

# **Leading Provincial Labour Associations During a Time of Pandemic: Transitions in Pursuit of Safe and Healthy Campuses**

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## **Introduction**

In many ways, this chapter began and developed with the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, two provincial education leadership organisations representing most of the public post-secondary

sector in B.C., the Confederation of University Faculty Associations of British Columbia (CUFA/BC), and the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of British Columbia (FPSE/BC), began to build connections designed to help us better advocate for post-secondary educators across the province. Together, we represent more than 24,000 faculty and staff who teach and support 175,000 full-time equivalent students across British Columbia. As we worked to better understand each other's organisations and membership needs, as well as build trust and understanding across our organisations, we realised this strengthening relationship could serve as a foundation for substantive collaboration to help post-secondary educators respond to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered post-secondary leadership scholars and practitioners an important window into crisis management. In the classic literature on crisis management, crises were often viewed as singular events to be managed and frequently focused on the organisation or institution, and as a result, were concerned with things like reputational impact. The pandemic was a completely different crisis, more akin to disaster response literature than crisis response literature. In fact, the pandemic has caused something of a crisis in crisis literature as we seek to better define the experience and fit it within our understanding of event response.

In their categorisation of hazard events, Montano and Savit (2020) were unable to place the pandemic in the traditional emergencies, disasters, and catastrophes continuum since the pandemic created different types of impacts. Local leadership was not interrupted, and the event duration was (and continues to be) atypically long. This lack of fit matters since research generally suggests targeted responses based on the type of emergency being faced. In a more recent review, Salamzadeh and Dana (2022) recommend a three-stage approach to crisis management with guidance under each stage: pre-crisis, crisis-time, and post-crisis, although they note little research has been done on pre-crisis management and post-crisis change.

As a result, we have a unique opportunity to rethink how we conceptualise and define *crisis*, examine and understand leadership within an expanded crisis context, and focus on the transition to more diverse, sustainable, democratic, and equitable institutions as we respond to the pandemic. Previous research conceptualises crises as event-specific and time-limited (Smith and Riley 2012); however, the pandemic can best be conceptualised as an ongoing crisis composed of *mini-crises*. While each mini-crisis may fit well within the framework of previous research, the on-going nature of the pandemic offers lessons in *slow-crisis* leadership. That said, there are tensions between short- and longer-term responses within a crisis framework, as important rules and regulations may be set aside to facilitate short-term responses to crises; however, important protections may be lost if short-term changes become institutionalised.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The leadership experience within our organisations can best be understood through two bodies of literature. The first—*crisis leadership*—helps us interrogate our experience within the pandemic, while the second—*transformational leadership*—helps us understand our experience within our organisations.

### ***Crisis Leadership***

Leadership is highly contextual (Oc 2018) and the research literature on contextual leadership offers a wealth of categories for leaders to navigate. Researchers have proposed categories including *culture/climate*, *goals/purposes*, *people/composition*, *processes*, *state/condition*, *structure*, and *time* (Porter and McLaughlin 2006), and have differentiated between leading in context and leadership that changes the context (Liden and Antonakis 2009). Other researchers have conceptualised context as cultural and organisational (Ayman and Adams 2012). Oc (2018) proposes two types of context: omnibus and discrete. He defines the omnibus context as consisting

of national culture, institutional forces, the demographic composition of groups, economic conditions, and crises. At the discrete level, Oc argues that issues are more narrowly focused on practice: the task, team, organisation, and social network. Physical distance between the leaders and followers, as well as time pressures, also play an important role in leadership. Oc's categorisation of context offers a framework for interrogating the pandemic crisis, which is still occurring across and within institutions.

### ***Transformational leadership***

Even as Oc (2018) argues that leadership in times of crisis is contextual, at the discrete level, where the focus is on the organisation, the response can be transformational. In particular, when leaders are focused on transformation – in our case, working across member organisations to bring the organisations as a whole to a new understanding of what it means to be an effective provincial labour association – substantial internal changes can be realised. Transformational leaders use their vision to guide change and energise members to act (Jeanes 2019). While the context of the pandemic opened a window for action, it was the transformational leadership approaches of leaders in both organisations that ultimately were able to shift organisational cultures. While this chapter focuses primarily on crisis leadership, links to the transformational leadership approaches at both CUFA/BC and FPSE/BC are apparent in the ways the organisations experienced internal change.

This chapter opens with the perspectives of the CUFA/BC Executive Director, Annabree Fairweather, and President (at that time, during the pandemic), Dan Laitsch, on leading the organisation during an extended time of crisis. It explores the challenges of leading through consensus in a time of competing interests and across a diverse membership. It explores the COVID-19 crisis broadly and identifies four stages of crisis—from the initial crisis of universities

quickly moving to remote delivery, to managing a sustained crisis of advocating for faculty working remotely over an extended time period, to working toward a safe return to campus, to once again suddenly returning to remote work as the omicron variant spread across the globe.

The crisis, as a whole and within each stage, saw unique issues in working with member institutions, government stakeholders (ministers, ministries, opposition parties, and the public health office), and management groups, including the Research Universities Council of B.C. (RUC-BC) and the Public Sector Employees Council (PSEC). Additionally, CUFA/BC was working through the transition to a new executive director (hired in 2019) and a new president (Dan Laitsch stepping into the role in the summer of 2020, taking over from outgoing president Jacqueline Holler). The extended and cyclical nature of the crisis created competition between CUFA/BC's sustained work on behalf of the membership and individual and ongoing crisis responses. The transitions in leadership also opened a policy window for change internally.

The chapter continues with the perspectives of Brent Calvert, President, and Sean Parkinson, Secretary-Treasurer, of the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of British Columbia. FPSE/BC leadership faced the same stage of challenges as CUFA/BC, both internally and externally. While we worked closely together through the phases of the pandemic, FPSE/BC also working through internal changes in leadership and ultimately, the move to a new staff and leadership structure.

## **CUFA/BC Story**

CUFA/BC is an institutional membership organisation representing unions at B.C.'s five research-intensive universities. The work of the organisation is overseen by the president and executive director and an executive consisting of the five elected presidents of the member faculty associations. Decisions are generally made on a consensus basis, although on contentious issues,

a vote of the executive can be taken. While CUFA/BC is an association of labour organisations, it is not itself a union and therefore sits slightly outside of traditional labour structures. While CUFA/BC has a special membership in the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), it does not have access to other labour groups under the House of Labour, like the BC Federation of Labour.

### ***Accelerating Processes for Decision-Making and Communication***

We have a regular process at CUFA/BC of working together with five faculty associations through an iterative approach in which we: 1) systematically identify an advocacy position; 2) articulate objectives and strategies around this position; and 3) identify *who* will be performing *what* duties. We meet biannually with the council, and prior to the pandemic, the executive committee met as needed based on consultation between the executive director and president. The bulk of the work is done by the executive director and executive assistant, with a significant contribution from the president. While this gives insight into our structure of communication and planning, in our experience, our processes are best described as slow and methodical. We are not unlike the universities and their decision bureaucracy, with their hierarchies of boards of governors, senates, faculties, administrators, unions, and myriad committees.

During the crisis of the pandemic, however, the *status quo* in our careful decision-making was substantially disrupted. Like the institutions themselves, we had to move quickly to respond to significant emerging events, often with limited or incomplete information. As a result, we moved to a regular monthly meeting of the executive committee when Laitsch took over the presidency in July 2020.

We also demanded a lot from CUFA/BC's member faculty associations. Since we are an association of associations, none of our advocacy can be done without the input of member faculty associations, who directly interact with the broader membership of the organisation – the faculty. As the faculty associations communicated with their members and administrations, we needed real time updates so that we could do our part in advocating for the government and supporting the membership across institutions.

### ***Everything Everywhere All at Once***

The early days of the provincial and national shutdown were absolute chaos. At first, we thought this was going to last a few weeks, but reality soon set in that this could last for a while, maybe even months. We did not anticipate the pandemic disrupting our lives for years. In the beginning, though, we focused on answering the most pressing questions, primarily related to the closure of the university campuses. *How were faculty and students going to complete the term? What time-sensitive research projects can be paused? What about experiments with live animals or bacterial cultures that needed daily care? Or researchers in the natural sciences who could not access their laboratories? Community-based research projects with vulnerable community members who relied on critical services? What about assignments and grant deadlines? What did this mean for career decisions over tenure and promotion? What about student graduation?* Most of this initial phase was led by President Holler, working with ED Fairweather.

University administrations announced the plan to pivot to remote teaching and learning, with full attention on salvaging the term but often without consultation with faculty. Faculty asked themselves—and their employers—what *remote teaching* was, and how does one do it having never done it before and without existing technological infrastructure? Many pointed out that not

all disciplines or programmes could readily transition to an online delivery model. We all did the best we could under constrained circumstances. Courses were recalibrated in record time to fit an online delivery model.

Meanwhile, many research projects were parked as best as possible while faculty and students collectively focused on completing the school year. Ancillary services were canceled. Many non-academic staff were laid off. Campuses remained closed and locked except for student residences and libraries. On-campus libraries were one of the only services that remained open, and they poured resources into rapidly expanding licencing agreements to access electronic publications and online subscriptions.

One of the biggest struggles for all of us was not knowing who was responsible for making decisions in an emergency in the absence of the usual collegial processes. At research universities in B.C., matters of business and regular institutional operations are the purview of the board of governors, while academic matters fall to the Senate. Terms and conditions of employment, including workload, discipline, and supervisory issues, are typically matters for collective agreements. There are multiple collective agreements at universities for faculty, sessionals, teaching assistants, and staff. Provincial legislation requires joint workplace committees to oversee all matters of occupational health and safety, with broad employee representation and participation in decisions. By nature, universities are conservative in their decision-making and slow in their institutional review processes, which generally occur on a monthly basis. As a result, many of these regular decision-making structures were paused as administrations stepped in to make fast-paced decisions in response to emerging issues and understanding.

For faculty unions to support their members, they needed to know what members were going through and identify their needs, but it was hard to connect with everyone through the regular



communication channels like emails and general meetings. Inboxes were overflowing, and people had limited bandwidth to cope with their demanding workloads. Faculty needed support to work from home; some of them lived in rural or remote areas with limited internet connectivity, and some were stranded out of the province and indeed, out of the country. In their personal lives, they were dealing with all the things we have talked about throughout the pandemic: experiences with immunocompromise, being caregivers to young people and seniors, navigating the gendered impacts of the pandemic on women, and experiencing personal and communal grief for the unknown.

Faculty unions did the best they could to connect with members and to represent their urgent needs to employers. They adopted novel strategies for communicating through newly adopted technology like Slack and, in particular, Zoom. They regularly surveyed members to learn more about their experiences during the great transition to remote working. Faculty unions were able to raise issues with administrations in a timely manner, which greatly contributed to the ability of the employer to support faculty and students. It wasn't perfect, and not all administrations responded to the needs of their communities or advocated on these issues with the government. But there was a need for a broader approach to the systemic issues facing post-secondary institutions, which became a critical matter for provincial groups like CUFA/BC.

### ***Who Makes Decisions in Crisis?***

During the early days of the shutdown, a small contingent of the most senior members of the university administration assumed decision-making authority. This streamlining of decisions was a trade-off for making quick decisions. There was some necessity to this approach, but there was also concern about potential abuses of power. It was a complicated time. We suspended our usual

rigid rules about how things ought to be done at the university and adopted the position that rules were temporarily suspended until we could get a handle on the situation. But it came at a cost: decisions were not broadly informed, nor were they sensitive to the real issues facing faculty, staff, or students, and some of the institutions worked more closely with the faculty unions than others.

In the institution hierarchy, faculty have a great deal of autonomy in making decisions over pedagogy and research. During the pandemic, however, decisions were made by the administration at the top and even at the direction of the government over matters that were usually in the purview of departments, faculties, and individual faculty members. Things like course delivery being remote or in-person were decided with minimal consultation or engagement from the university senates. Decisions were made in a blanket manner with little understanding of the needs of the end-user. Courses that were historically offered virtually were required to be taken in person as the government mandated their return to campus. Altering exam modalities to support student success by relaxing standards, utilising specialised technology for proctoring exams to deter cheating, requiring lectures to be recorded, and even regulating course delivery to offer both synchronous and asynchronous participation, were made in many cases without substantive consultation. They also had big implications for copyright, privacy rights, accommodations, academic freedom, and more.

As the pandemic evolved, decision-making became more exclusive than the traditional and more inclusive models embodied by bicameral and collegial governance. Power was concentrated among an elite few at the top. In the usual highly complex communication systems needed within universities, communication became disconnected. Decisions were made that were at times impractical for those at the forefront of the academic mission. Constituents from across the university campus vied to be heard above the throng of people in crisis, creating a new crisis

in the stumbling return to consultation and collegial governance. We worked hard to monitor trends across our membership institutions to help members understand the related challenges they were, or might soon be, facing while also working to help the government understand the unique context of service delivery at post-secondary universities. The transition from an initial crisis response to a more steady-state pandemic response occurred during the transition of the presidency at CUFA/BC.

### ***Too Many Captains Steering the Boat***

Adding further complication to this moment in time was the issue of jurisdictional authority within competing branches of provincial government. Universities fall within the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, and K-12 schools within the Ministry of Education, but because of the active state of emergency in the province, authority over health and safety measures was granted to the office of the Provincial Health Officer (PHO), who often made broad-brush directives that conflated education systems and contexts. Further, many decisions were made without real consultation, alienating front-line educators and losing connection to the real needs of faculty delivering educational services and personal support to students.

The Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills was working with university administrations over course delivery, shutdown procedures, emergency funding supports, and return-to-campus protocols. The PHO was making different decisions over COVID-19 safety protocols on campus that, at times, contradicted the Minister's directions. When faculty and students were mandated back to campus, without what many felt were sufficient safety protocols in place, a legitimate crisis emerged over who had the authority to direct institutions. Was it provincial health or the ministry? And what about the legal autonomy of boards and senates to

make decisions about the institution? There was a need for nuance in rules that could accommodate the unique needs of institutions, but instead, we got the blunt instrument of uniform directives from the provincial health office.

University campuses also occupy both public and private spaces. The PHO directed that restaurants and movie theatres be subject to mask mandates, contact tracing, and reduced capacity to allow for physical distancing and control of foot traffic directionality, yet classrooms had no such limits or transmission tracking, even for classrooms that held many hundreds of students. The rules were intended to be black and white with a clear rationale. When applied to university campuses, however, these rules seemed arbitrary and completely out of touch with the way campus spaces were utilised. Some faculty proposed holding lectures in campus pubs and restaurants so that the physical distancing rules and tracing measures could apply instead of cramming into classrooms with poor ventilation and locked windows. Institutions, departments, and faculties were pulled between legal compliance with poor directives from the government and supporting the practical safety needs of those on campus.

We collectively struggled to understand who was making decisions and how we could better insert ourselves into the narrative to better advocate for faculty. It was impossible to triangulate between differing branches of government and institutional decision-makers. The ground constantly shifted with new and then revised protocols directed by different spokespersons. The minister said one thing, and the PHO said another. For financial matters, the Public Sector Employers' Council, as directed through the Ministry of Finance, made crucial decisions over institutional finances that hamstrung the ability of institutions to respond to the needs of the local context and faculty.

Administrations recognised that people needed support to set up home offices, especially when campuses were locked and people did not have access to their campus offices or labs. People were working excessive, impossible overtime hours to get their courses formatted for online delivery without the support of Tas and tech support. But the Ministry and PSEC prevented administrations from spending their own surplus money to support faculty and staff. Faculty were collapsing under the stress of teaching, research, and service within a new pandemic context. There were some who took leave because they were unable to work under these extreme conditions, which cascaded into an increased workload redistributed among even fewer workers. As institutions lost critical revenue from ancillary services, many of them implemented hiring freezes to staunch the financial bleeding. It left institutions further understaffed and under resourced following decades of chronic underfunding. And yet, administrations were prevented from tapping into their own surplus funds to support programme delivery. It was devastating. It was also unnecessary.

As post-secondary students navigated a complicated return to campus, we pressed the Ministry to affirm the existing legal rights to institutional autonomy. In response, they partly relinquished their stronghold on research universities and let them make decisions within limits that were tailored to the needs of their campus communities. Some adopted mask mandates on campuses and vaccine passports and largely returned decision-making over course delivery back to the departments and faculties, where it belonged only for the research universities. Other post-secondary institutions were held in tight grips, squeezed between the directives from the Ministry and the PHO and under the thumb of PSEC.

## *Paddling Together*

While the faculty unions were working with the faculty, administrations were making decisions about the institution and talking to the government. There needed to be a voice for faculty unions to communicate with the government. As the provincial voice for more than 5,500 faculty members through the faculty associations, CUFA/BC represented the collective interests of faculty at B.C.'s research universities. Through our internal work with member faculty associations, we identified emergent issues at the system level and amplified the voice of faculty to the government.

We also recognised that other labour groups within the post-secondary sector were advocating for similar issues and that we needed to work in unison with other provincial organisations. Building on the relationship that we had been working on with FPSE/BC shortly before the pandemic (as described earlier in this chapter), we realised that a greater connection was needed. We did not want to speak at cross purposes to the needs of non-academic staff on campus, of students, or of post-secondary institutions that were not members of CUFA/BC. As a result, we worked with FPSE/BC to build and strengthen relationships with organisations like CUPE BC, BCGEU, MoveUP, and others that had broader memberships.

Our focus initially was on sharing information, listening to what was happening at other institutions, and collecting what bits and pieces we could put together to make sense of the confusion. We learned administrators were communicating with each other very closely, which allowed them to have a singular voice with the government. We modelled ourselves in this manner. We produced joint communications representing broad issues from the perspective of post-secondary labour. Through our collective actions, we got the attention of the government and public media, further enhancing the strength of our voice.

The labour groups were invited to stakeholder consultation meetings with the government. We met with the Minister of the (then-named) Advanced Education, Skills, and Training Ministry to talk about the big burning issues facing faculty during the shutdown. We were stakeholders in a series of consultations on the return to campus and COVID-19 safety protocols, as well as the job recovery planning. When there was a provincial election, we worked together to organise joint meetings with the government and better collaborate during a provincial funding model review process. We also transitioned through our own changeover in elected officials and worked very hard to maintain the momentum of our fledgling collaborations.

By working together as closely as we did, we navigated a delicate balance between finding common interests when we could (such as calling for better on-campus health and safety measures) and ensuring that we supported each other in advocating for our disparate needs when our interests diverged (such as advocating for faculty to continue delivering courses online while supporting the return to campus work for non-academic staff who were laid off during the campus shutdown). We learned that this balance was necessary to counter the power asymmetry that exists in post-secondary institutions, with government and management working collaboratively to advance an agenda that often leaves faculty, staff, and students without a voice.

In many ways, our systems are still behaving as if we are operating in an emergent crisis, with many of our collegial processes weakened or ignored. This move away from collegial responsibility for organisational welfare puts both institutions and stakeholder communities (faculty, staff, and students) at risk. To protect the post-secondary system in B.C., we must return to a state of shared governance and not let the temporary state of unilateral decision-making become the norm.

In looking back at our successes from this collaboration, one of the best outcomes was the building of strong networks that facilitated open information sharing. With this foundation, we are now better organised to respond to other events like public sector bargaining, future government consultations, and union mobilization. Collective power is galvanising for the work ahead.

## **FPSE/BC Story**

While FPSE/BC is similar to CUFA/BC in that its membership is made up of post-secondary labour unions, FPS/BC provides direct labour relations services to its members. As a result, much of our work was more concerned with specific collective agreements, letters of understanding (LOUs), and grievances than would be the case with the work of CUFA/BC, which would focus more on pan-institutional issues and concerns.

When the COVID-19 pandemic appeared in early 2020, the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of British Columbia (FPSE/BC) was planning in-person celebrations for its 50<sup>th</sup> year of operations. Over the previous 18 months, attempts to introduce emerging collaborative technologies like Zoom and Slack were met with limited interest, signalling that the federation was content to maintain the dominant model of primarily travel supported in-person and email-based operations commonly embraced by labour organisations. A teleconference may be called where time is of the essence, but it is clear that there is little initiative for change. By April, in-person operations were not feasible, and the federation braced for how to manage effectively in a foreign operating environment.

### ***FPSE/BC within the B.C. Post-Secondary Education Sector***

FPSE/BC brings together faculty and staff at over 20 public and private colleges, universities, special purpose teaching universities, and language schools across the province of British Columbia. While the participating faculty and staff associations maintain their independence and



autonomy, the federation structure supports internal coordination for labour relations, contract administration, bargaining, equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonisation. FPSE/BC also collaborates externally with other post-secondary education (PSE) groups on policy, government relations, and ensuring PSE is serving provincial and community needs.

On matters of labour, FPSE/BC affiliates provincially with the BC Federation of Labour (BC Fed) and nationally with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) through the National Union of Canadian Association of University Teachers (NUCAUT). While bicameral collegial governance is a staple of CUFA/BC institutions, FPSE/BC institutions rely on different structures to protect faculty, often resulting in more formal engagement in labour relations, including the careful use of grievance procedures, formal letters of understanding, and greater engagement in the working conditions of members.

On matters of academia, FPSE/BC affiliates nationally with the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). Provincially, the B.C. government has represented the sector as pre-segmented in the following categories: FPSE/BC is the largest post-secondary education organisation by membership in the province; the B.C. post-secondary education (BCPSE) sector also includes CUFA/BC, which represents five research universities; the BC Institute of Technology Faculty & Staff Association (BCITFSA); and the BC General Employees' Union (BCGEU) Component 7 (primarily trades instruction). Support staff in BCPSE include members from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE-BC) and the Movement of United Professionals (MoveUp).

Healthcare is the largest sector in B.C., in part due to being presented as a single entity. Curiously, PSE is presented in a segmented manner with the B.C. government and Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills segmenting the sector into research universities,

special purpose teaching universities, colleges, and parsing out support staff. This has contributed to a divisive understanding of the post-secondary sector that has often led to different sector members being pitted against each other in seeking funding resources, accessing consultation invitations, and in other public policy matters. When presented as a single sector, PSE becomes the third-largest sector in B.C. by number of employees. Second in size is K-12 education.

While specific item coalitions had occurred in BC PSE prior to the pandemic, it was clear that PSE instruction would be disrupted dramatically by the COVID-19 pandemic. These historical divisions would be brought into question over the course of the pandemic.

### ***COVID-19 First Reactions***

Like any good labour organisation in PSE, the first actions undertaken by FPSE/BC included striking a subcommittee to investigate how the COVID-19 crisis was affecting our members and how FPSE/BC could lobby and act to best support them. First actions focused on supports for the most precarious groups, including contract faculty (referred to as Non-Regulars or NREG) and members in our private sector locals, and advocacy for employees to receive the Federal Government's Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Labour relations experts reviewed collective agreements to assess the risks of changes in working conditions, and examples of pandemic type variance clauses to support workers in these situations were sourced and shared.

The needed shift to online learning was examined for copyright implications, and protections were put in place for faculty who created materials to be uploaded into online learning systems. Exploration and communication of other unintended consequences that this temporary transition may have created were also undertaken, including drafting letters of understanding for needed variances to existing collective agreements; filing grievances for violations of collective

agreements; and a close monitoring of layoffs, compensation, and employer actions to increase class sizes (workload) in remote learning environments. The Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills was pressed for decisions and actions on matters like term completion, final exams, and final mark options. As we worked to understand these issues and their impact on faculty, it became clear that the issues we were identifying affected educators across the province and beyond the membership of FPSE/BC.

### ***A Collaborative Approach***

It was clear that the PSE sector had many concerns in common that trumped the traditional divisions of colleges versus universities, public versus private institutions, applied versus theoretical learning, and abilities to obtain research funding. By September 2020, outreach began on building the BC PSE Partner Group based on an exciting energy about how our organisations (FPSE/BC, CUFA/BC, and BCITSFA) could better collaborate and work together in response to issues brought about by the pandemic.

By October 2020, within FPSE/BC, locals had established coordinated workplace health and safety protocols and developed a coordinated strategy on how to handle variance agreements through Section 54 (labour adjustment plans) and Section 88 (industrial unrest) filings with the BC Labour Board. The impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of faculty, staff, students, and administrators was staggering. There was a strong desire for collaboration and coordination with other organisations in post-secondary education, including other unions and institutions' administrations. The first formal BC PSE meeting was held on November 4, 2020, and the first actions included coordinated lobbying of federal members of parliament on how the impact of COVID-19 was being managed in the PSE sector. The group continues to meet regularly

to discuss issues in PSE, and throughout the pandemic, we often meet multiple times per month to coordinate activities to protect the health and welfare of PSE educators.

In December 2020, the three leading BC PSE sector group academic partners (FPSE/BC, CUFA/BC, and BCITFSA) sent a jointly signed letter to the new Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills minister recognising that British Columbians faced significant challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and announcing that we had come together in recognising that rebuilding the provincial economy post-COVID-19 would require a strong, revitalised post-secondary system. The letter outlined that with the collective representation of over 18,000 post-secondary educators and workers from 36 institutions across British Columbia, we were joining together to collaboratively engage with the government policy priorities, from the focused sector funding review through those that intersected with other ministries. We were mindful that this work would be undertaken in concert with meaningful changes in reconciliation, improvements in diversity and equity, reductions in discrimination, and racism and overall climate impacts. Given the scale of issues we faced and the institutional budget presentations already underway, we were eager to undertake a joint meeting with the Minister to discuss and support common goals.

Within FPSE/BC, it was exciting to see regional meetings based on geography but cutting across the segmented PSE operations begin, with faculty and staff from neighbouring institutions coming together to share information and coordinate communications and actions. The commencement of the BC PSE Funding Review was a complementary project to COVID-19 recovery actions that energised the sector to ensure funding model changes didn't negatively impact institutions and educators.

In the first three months of 2021, the BC PSE sector group participated as a PSE Labour Reference Group in provincial consultations on the Safe Return to Campus (for the September

2021 fall term), emphasising issues such as air filtration and inside air standards, classroom cleaning and personal protective equipment (PPE), and masking, which culminated in the April 2021 Post-Secondary Return-to-Campus Primer. A provincial town hall for the BC PSE sector was held in a tightly controlled virtual environment in May 2021, but coordination across the PSE sector group on listing and up-voting on questions of concern to faculty and staff ensured they were asked and addressed.

### ***Our Return to Campus***

Through July and August 2021, as the fall term neared, concerns about guidelines for masking and vaccination mandates rose, and the discrepancies across the sector became clear as larger research-based institutions had more autonomy to implement solutions, while colleges were held strictly to government-imposed mandate conditions. The façade of institutional autonomy in the BC PSE sector was clearly exposed.

In early September 2021, a joint Labour Day Statement was released, highlighting the ever-changing landscape of COVID-19-related announcements. We saw what was possible as a collective amidst the chaos. The message celebrated the fact that we came together as a collective to protect the health and safety of our campus communities despite our different structures and memberships, and that with Labour Day approaching, we wanted to celebrate the power of solidarity. The symbolic nature of the letter was critical—our sector had never before come together to celebrate the collective voice of labour. The fact that we were able to jointly commit to “fight for equitable, accessible, and well-supported public education” across our contexts was an important step forward for groups used to competing with each other for scarce resources, where a *win* for one was felt as a *loss* for others (Jones, et al. 2021, para. 4).

In September 2021, the provincial government released a report entitled “B.C.’s Restart: A Plan to Bring Us Back Together,” which featured updated information on the much-anticipated return-to-campus and in-person learning and focused on key areas like campus logistics, student housing, and dining facilities to bring PSE into alignment with provincial public health guidelines. Confusion arose, however, when the B.C. government mandated that public service employees be vaccinated against COVID-19 or risk losing their jobs.

The situation was further magnified in BC PSE as colleges and special purpose teaching universities appeared to be bound by the mandates for public institutions, while research universities appeared to have more leeway and, perhaps, more resources available to implement options like rapid testing kits and processes. Strangely, environments like movie theatres were subject to social distancing, masking requirements, and contact tracing, but the PSE learning environment was deemed immune from similar concerns.

Representatives from the BC PSE Sector Group were invited by the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills as a labour reference group on the B.C. Vaccination Card. Concerns were expressed about how the K-12 learning environment was seemingly being used as the model for PSE, as well as the lack of institutional autonomy to implement health and safety measures that matched the diverse nature of actual PSE learning environments. Other concerns raised included the recognition of student accommodations but a failure to understand the associated increases in faculty and staff workload that would accompany them. The government concluded the consultations with a report titled “Moving Beyond COVID-19: Getting Back to Normal – New Return to Campus Public Health Guidance.”

## *A Stumble in the Return*

November 2021 saw early reports surface about the Omicron variant, and in early December 2021, another provincial town hall was held for PSE stakeholders. At the town hall, the PHO stressed the importance of remaining with the on-campus and in-person learning established at the start of the fall term and resisting the call to return to remote learning.

In late December, a second provincial release entitled “Post-Secondary Unions Call for Safer Return in January” was released, urging the B.C. government to support institutional autonomy in the sector. This was crucial so that our post-secondary institutions could make the necessary decisions to protect the health and safety of our students, faculty, and staff. The release went on to outline that protective measures could include such things as offering alternate modes of course delivery, delaying the start of the term, providing enhanced PPE and engineering protections, and/or reducing class sizes for in-person delivery. We called on administrators to work closely with unions and joint workplace health and safety committees and to address the workload burdens placed on faculty and staff due to the challenging transition back to a predominately in person model of teaching within a chaotic and distributed environment. Educators found themselves being forced to teach classes in person while accommodating students still living remotely, as well as adjusting practices to support students forced to isolate due to sickness.

In response to overcrowded exam spaces and the reality that communal spaces on campus were crowded with students, we called on post-secondary institutions to implement the same 50% capacity limits in lecture halls, classrooms, and labs as the provincial orders required for social gathering spaces. This request was strongly resisted by the PHO and institutional leadership, although some inroads were made on an institution-by-institution basis. The previous move to

online post-secondary education was associated with significant negative consequences for post-secondary students, who reported poorer and worsening mental health and greater negative economic impacts than other British Columbians. Many of the decisions made during the return to campus were focused on student needs, to the exclusion of broader sector concerns.

The fall term had been chaotic and stressful for faculty, staff, and students, which had a direct impact on the mental health and well-being of our members. In large part, this chaos was the result of a series of fast-paced, changing rules governing campus safety decisions. There were also disruptions from the high frequency of absenteeism for sickness and self-isolation due to exposures and balancing necessary accommodations for these interruptions throughout the semester. We expected those disruptions to continue in early 2021.

We called on B.C.'s post-secondary institutions to take a responsible safety-first approach to the January term given the uncertainty created by the exponential growth of the Omicron variant. We strongly believed that it was no longer adequate to assume a low transmission rate in post-secondary settings. Nor was it enough to claim that transmission occurring at non-academic gatherings did not impact learning and teaching. We were also concerned that the unenforced self-disclosure surveys of vaccination status would not capture enough members of the post-secondary community to ensure a safe teaching and learning environment.

That said, we also understood that we couldn't allow fear to govern our campuses. After almost a year of isolation, returning to an on-campus community was scary, and we needed to both acknowledge the concerns of our members and help them make decisions based on data. We believed that monitoring the spread of COVID-19 in our communities was key and that tracking the trend of cases was imperative so that institutions could make decisions quickly, well in advance of the new semester, to allow faculty, staff, and students the necessary time to prepare. While we



were focused on a safe return, we were still acting within a crisis framework. Lost in our focus on safety was ensuring that our return also included a return to collegial decision-making and consultation. While we believed it was imperative for faculty unions to be involved in this dialogue and that they be fairly and adequately compensated for the added workload, adding service commitments to that workload was a distant concern.

Finally, it became apparent that COVID-19 truly highlighted and exacerbated the inequities in our communities. There were well documented impacts on younger faculty with families and elder care duties, particularly affecting female faculty. Older faculty were also rightly concerned about their own vulnerability to the virus, which was much more serious for them than for their younger colleagues. Campus communities, like the broader community, were composed of educators who faced significant health and economic barriers, and we called on administrators to couch their decisions with accessibility, equity, and safety at the centre.

By collaborating across our sector group, we were able to advance significant changes within and, at times, across institutions. Many institutions added support for teaching, suspended competitive evaluation systems, allowed increased flexibility in course delivery formats and took other initiatives that helped advance equity in our communities. While these changes were not always universal, the way we were able to communicate across institutions allowed for policy-borrowing proposals that saw a ripple effect of implementation.

### ***Key Takeaways***

Post-secondary institutions demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability by quickly shifting to (and then from) remote and hybrid learning in order to remain open and available for learners. A key challenge for the sector was (and remains) to understand the value of these

experiences and to make meaning of our experiences in ways that might add value to the working conditions of our members. The fast-paced and radical changes made in response to the pandemic gave the lie to the statement that “we can’t.” It became apparent that what the phrase really means is “we won’t” or “we don’t want to.” As a result, many institutions are now exploring what flexible work environments might look like, what it means to give educators more autonomy in thinking about programme delivery, and how equity can be strengthened through societal change. Canada saw the poverty rate drop by 33% over the course of the pandemic, and by 50% for children in poverty. Important lessons remain in understanding the diverse outcomes realised from policy responses to the pandemic, shifting the conversations within the BC PSE sector group from “what now” to “what next.”

On the policy front, obtaining real policy change was challenging, given the largely symbolic consultation invited by the government. Our coalition was able to leverage our collective authority to get concessions from the government; however, those concessions were often temporary or superficial. For example, we secured the affirmation of autonomy for post-secondary institutions as we leaned into the existing wedge between the PHO and Minister, AVED and demanded of them to clarify what rights universities had to make decisions of their own over health and safety protocols based on the local needs of the campus community. In public statements, the Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills categorically affirmed that universities have autonomy. Thanks to CUFA/BC's provincial advocacy, the research university administrators were able to, at their own expense, add limited additional protocols through the use of vaccine passports on campus and mask mandates. Eventually, however, the PHO added language to guiding provincial health documents that officially undermined this autonomy: “All faculty and staff should follow institutional health and safety prevention measures which continue to be guided

by public health, and not introduce other or different measures in their work or learning areas.” Faculty were effectively prohibited from enforcing distancing measures or even enforcing the existing mask mandates in the classroom.

We also pushed back against the differential (and preferential) treatment of students over educators. The first draft of the provincial return to campus primer strongly encouraged faculty to accept all accommodations for students and to limit demands for documentation in the spirit of compassion and generosity. Meanwhile, faculty requests for accommodation were to strictly follow collective agreements and other policies that pre-existed the pandemic and were insensitive to the current situation. Faculty turned to union support because they were frequently denied accommodations that students would have otherwise been granted, but administrators refused to budge. CUFA/BC protested (CUFA/BC 2021) in a public statement, and the final guideline document was modified with language that strongly encouraged administrators to grant requests for accommodation (B.C. Post-Secondary Institutions 2022).

## **Discussion**

Through our combined experiences, issues raised by the COVID-19 crisis include safe and healthy workplaces; equity issues related to gender, age, and stage of career; workload and personal and collective wellbeing; fear and fear management; collegial governance and consultative decision-making; and challenges and opportunities raised by increased use of technology to support remote work. Further, the cyclical nature of the crisis suggests a continued period of uncertainty as we transition from the on-going crisis response of the pandemic to endemic living in the world with COVID-19.

Our experience crossed multiple theoretical constructs, including Oc’s (2018) omnibus and discrete contexts, but also theorists we encountered in trying to further interpret our experiences,

including Grissom and Condon's (2021) phases of crisis management and Ebrahim's (2016) faces of non-profit accountability. The leadership and organisational theory research bases are replete with theories, many of which overlap. We found that these theories, at least in part, helped us better understand important aspects of our experience, although no one theory encapsulated all our experiences.

### ***Omnibus and Discrete Contexts***

Oc's (2018) omnibus context can more easily be summarised as examining the *where*, *who*, and *when* aspects of leadership. At the where level, national culture, institutions and markets, and organisational contexts are theorised to shape leadership. The where in which we found ourselves working during the pandemic was in a highly hierarchical system, where the need for quick and certain decisions created resistant authority structures. As highlighted earlier, the PHO often made broad-brush directives that conflated education systems and contexts. This caused tension with another aspect of Oc's framework, the *who* category, which focuses on the demographic characteristics of the people being led through our work. Our members are highly educated, and many have their scholarship, teaching, and service located in the healthcare sector, including public health policy, epidemiology, and medicine. While the PHO was making broad-based decisions that could be widely and easily implemented across diverse contexts, our membership had expert knowledge that demanded a nuanced response to a specific context. The *when* aspect of the context was also influential. As Rosenthal et al. noted, crises create "a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making critical decisions" (Rosenthal et al. 1989, as cited in Oc, 2018, pg. 225). Many of the collegial decision-making structures at our member

institutions that were suspended during the response to the pandemic were slow to recover as we shifted into endemic management. This has at times created conflicts within our institutions and helped set an agenda within our organisations to focus on issues of governance.

At the discrete level, concepts such as *task, team, organisation, networks, location, and time* all serve to influence the leadership context. Three of these concepts had particular influences on our organisations: networks, location, and time. As noted earlier, in the B.C. public sector, healthcare is the largest sector, with post-secondary education fragmented in both policy and ministries. This fragmentation has historically resulted in weak engagement in policy-making processes across the sector as the competing interests of public and private universities, colleges, and institutes resulted in haphazard and isolated responses to policy problems in the sector. However, when presented as a single sector, post-secondary education becomes the third largest sector in B.C. by number of employees, second in size to K-12 education. The pandemic helped drive CUFA/BC and FPSE/BC (along with BCITSFA) to work much more closely together. The relationships we established early in the pandemic also helped us reach out to colleagues at CUPE and MoveUp and, ultimately, bring a much more unified voice to our policy work with government and with the larger labour structures in B.C. (i.e., the BC Federation of Labour). This joint engagement helped us to challenge governmental approaches during the pandemic but has also helped us work together on issues beyond the pandemic, including the sector-wide contract negotiations currently underway and embedded within a new economic crisis of high inflation and exhausted public sector workers drained by the pandemic response.

In addition to expanded network creation and engagement, pressures related to physical distance between leadership and our members were core part of the pandemic response and had a substantial impact on changes in the way we conducted business. At both CUFA/BC and

FPSE/BC, we were highly reliant on face-to-face meetings with our membership for all manner of governance decisions and activities. At CUFA/BC in particular, governance meetings were limited by a long-running resistance to meeting by conference call, a requirement given the wide geographic spread in leadership. The immediate move to Zoom brought about by the pandemic completely transformed the way the organisation meets with its membership and was a primary facilitator of CUFA/BC moving to more regular meetings with member groups and institutions.

The ability to meet more regularly also addressed some of the time pressures brought about by the pandemic. Rather than wait for in-person meeting times to become available, Zoom allowed the organisations senior leadership to gather quickly, in some instances allowing us to respond to government information releases and statements within hours of their release. This shortening of distance between leaders and members, both geographically and temporally, allowed for much stronger and more effective engagement.

Zoom also allowed us to meet more easily with allies and affiliated groups, such as the Alliance of BC Students, the British Columbia Federation of Students, and the Research Universities of Canada/BC, among others. In fact, the Post-Secondary Education Group was founded through Zoom meetings and has never had a face-to-face gathering.

### ***Crisis Management***

For CUFA/BC and FPSE/BC, crisis management was largely reactive, focused on responding to the changing conditions of our members and to government actions. A major component of our responses also focused on acting as a go-between for our members and the government. In some cases, such as the 2021 and 2022 return-to-campus consultations, we coordinated pro-actively to try and protect member health and safety and address working conditions (intellectual and

physical). For us, *communication* and collective action (*coordination*) were the primary aspects of crisis management. Establishing regular and frequent two-way communications with our members and across the sector allowed us to realise protections and supports for academics at our member institutions. Cross-sector communication helped us push the government to consider and respond to our needs, leading to multiple townhalls between post-secondary stakeholders and the BC Public Health Office, as well as consultation around pandemic response guidance coming from the B.C. government.

### ***Not-for-Profit Accountability***

While much of this chapter has looked at our organisations as mediators and service providers for our membership during a time of crisis, our relationship with the frontline practitioners that both CUFA/BC and FPSE/BC see as our “membership” is also mediated by their faculty unions, our more formal institutional members. As not-for-profit membership organisations FPSE/BC and CUFA/BC also need to be cognizant of the organisational relationships that we maintain and how we demonstrate accountability to our members. In general, member-driven organisations must balance their leadership activities (how we direct and push our members in particular directions that we see as advancing the collective good) with their service activities (how we respond to the need for services expressed by our members). When we push too hard or provide too little, we risk creating internal conflicts with our members.

Members in membership organisations generally seek to hold their organisations accountable in three ways: exit-leaving (leaving the organisation); voice-voting (choosing the political leadership); and loyalty-running (seeking to take on elected leadership in the organisation). (Ebrahim, 2016). For both FPSE/BC and CUFA/BC, issues of member relations are

crucial, but they were particularly important during this time. CUFA/BC is highly constrained by its membership model. With just five institutional members and a rotating presidency, the extent to which members can individually hold the organisation immediately accountable is limited. While members are always invited to share their perspectives at council meetings, aside from waiting for their turn in leadership, their only other option for driving change or expressing discontent is to withdraw (or threaten to withdraw) their membership in the organisation. This can create a tense environment when an individual member institution expresses discontent with the organisation's direction, and during the pandemic, the leadership was cognizant that there was disagreement within the membership as to the extent the organisation should be aggressively lobbying for change. Further, the diversity in size and resources across its membership institutions can create an imbalance in perceived power between the larger institutions that contribute the bulk of funding for the organisation and small organisations that might have a larger need for services. Working when possible by consensus, ensuring clear and transparent communications, and making respectful space for diverse voices are core practices that help ameliorate but certainly do not eliminate these concerns.

While FPSE/BC is much larger, it too is protective of its membership and seeks to ensure avenues for members to engage with leadership and exercise voice in the activities of the organisation. One of the challenges FPSE/BC was working through during the pandemic was a dramatic transformation in senior leadership. At the FPSE AGM in the spring of 2020, all four elected leadership positions were contested, with three of the four incumbents losing their positions. Newly elected leaders needed to facilitate that transition while also setting an agenda for the organisation and managing the work of staff. Even as the organisation was supporting members through the pandemic, it was working toward a changed leadership model that resulted



in hiring their first executive director in early 2023. Here too, a clear focus on open communications and individual member needs, as well as creating space for divergent voices, allowed the organisation to instantiate its elected leaders and build support for the move to a more formal staffing model with a full-time executive director.

## **Conclusion**

As highlighted by Eftenaru and Laitsch (2024), there is no single theory of leadership that offers a complete understanding of leadership practice. By some counts, more than 50 discrete leadership theories have been proposed over the past century as researchers sought to understand the practice of leading (Northouse 2016). As Oc (2018) highlights, leadership is often contextual, and leaders may adapt their practices in response to the context as bounded by place, time, and community. In the case of our organisations, there were a number of strategies that helped guide our responses to the pandemic, as well as the internal dynamics of our organisations.

For us, leadership needs to be collaborative, consultative, and member-focused, with attention paid to creating open communication avenues for member institutions. Interestingly, we found an unexpected relationship between reactive and proactive leadership practice in responding to the quickly shifting contexts of the pandemic. The need for our organisations to be quickly responsive to both government and our members resulted in a largely reactive leadership practice, with same-day issue analysis and quickly crafted press releases issued to try and ensure organisational interests were protected. At the same time, however, coordinating actions across our organisations also allowed us to proactively drive conversations with the government, particularly around issues of health and safety and governance. Similarly, by being attentive (reactive) to the expressed needs of our member institutions as their own contexts changed, we were able to proactively drive important shifts within our organisations. Crises have been cited as

providing policy windows of opportunity for reform (Kingdon 1984), and that was indeed our experience.

The tension between reactive and proactive crises responses also served as a mechanism for transformational change in both organisations. Both CUFA/BC and FPSE/BC are different organisations today than they were prior to the pandemic. While FPSE/BC's evolution was stimulated by the change in elected leadership, the transformational leadership response of the newly elected leaders helped to shift members and staff within the organisation to a more professional model that now includes an executive director as well as elected leadership. While CUFA/BC's changes were less radical, the move toward research and data-based decision-making, as well as more regular engagement of member leaders, has also helped transform the organisation professionally and structurally, strengthening relationships across member institutions and building a deeper understanding of administrative capacity and activity.

As we move to endemic engagement with COVID-19, our organisations now need to take the lessons we've learned and use them to help us proactively prepare for future crises (Salamzadeh and Dana 2022). This includes thinking about and creating pre-crisis management plans, focusing on such things as communication, stakeholder relations, and coordination; workplace and workforce interruption; fiscal chaos and resource interruption; event-focused risk analysis and response planning; and even ensuring appropriate insurance protections. Based in Vancouver, British Columbia, our organisations face the probability of natural disasters, from earthquakes to flooding to draughts. We are currently dealing with emerging financial crises of high inflation and potential banking collapse and should be prepared to respond to economic recessions or depressions. Even ideological crises could arise as we see anti-union and union-busting efforts at the provincial political level across Canada and attacks on academic freedom and collegial

governance in the United States (West 2022) and at home. Our organisations should be planning now to protect our members and organisation in the future.

As labour organisations, our focus is always on the health and well-being of our members. During the pandemic, our organisations worked hard to protect our members and B.C.'s post-secondary institutions by serving as a conduit for communication between the government and frontline practitioners (our members). While labour organisations are often viewed contentiously by governments used to negotiating collective agreements, in times of crises where health and safety are key concerns, labour groups should instead be viewed as partners in response.

## **Chapter Summary: Key Lessons for Leadership in Higher Education**

As highlighted throughout this chapter and across this volume, the role of context in transformational leadership is critical (Drinkwater and Deane 2024). The way leadership was enacted during the pandemic was unique to the crises in that leaders became much more prescriptive because of the urgency of the situation. In many ways, leadership shifted away from transformational processes as consultation was delayed or became largely symbolic. Similarly, as we returned to campus and moved from COVID-19 as pandemic to endemic, and the resultant financial pressures on institutions stemming from the pandemic, the restoration of collegial and consultative processes at the core of transformational leadership has been slow. Labour unions throughout the sector continue to work to hold leaders accountable to their communities within collegial and consultative structures and some progress is being made. However, to continue the shift back to more engaged forms of leadership, we see two critical lessons from this experience:

- Leadership during crises is highly contextual. Leaders should be collaborative, consultative, and member/follower-focused, with attention paid to creating open communication avenues.

- Unions serve as a critical voice for the health and safety of their communities and should be seen as allies during crisis response.

## Additional Resources

- Confederation of University Faculty Associations of British Columbia: <https://cufa.bc.ca>
- Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC: <https://fpse.ca>
- Canadian Association of University Teachers: <https://www.caut.ca>
- B.C.'s response to COVID-19: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/info/response>

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