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The Resilient Practice

Positioning the Practice for
Success Post-COVID-19

Module 1 | October 2020



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OF OPHTHALMOLOGY®

The Resilient Practice:

Positioning the Practice for Success Post-COVID-19

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What sets a practice on a steady path to successful recovery?

Great leadership skills.

The impetus for *The Resilient Practice* was to help practice leaders develop effective leadership skills and provide guidance on the most crucial recovery strategies. These modules highlight on-the-ground recovery strategies, leadership pearls and lessons learned from your Academy and AAOE colleagues. Robust learning resources are included for you to deepen your knowledge.

Leaders are not born; they are developed through study, practice and trial and error. The leadership skills of many physicians and administrators were newly forged during the pandemic crisis. Like you, these practice leaders quickly learned how to unite their eye care teams, lift morale, foster innovative problem-solving while continuing to provide excellent patient care and experience during the unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19.

Developing your personal leadership skills will take time but will be well worth the effort. We wish you success in your practice recovery.

—AAOE Recovery Task Force

Table of Contents

- Module 1:** Resilient Leadership in a Time of Crisis
- Module 2:** Assess, Manage and Grow: The Path to Financial Resiliency
- Module 3:** How to Reduce Burnout by Changing Your Practice Culture
- Module 4:** How to Achieve Patient Service Excellence
- Module 5:** Lessons Learned From a Year in Crisis

“Leadership is unlocking people’s potential to become better.”

—Bill Bradley
American Politician/Former
Professional Basketball Player

Module 1

Resilient Leadership in a Time of Crisis

“A resilient leader is a person who sees failures as temporary setbacks they can recover from quickly. They maintain a positive attitude and a strong sense of opportunity during periods of turbulence. When faced with ambiguity, a resilient leader finds ways to move forward and avoids getting stuck.”

— Joseph Folkman,
Keynote Speaker/Author
[Forbes](#)

“Resilience isn't a single skill. It's a variety of skills and coping mechanisms. To bounce back from bumps in the road as well as failures, you should focus on emphasizing the positive.”

— Jean Chatzky
Journalist, Financial Columnist

Successful recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will require resilient leadership and a heavy investment of time in practice management. Ophthalmology, in particular, has been significantly impacted by the pandemic. According to a report by the [Commonwealth Fund](#), ophthalmology experienced the greatest decline in patient visits compared with other health care specialties at the outset of the pandemic. The close proximity required to examine and treat patients continues to pose a high risk for ophthalmologists and their staff. In addition, lingering fear of exposure and social distancing requirements have contributed to a reduction in the number of patient visits, potentially delaying a full recovery for months to come.

What is a Resilient Leader?

The Institute for Management Development defines resilient leaders as having “the ability to sustain their energy level under pressure, to cope with disruptive changes and adapt. They bounce back from setbacks. They also overcome major difficulties without engaging in dysfunctional behavior or harming others.” In his *Forbes* article on resilient leadership, Joseph Folkman observes that resilient leaders:

1. Communicate powerfully
2. Are coachable
3. Build positive/trusting relationships
4. Are bold risk-takers
5. Develop others
6. Champion change
7. Are decisive

Practices that innovate will recover more successfully from a downturn. Resilient leaders are the most likely to rebuild thriving practices because they are by nature risk takers and champions of change. Folkman states, “For a leader who is trying to be more resilient, we believe that improvement on even a few of these factors will help.”

How to Become a Resilient Leader

1. **Carpe diem — seize the day.**

Resilient leaders are decisive. Seize the opportunity to make the difficult changes you wanted to do in your practice before the pandemic. If these changes will position your practice for success during recovery, then you should implement them immediately. Ask yourself if there are things you need to rethink and do differently now. For example, do you need to right-size your staff? Do you need different skill sets post-pandemic? Should you close a satellite office?

2. **Communicate your purpose.**

Resilient leaders communicate the “what” and the “why” of what they do. When people understand the reason behind why they have been asked to adopt or change a particular action, they are more willing to get on board. During recovery, be sure to explain clearly the purpose of any changes you want to implement. Make sure you connect it to your practice’s values and outline the benefits to be gained. This will help to create buy-in and ensure a smoother change process. (See “Finding Your Why” below.)

3. **Embrace change.**

Resilient leaders understand that success is impossible without change. Leaders who negotiate change successfully are willing to step outside their comfort zone. They also devote more time to the change effort, are focused on the big picture and do not get discouraged when they fail to see immediate results. Resilient leaders are in it for the long haul.

4. **Listen first.**

Resilient leaders know that feedback from multiple stakeholders makes them better and more knowledgeable leaders. Be the leader whose staff is comfortable giving you their honest assessment and not what they think you want to hear.

5. **Be a multiplier.**

The most inspiring leaders can double their teams’ effectiveness while others drain the energy right out of the room. The “multiplier” leader uses their smarts to unleash the genius of those around them.

6. **Communicate clearly and supportively.**

Resilient leaders understand how to communicate effectively. Here are six tips to improve communication:

a. **Be problem oriented, not person oriented.**

Problem-oriented communication focuses on the actual problem at hand rather than on the person who is responsible for the problem. This avoids useless finger-pointing and gets the conversation back on track to finding a solution.

“It isn’t how much you know that matters. What matters is how much access you have to what other people know. It isn’t just how intelligent your team members are; it is how much of that intelligence you can draw out and put to use.”

— Liz Wiseman
Researcher/Executive Adviser

- b. **Be congruent.** Congruent communication conveys what the speaker is thinking and feeling. Some situations certainly require discretion, however, in most situations, we foster trust when we communicate honestly.
- c. **Be descriptive, not evaluative.** Evaluation and judgement are linked and should be minimized in communication. An example of evaluative communication is when a speaker expresses his or her judgment of a particular person, event or action to a listener. A more constructive approach to communication is for the speaker to objectively describe the problem rather than the feelings or viewpoints about the problem.
- d. **Validate over invalidating.** Validating communication helps people feel understood, valued, and accepted. In contrast, invalidating communication makes people feel ignored and alienated.
- e. **Be specific.** Communication needs to be clear and specific to minimize confusion and misunderstanding.
- f. **Listen and receive feedback.** Communication is not a one-way message delivery. Remember to engage fully and listen to what is being said, and avoid thinking of your response while the other person is speaking.

“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence—it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

— Peter Drucker
Management Consultant,
Educator and Writer

7. **Nurture collaboration.**

Resilient leaders are successful because they work across boundaries and bring everyone along with them. They do this by:

- a. Breaking down silos that impede collaboration
- b. Developing and nurturing a culture in which experimentation and learning are embraced, valued and rewarded
- c. Collaborating with employees at all levels within the organization — not just upper level management — because they know that a 360-degree perspective contributes to more informed decision making
- d. Including employees in decision-making early on, engendering enthusiasm and commitment (See “The Multipliers” below.)

8. **Encourage resourcefulness.**

Resilient leaders are resourceful and encourage this skill in others. Here are a few tips to nurture resourcefulness in the practice:

- a. Use language that reinforces the message of its importance. For example, “We are going to figure this out,” or “Let’s find a solution” are positive ways to model and encourage creative problem-solving.
- b. Practice staff are under a lot of pressure and, understandably, tension and discouragement can happen. Turn around questions, such as, “Why is this so hard?” or “Why did this have to happen?” to “What else could I/we try?,” or “What can I/we do to make this work?”
- c. Be comfortable with not knowing and respect your staff when they acknowledge that they don’t know. Resilient leaders are comfortable with not having all the answers. They’re able to sidestep this stressor because they know they will work until they get a solution.

“The responsibility of leadership is not to come up with all the ideas but to create an environment in which great ideas can thrive.”

— Simon Sinek
Author/Motivational Speaker

9. **Strive to do your best, not for perfection.**

Resilient leaders strive to do their best work, but don't get hamstrung by perfectionism. During crisis management, perfectionism will be counterproductive and impede forward momentum. The perfect or even "right" answer may not be readily available. Commit to doing your best, remaining ethical and balancing objectives.

10. **Be curious.**

Resilient leaders are great learners. Acquiring diverse knowledge both professionally and personally enables you to discover solutions and strategies more synergistically. Make it a point to read or acquire new information as part of your daily routine. Committing to just 60 minutes a day to acquire a new skill or nurture a passion or hobby will increase your knowledge and help you avoid burnout.

11. **Reflect.**

Resilient leaders understand the power of hitting the pause button to reflect. Too much action with too little introspection can lead to poor decision-making and burnout. Stopping to write in a journal, take a walk or indulge in some other form of introspection will give you time to see patterns, obstacles and solutions. There is a reason some people find their eureka moments while taking a shower — the mind needs time to wander and reflect in a relaxed state.

Build a Resilient Practice

1. **Re-envision your financial solutions and processes.**

Step back from your business-as-usual targets and goals and look for new strategies that will increase your practice's viability during recovery. Are there opportunities to collaborate or cost share? Can you proactively reach out to referring physicians?

2. **Reassess your staffing.**

Assessment of your current staffing needs may reveal that you need to reduce your staff levels or hire new staff with different job skills. A difficult part of leadership is making hard decisions that will benefit your practice long-term. As a leader, you will need to handle these staffing decisions with compassion and honesty. Be prepared to communicate how and why you are making your staffing changes to your team. Relationships are forged in the practice and how you handle these will impact your staff's morale and loyalty to you and the practice.

3. **Create a positive culture in your practice.**

The best way to create a positive culture is by modeling it yourself. Encourage and support your staff and reward teamwork and new ideas. Avoid punishing or demeaning staff when they make mistakes or try new ideas that do not pan out as expected. Keep attuned to burnout in your staff as well as to your own sense of well-being. Take time to pause and connect with staff on a daily basis. Having patience, a good sense of humor and a positive attitude will make a huge difference in your practice culture, and your patients will notice and benefit from it as well. Remember happy staff equals happy patients.



ACTION
STEPS

4. **Reach out to your professional support network.**
Connect to your professional support network and stay on top on current issues, facts and innovative solutions. Check out AAOE's listserv, [E-Talk](#), which is one of the best crowdsourcing forums for ophthalmic practice management.
5. **Learn from ophthalmic practice leaders that you admire.**
Ask them how they approach leading their practice. Check out the leadership resources listed below to strengthen your leadership skills and reach out to members of the AAOE Recovery Task Force for additional advice by submitting your questions to aaoe@aao.org.

SPOTLIGHT

Resilient Leadership in Action

Ravi D. Goel, MD, Academy senior secretary for ophthalmic practice, shares how his comprehensive ophthalmology practice developed reopening protocols through teamwork and brainstorming:

“Empowering our team to brainstorm innovative solutions has always been a priority. And with the pandemic, we’ve encouraged out-of-the-box thinking even more. Staff insights have greatly helped refine our practice protocols and improved efficiency. We found that in soliciting collaborative solutions, we were able to implement changes immediately and avoid reactive responses.

I believe that generating ideas collaboratively starts with listening. Early on, I would hear my staff ask questions such as, ‘Why do we do this?’ or ‘Why don’t we add this information to our website?’ I was inspired to see and hear their commitment to quality improvement. I knew we needed to implement a system to routinely ask for staff input and easily capture their feedback. So, we posted a whiteboard in my practice. We said to our staff: ‘If you think we should be doing something, write it down. Whatever your idea is, it’s important and we want to hear it. Even if it is something simple like we need napkins, then we need to hear about it.’ Even simple changes can make an impact.

Very quickly, our staffs’ ideas changed the course of our reopening. One of our employees observed that if we conducted an efficient pre-encounter phone call, it would save time at check-in. Another staff person suggested that if we confirm the current medications during the same call, then we would save time during the encounter. Implementing these changes alone saved up to three minutes per encounter.

The experiences of COVID-19 have caused us to include analysis and self-reflection in our daily work. This is time well spent. This process has changed our practice culture to engage everyone to continually improve our best practices and retain only those that make the best sense to continue.”



Ravi D. Goel, MD

Academy Senior Secretary
for Ophthalmic Practice

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SPOTLIGHT

Resilient Leadership in Action

The ongoing pandemic can take a toll on the culture of a practice—the looming uncertainty and constant bad news can impact how people think, feel and react. Recognizing this shift in culture and cultivating a collaborative response is one of the attributes of resilient leadership.

Listening to her team and recognizing the shift in morale within her own practice, Brittney Wachter, Chief Executive Officer at Excel Eye Center in Provo, Utah, collaborated with her team to identify the following three key strategies:

1. **Validate feelings.**

“We observed that everyone feels like so much has been taken away. There is such an overwhelming feeling of grief and loss. We had to stop providing luncheons that we had formerly instituted as a reward because staff members are required to socially distance for safety reasons. We also had to cancel our annual staff summer pool party to comply with social distancing requirements, which was replaced with a virtual weeklong party.

Sometimes we can quickly recognize that the next big change feels ‘like the last straw.’ As a management team, we wanted to validate these feelings with direct communication by saying, ‘Yes, this is a great loss,’ or ‘This is a difficult change. I recognize how this makes you feel.’ We recognized the importance of making sure each person was not ignored and felt valued.”

2. **Change the focus.**

“Our next step was to encourage a campaign of support and focus on each other, not ourselves. We started a daily reminder: ‘How can you help someone today?’ This quickly evolved to staff asking themselves, ‘How can I help someone today?’ Our staff began to witness simple acts of kindness that made the difference for colleagues. I personally experienced a small token of encouragement from one of our employees—and for me—it came at just the right time.”

3. **Change starts at the top.**

“We knew the conscious efforts to validate, encourage and support one another would not continue without the support of our physician leaders. The doctors have to be on the same page when it comes to any sort of change. Communicating



Brittney Wachter, CEO

“The experiences of communicating observations and collaborating solutions with our physicians was the key to getting them quickly onboard. We experienced the same positive response to the cultural shift from our physicians—and that really solidified the paradigm shift.”

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Books

- ***Craving the Future*** (Michael Perman)
- ***Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*** (Daniel H. Pink)
- ***Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*** (Daniel Goleman)
- ***First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*** (Marcus Buckingham)
- ***Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*** (Jim Collins)
- ***Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*** (Simon Sinek)
- ***Leading Change*** (John Kotter)
- ***Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*** (Simon Sinek)
- ***The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done*** (Peter Drucker)
- ***The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter*** (Michael Watkins)
- ***The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*** (Patrick Lencioni)
- ***The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*** (Clayton Christensen)
- ***The Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*** (Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown)
- ***The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You*** (John C. Maxwell)
- ***The Zen Leaders*** (Ginny Whitelaw)
- ***Thinking, Fast and Slow*** (Daniel Kahneman)
- ***Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us*** (Seth Godin)
- ***True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership*** (Bill George)



LEARN
MORE

Online Articles

- [Applying past leadership lessons to the coronavirus pandemic](#)
- [Culture and Leadership: The Nine Principles of Agile Leadership](#)
- [How to Become a More Resilient Leader](#)
- [Leadership Will Change Forever After The Coronavirus Pandemic](#)
- [Leadership in a crisis: How leaders can support their organizations during the COVID-19 crisis and recovery](#)
- [The heart of resilient leadership: Responding to COVID-19](#)

Online Videos: AAOE Practice Management Library

- [Effective Strategic Planning](#)
- [Effectively Manage Your Millennial Physicians and Staff](#)
- [Succession Planning Essentials - Hiring Your Next Administrator](#)

Podcasts

- [Helping Organizations Thrive With Julian Rob](#)
- [Resilient podcast: How businesses can confront the COVID-19 crisis](#)

TED Talks

- [5 ways to lead in an era of constant change](#) (Jim Hemmerling)
- [How great leaders inspire action](#) (Simon Sinek)
- [How to break bad management habits before they reach the next generation of leaders](#) (Elizabeth Lyle)
- [How to manage for collective creativity](#) (Linda Hill)
- [The surprising ingredient that makes businesses work better](#) (Marco Alvera)
- [Why we need to treat our employees as thoughtfully as our customers](#) (Diana Dosik)

About the American Academy of Ophthalmic Executives

The American Academy of Ophthalmic Executives® (AAOE®), an affiliate of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, is the leading membership organization for ophthalmic practice management serving thousands of members. AAOE's mission is to facilitate the business success of ophthalmic practices through accurate and up-to-date coding and practice management resources.

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