



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

You can subscribe through iTunes, Google Play or Spotify.

Legislative Staff Week: readiness and Resilience in a Pandemic | Episode 93

Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. On this podcast, we’re all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith. Thanks for joining us.

This podcast is part of Legislative Staff Week, NCSL’s effort to recognize the crucial work of legislative staff across the nation. It is also one in a series NCSL is producing to focus on how states are taking action in response to the corona virus pandemic. You can find links to podcasts, webinars and other resources at www.ncsl.org/coronavirus.

Today we’re talking with Laree Kiely, president and chief wisdom officer at the We Will consulting firm in California. She is an expert on leadership and management and talked with “Our American States” about readiness and resilience during the pandemic.

Laree, welcome to “Our American States.”

Laree: Hi Ed. I hope you’re doing well and being safe out there.

Ed: Doing well, thank you very much.

Time Marker (TM): 01:14

Ed: Can we start with you filling in listeners a little bit on your background and particularly around crisis management?

Laree: Well, first I’d like to go tangential on you for just a second here and saying for all the legislative staffers before we get started on the content, your hard work behind the scenes in helping us create new policies and rules and solutions to this corona virus life that we are living in, and I just want to thank them for this.

They’re under-appreciated and under-valued, and I just want them to know that a thank you is in order here.

As to my background, ever since I was a kid, I've been fascinated by the human condition and human behavior in response to that condition. And so, I watched and I learned and I did graduate work in social science and cognitive science, served as a faculty at a university, built a consulting firm. And we originally specialized in crisis management. This was a while ago, a few decades ago.

And in those days, crisis was defined as anything that could happen that you didn't anticipate that could do potential harm to your tangible or intangible assets. I'll repeat that – that was the definition of crisis in those days, was anything that could happen that you didn't anticipate that could do potential harm to your tangible or intangible assets.

So, if you think about it now, it's actually the definition of a day. And even before the pandemic, it was the definition of a day. Maybe now it's the definition of a minute or an hour, because we for a very long time have been living in a really complicated world. The military calls it a VUCA world, which stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. My brother says it's like living in a science fiction movie.

One of my favorites is George Carlin, of course, who was making a joke – he called this concept a “vuja de” – it's that feeling that creeps over you that you've never felt anything ever like this before. I just taught this in Montreal a while back and they thought it was bad French, which of course it is. But that world of vuja de – the opposite of déjà vu – we've never been here before. There's nothing we can even compare it to in so many ways in our own lifetime.

Overall, my organization specializes in how people interact with information and how we interact with each other. So, that's kind of a broad spectrum.

Background-wise, it was one conversation with a client that took me into specializing in readiness and resilience. So, Ed, have you ever had a conversation with someone, maybe even a stranger, that changed the entire trajectory of your life? It was one conversation that I had.

In those days, because crisis and change were so closely related, we worked a lot in change management, as well as crisis management. I was sitting down for lunch with a friend of mine, a client in Manhattan, and we were at lunch, a nice little chat, and she said: Well, so you're here. Let's talk about what you're going to do for us. And she said: You know, I have to say, I'm so tired of bringing in change management people every time there's a change in our organization.

And I said: Well, sorry, what can I do to help? And she said: This isn't what I want. I don't want to keep bringing change management specialists in here to help us every single time there's a change because a change happens all day long every day. And I said: What might you want instead? And she said: You know, I don't exactly know, but I think I just want them to be ready.

And I said: Well, ready for what? And she said: Ready for anything. Can you help me build a workforce that is ready for anything, and an organization that is ready for anything, so that we're more nimble, more agile?

And that conversation with her, that one few sentences that she gave me, changed the entire trajectory of my life, of my professional life and my research life. So, we started studying readiness and resilience as well.

TM: 05:16

Ed: These two terms get thrown around quite a bit, but I know that you see them as very distinct things. And I wonder if you could explain the difference between the two.

Laree: The difference between readiness and resilience is that they're two sides of the same coin actually. Readiness is being prepared for whatever might happen, being in front of change, which means we can be proactive. Resilience is how well you bounce back after a change; it's more reactive. Can you get back on your feet after something really difficult?

The overlap between readiness and resilience is how we handle things while they are actually happening, and we call that being robust. How robust we are tells a lot about how resilient we can be, how long it will take us to bounce back. And the two different environments you can look at in those studies – you can look at the external world versus our internal processing mechanisms. My interest is particularly in our internal processing mechanisms.

So, we did, as a result of that conversation, we did a seven-year, longitudinal study, an international study with hundreds of people weighing in in multiple different languages, asking more information about readiness. And the kind of research, this is called grounded research, is the methodology that we used in gathering all this information from hundreds of people, and taking all of their information and dumping it into some software we've got, it comes out and it tells us the patterns in all of their answers.

And, interestingly enough, there were four patterns, or four attributes that came very, very clearly out of the study of readiness, these attributes of being ready for anything no matter what, even if we can't anticipate it.

The attributes are, first of all, mental discipline. That's number one. Number two is just the very act of co-creating with other human beings, and I'm going to come back to mental discipline in a second, but the ability to co-create in emergent and dynamic situations with other people, which means this is going beyond collaboration and cooperation, which are nice to have, but they're too soft. We're actually in dynamic situations, in emergent environments. We are actually making stuff up together. We're co-creating a reality, and that's a much more rigorous set of skills.

The third attribute is the ability to act on things and on decisions. That may sound silly except for we have a tendency to talk a lot about stuff, and think a lot about stuff, and plan a lot about stuff, but we're not necessarily great at acting on things. In the end... I think it was Alfred Adler who said: Life happens at the level of action. Trust only action. So, talking and thinking are not enough if we need to act.

And then the fourth attribute is the ability to reflect and assess in an iterative way as we're going through the process, meaning looking back to what we decided: Did it work? Did it not work? How can we make it better? And then keep continuously learning as we go. They're called learning loops: you decide a thing, you do the thing, then you loop back and see if it was the right thing to do, and then you make an improvement on the next step.

So, the ability to reflect and assess how well we're doing at the time is also a really important attribute. So, the four attributes that we found that I think are pretty profound, actually, are: mental discipline; the ability to co-create in emergent, dynamic environments; the ability to act on these things; and then the ability to reflect and assess in learning loops as we go along.

And I wanted to pay more attention to the mental discipline issue because it is defined slightly differently. This is not just: How tough can you be? This is the one I want to focus on the most today. It has to do with how we interact with information. And, of course, there are lots of pieces of mental discipline. Mindfulness is a form of mental discipline; it's one of the elements. It's also one of the best things you can ever learn to do for your own health is mindfulness.

Emotions are also part of the mental discipline process. Emotions are great. We have to pay attention to them, we have to honor them; we also have to acknowledge them and take a look at them because they can often take off and run without us, and not necessarily take us in good places. So, some of it has to do with rational whole brain versus primitive brain usage during the process of some kind of difficulty, or some kind of change. It really has to do with being able to leverage our brains so that they work with us, because they often take off without us.

There's an old book that I love the title of. It was: *Your Brain Has a Mind of its Own* – and it does. This really has to do with learning how to ask our whole brain, the right and left hemispheres, to show up when we need them, because frankly, the brain will take off without us and it will go into places usually related to fear, which I'll talk about in just a second here.

It also says that in order to be willing, able, ready for just about anything, you have to have an open mind and a spirit of curiosity. Most people think they know the answers and lose their curiosity. In fact, one typical mental activity is to go out and form an opinion about something and then, the confirmation bias, go out and find all of the data that back up our original opinion in the first place, which is not really mental discipline. That's actually just a confirmation bias.

Also, in mental discipline, is the element of creativity and the element of critical thinking and decision making. Those two are really interesting elements in mental discipline because creativity is making stuff up that hasn't been created yet, or building off of something that hasn't been created yet so that we can come up with healthy, but maybe innovative answers when we're facing some kind of difficulty.

Critical thinking, of course, I wish we had more of it, but critical thinking and decision making is a much more rigorous kind of process in the brain. What we found in our study was that both are absolutely critical, but critical thinking has to come after creativity because creativity is using the brain and the whole brain in all kinds of innovative ways, and critical thinking is narrowing down the judgment of those things.

So, that means creativity has to come first, because as important as critical thinking and decision making are, they are the enemy of creativity. They shut the brain down and make it more linear, and when we're being creative, it needs to be more non-linear.

So, that's kind of what we found in our study and that's how we moved in the direction of looking at how people interact with information, how we interact with each other, and the difference between readiness and resilience and the necessity for being robust.

TM: 12:29

Ed: When you're talking today... this is, of course a podcast we're doing for Legislative Staff Week, a recognition of the great work that the tens of thousands of legislative staffers around the country do every day, so I'm wondering how this helps apply to them at this point of uncertainty, maybe even a feeling that life is chaotic because of this pandemic.

What should they know about how these things can apply to their lives now and when they're back in the office and back on the job?

Laree: Well, how this information can be helpful to people today in this really interesting time... I think my brother is right actually; it is like being in a science fiction movie... keeping in mind that we can't control the big picture, we're all looking at possible ways to navigate the external world. There are the frontline workers and bless them for doing this work. There's also a lot of unemployment. There are some people who are working from home. The external things that we have to do, wash our hands, wear masks, all the external things we can respond to.

I'm more interested in helping people with the inner world and how to manage what's going on inside of us as opposed to around us. And the inner world responses are where most of our good solutions are. They make us more robust. They make us more ready and resilient.

But first, let's take a look at acknowledging the varying levels of impact on individuals and communities in this corona virus time. There are about ten levels of complexity in terms of loss, and we have to really be gracious about this because some of us are experiencing a lot more loss than others, and to know that we're not all having exactly the same experience even though it is the same situation.

So, the most difficult of all of these levels of impact, of course, is the loss of life, our fear of dying actually, and most people have never quite come to terms with that anyway even though we know it's one of the few things that is inevitable.

Then coming down from that really complex level, the next level down from that is the loss of a loved one, and the complexity and the pain of thinking about someone that we love getting sick and losing them.

Then there's one more step down, which is just the loss of our own physical health. We may get really, really sick, and that's also a kind of stage where we have to pay attention to what we fear in that level.

Then below that is the loss of our job, which is not small, but it is certainly not quite as complicated as the loss of safety and loss of health and loss of loved one. There's also the loss of finance, of course, below that, the loss of certainty and security, the loss of freedom and independence, the loss of purpose, the loss of choice. Those are kind of the levels of loss that different people are experiencing.

The bottom line is that people hate the feeling of being out of control, and we really hate it when we feel helpless. So, believe it or not, the one thing we have control over more than just

about anything else is our own mind. So, if we focus on mental discipline, that incredible instrument we call our brain, we can start solving the way we're reacting to things and be healthier and mentally healthier and navigate this process in a more robust way.

It's not quite that simple though, because we have to build that mental muscle, and it doesn't mean being robotically rational or Mr. Spock all of the time, because emotions matter; they're what make us human, beautifully, elegantly human. They also get us in a lot of trouble.

So, developing mental discipline provides us a much more fulfilling life and anybody can learn it. That's the thing I love about it is that anyone can learn mental discipline. But first, what happens with information is it's coming in, which is absolutely fascinating. First information coming in and how we interact with it – it automatically goes to the primitive part of our brain and it looks for threat. And if we have no mental discipline and we haven't made our brains our friend, then that threat becomes fear.

And we have only three choices in that level of fear: it's fight, flight or freeze. Fight means feeling angry. Flight means just get me out of this. Whatever it takes, get me out of this. And freeze is what a lot of people are experiencing bouncing off of the wall and going: What do I do now? What do I do now?

And that's okay for our primitive ancestors to have had that part of their brains, because we needed to know when we were cave people whether or not there was a saber tooth tiger behind that tree and we needed to know quickly. So, that part of our brain served a really good purpose.

It's just that our fears are much more nuanced than that now. And we need to bring in the executive function of our brain, the prefrontal cortex of our brain. But in complex situations, the limbic system is already there, and the executive function needs to be intentionally invited to the party, because it might not be working as the more primitive parts of our brain are taking off without us.

Eckart Tolle, the spiritual leader, tells us that there are three types of adversity: the number one kind of adversity is in our personal lives; the second kind of adversity is in the human collective; and the third kind of adversity is in our own minds due to dysfunctional thinking.

So, this is where I want to take a look, and I've got some tools that might be helpful. Would you like me to toss out some tools for people as they leave this conversation?

Ed: I think some tools would give people a real nuts-and-bolts way to grasp these ideas and would be great.

Laree: So, here are some tools for strengthening your relationship with your whole brain. They have to be intentional, they're free, they are fascinating – you don't need a psychotherapist for any of this – they are things you can do on your own. The only thing that they take is a little discipline and a little practice.

But the first tool that I have is to make a list of everything that is irritating you or concerning you, everything big and small. Like my list, the big things are: I work in healthcare a lot and I'm

very concerned about my clients and my friends who are on the front lines. I'm very concerned about the economic situation. I'm worried about my own work and being able to survive financially.

And I'm also really worried about the fact that my dogs need a haircut, something from the big to the small – everything you can think of. Make a list of everything that's concerning you. Then put an N beside all of the issues that you have no control over, N standing for no. All of those things that you have on that list, put an N by everything on that list that you have no control over.

For example, I mean just based on your own individual life... Some people are working on the virus. But I personally don't have any control over the virus itself. I don't have any control over getting a vaccine ready. I don't have any control over what my clients do. I don't have any control over the schools closing.

Then go back to the list again and put an S beside the issues that you do have some control over, and then determine what actual control you have. For example, the schools are closing; you can't have any control over that. But homeschooling you do have some control over. You have some control over where you go grocery shopping. Although you don't have control over the shortages of food, you do have some control over where you buy things.

Then go back... the third step here is go back to the whole list and put a C beside all of the issues you have the most control over. Homeschooling is one of those. If you're going to home school your kids, you have control over that. You can learn how to do this, and you get to deliver that information to them.

You have control over whether or not you stay sequestered. You have control over the food you eat. A lot of people are eating junk food. For some reason, it's like they got into panic mode and started eating junk food. But you have control over the food that you eat.

So put a C by all the issues that you have the most control over. And now you start to feel like you actually can have some effect here, as opposed to it all being completely out of control. So that's one tool.

The second tool, and I love this one, is a tool called thought stopping. Thought stopping is when you're having thoughts that send you off and create anxiety or create fear, create anger, any of those things. Oftentimes our incoming information or even just a little trigger will start these anxiety-based thoughts. Then we start firing our synapses to go to when we learn to be fearful and why we learn to be fearful and what it was that caused us to be fearful and all that kind of thing, because the mind automatically goes to the past to make sense out of the future.

So, these synapses are firing without you; they're taking off without you. And what you can do to control them is this tool called thought stopping. So, how it works is you think of something, anything that calms you and gives you peace. It can be one or two words, just one or two words. For me, it's trees. My dad was a forester, so trees give me a tremendous amount of comfort. I can just think about them and I feel a wash of this kind of peacefulness. So, for me, it's trees.

Whatever the one or two words are – it could be the beach for you; it could be grandma’s house; it could be any number of things – anything that you can think of that gives you peace and a sense of calm.

Pick one or two words and then you say those one or two words seven times. It’s important that you say it seven times. Neuroscience tells us there’s something magical about the number seven and something happening seven times.

So, for me, if I get a little anxious about a thought that’s triggering some anxiety and I can’t stop, the thought is starting to take over without me and so on, all I have to do is say trees seven times. Just trees, trees, trees, trees, trees, trees, trees, trees. And if that doesn’t stop the thought, then do it again. And if that doesn’t stop it, do it again. Keep doing it until that thought stops and your mind is going somewhere else.

That’s actually changing the way your synapses are firing. That’s actually making a synapse move to a totally different place to fire a totally different reaction in your brain. It will also fill you with more dopamine and a whole lot less anxiety, so this is a good thing.

Over time, believe it or not, you can use this tool to change the way you think about things because it got wired without your intentionality. And this tool can start rewiring your brain. It’s the whole concept of neuroplasticity. It’s amazing how we can rewire our brain to be the way we want it to be instead of the way it accidentally got created when we were kids.

And then the third tool I want to bring up is the whole concept of worry. And many of you may know the wonderful gentleman whose name was Ram Dass. He passed away just a short while ago. He wrote a wonderful book called *Be Here Now* and it’s really about the present moment and not wasting the present moment.

So, let’s take a look at worry, and I know a lot of people are spending a tremendous amount of time in worry and anxiety and so on. It has to do with: Is this present moment good? Like right now, Ed, I’m having a really nice time. I’ve got a cup of coffee here. I’m talking to you. This present moment is just fine. I’m safe, we are well, my dogs are a little fuzzy, but that’s okay. This present moment is really, really fine. And then the next one is probably going to be okay too, and then the next one is probably going to be okay too.

Worry does not change what’s going to happen. Worry does not keep it from happening. All it does is waste those precious moments that are good, as opposed to trying to figure out: if I worry about it, maybe I can stop it from happening. Now, prepare what you will do if your worry happens and then let it go until it’s time to act. And then start savoring these present moments.

It just really, really pains me the thought of: we’ve got these moments that are precious and they’re okay, and to waste them worrying about some undetermined future just seems kind of sad.

TM: 25:23

Ed: Let me ask you... We’ve talked about how people can cope now, but we’re probably going to face some change in our society for quite some time and, as I think we were talking about

before, the notion of uncertainty and chaos when we don't think there is any of that, we're kidding ourselves; that's there with us all the time.

So, as people look down the road to an uncertain future, let's hope not too chaotic a future, but an uncertain future, what would your advice be in terms of how to kind of steal themselves or equip themselves to go into that?

Laree: Well, yeah, I do have a few things to say about the future and where we're going here. We all know the world is going to be different. We don't know in what ways, but it couldn't possibly be the same. The problem is that human nature has a tendency to default to what is.

And I'm asking, and a piece of advice that I have is that being ready means being proactive, and it means creating the world the way we always hoped it would be. It's called thinking in terms of best imaginable.

And so, my advice is to aim for best imaginable. Start right now creating the world that you always wished we had. Plan for it, start acting as if it were here now, and start enjoying those wonderful moments that we have when there is no tension and there is no crisis in our own personal lives.

Pema Chodron, the wonderful Tibetan nun, said time... actually, people came to her and said: Please, please help us, we feel so ungrounded. Is there some advice you can give us to help us to find our footing again, to get grounded again? And Pema Chodron said: The illusion, interestingly enough, is that we were ever grounded in the first place. I think it's true.

Being human has always been perilous. Take a look at history. I mean, being human has always been perilous. It has always been dangerous. A lot of it we bring on ourselves. But I think we need to learn to be more realistic and effective and harmonious and happy in this world of George Carlin's concept of vujja de.

Ed: I do think that that notion, the illusion that we are in control most of the time and this is the exception, is an important way to think about the world. If ever it was evident to everyone now that we are not in control and that we have to live with that ambiguity, it's now.

TM: 27:56

So, as we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share with our audience?

Laree: Oh, there's nothing else. I just hope everyone is doing well, taking good care of themselves, being safe. And, again, I'd like to thank the legislative staffers for all the hard and wonderful work, and to let them know that some of us out here know what they're doing, know they're working hard, and have a tremendous of appreciation for what they do. Thanks, Ed.

Ed: Well, for them, I will say thank you and thank you for your time, and I wish you the very best, and you stay safe as well.

And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to

have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of “Our American States.”

MUSIC