, but effective leadership during Stage 3 may well provide a new hope for a better world, even before this mettle-testing pandemic is over.

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351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher