For those of us interested in crisis leadership, this has been a year like no other. It was not one crisis, as we most often study. It was not limited in place, time, or extent. COVID-19 has been everyone, everywhere, and in the complex ways of emergencies, simultaneous to other crises of the economy, race relations, social justice, politics, security, and climate-related disasters. And on top of this, for every family, community, and relationship, COVID presented its own personal crises into the mix. There was no escape.

The COVID-19 year for the NPLI started with quick transitions. There was the move to Zoom and phone with its many questions. Will we be able to conduct field research during the pandemic? Will we be able to teach and engage students when not together in the classroom? Will the analysis of our findings continue to translate into the curriculum and content that we teach? Will we stay on our mission to “equip leaders with the skills, knowledge, and abilities required to effectively lead during crisis in the 21st century?” We too were in the midst of the crisis just as we tried to study it.

Answers arose from the NPLI network of leaders committed to excellence in times of crisis. We were often in daily contact with people at the lead of responding government organizations, members of the White House COVID-19 Task Force, elected officials, and leading business leaders. They grappled with unprecedented contingencies and decisions.

What impressed us about these leaders was the compulsion and the capacity to adapt. This is perhaps the most important lesson of the COVID experience. In biological terms, adaptation is a change or process of change by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its shifting environment. Adaptation is a survival mechanism, an instinctual prompt to adjust in response to contingencies which themselves will not alter. In other words, the message to leaders: Adapt, because the conditions in which you lead are both undeniable and unpredictable.

Back on our Harvard Zooms, NPLI faculty asked how to provide guidance to leaders under these extraordinary circumstances. We reflected on leadership of past crises we studied, including the series of hurricanes that hit the southeast United States in 2017, from Harvey in Texas to Maria in Puerto Rico. We looked back at prior public health crises, including H1N1 in 2009 and Ebola in 2014. We also considered long duration crises such as the Deep Water Horizon Gulf oil spill in 2010. How could each of these situations inform current circumstances?

Early on, we realized that time itself would be a critical factor in the leadership of COVID-19. Time - through each phase of the pandemic - as well as time to reach the conclusion of the crisis. Yes, COVID-19 - like all crises - eventually will end.

From that observation, we fine-tuned the curriculum for the “Arcs of Time,” the patterns of escalation, transformation, and resolution that each phase of the pandemic could be expected to traverse. Three weeks into the crisis, we could see that cases would rise, plateau, and eventually subside. This creates a series of successive curves over time that formed each Arc. Those Arcs could track cases of the disease, incidents of protest as well as violence during the summer months, and the numbers of vaccinations, each rising, leveling and subsiding. With that, we forecast a best-case and worst-case scenario Arcs of Time for the duration of the COVID-19 experience.
We translated that conceptualization into a new component of our crisis leadership teaching, adapted to COVID-19. The Arcs of Time Meta-Leader tool then guided the forecasting, transactions, and transformations of leaders as they traversed the pandemic and its many transitions. We inserted what we learned from interviews with leaders at the front lines, who themselves were using the Arcs to identify and predict patterns of activity over time.

With that, the Arcs of Time became a tool for leader anticipation and adaptation. That adaptation was not only in response to the virus itself. Similarly, leaders had to adapt to questions about whether people would “follow the science” and the ensuing inclinations of elected officials and sections of the population. Patterns emerged and those patterns alerted and informed what might come next and what to do about it.

Yes, this has been a year like no other. The challenges of learning, teaching, living and surviving required countless adaptations.

And while there will be much to mourn and lament once we traverse our final Arc of COVID Time, there is also a great deal for which to be thankful. To our many colleagues, friends, faculty, students, and staff, my thanks for sharing your experiences, insights, and patience with this complex process of research, analysis, and instruction. It was what the NPLI set out to do at its outset.

COVID-19, with its ups-and-downs through these many Arcs of Time, gave us all the roller-coaster ride of our lives.

Leonard J. Marcus, Ph.D., Co-Director