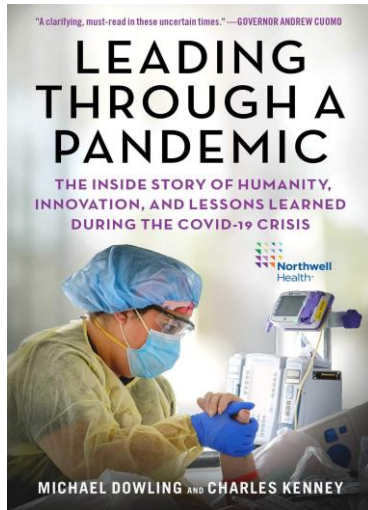




Book Review



Leading Through A Pandemic: The Inside Story of Humanity, Innovation, and Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Crisis

By Michael J. Dowling & Charles Kenney
Skyhorse Publishing, 2020

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Leading Through a Pandemic by Michael J. Dowling and Charles Kenney shows us a mere glimpse into the Northwell hospital system in New York during a global pandemic and the end of normalcy as we once knew it. As you turn the pages that unravel the darkest and most trying times of COVID, we also are able to see just how innovative, heroic, and strong these individuals are that showed the way for time to come. Throughout the book you will feel the strength of the leadership and frontline workers, while also grabbing for your tissues as you dive into the complete devastation and havoc that was caused by this crippling virus. It was evident that this pandemic took many of us and our healthcare systems by surprise, however, Northwell has always placed emphasis on the emergency management preparedness and having an incident command structure in place. As a major multi-hospital system in the heart of New York and it's geographic location booming with tourism, Northwell knew there would always be another emergency on the horizon. Having a back-up generator for the back-up generator, leadership took immediate steps to prepare for what was to come as news in Wuhan started to spark.

As any unknown and fast-acting virus causes many lessons learned, there were also a lot of things that made Northwell a leading example for emergency preparedness. The leadership team at Northwell had a lot at stake, but with a chain of command in place they were able to execute things a lot quicker and save a lot more lives. At the beginning of the pandemic, Governor Cuomo had issued that hospitals needed to increase their capacity drastically forcing conference rooms and many unlikely places to now become treatment rooms for the COVID

patients. As the number of patients arrived to Forest Hill they became increasingly overwhelmed, but because of an integrated health system, the team was able to see other open beds, how many patients, and what each patient was admitted for among the other hospitals in their system. By having this system in place, this meant they would be able to load balance the patients and send them elsewhere without having to turn them away or being overwhelmed. “At the peak of the crisis, we succeeded in moving an estimated 780 patients out of the hardest-hit community hospitals to other parts of our system” (p. 38). Once a patient had recovered, they would sometimes awake in a completely new side of town they may not know and are far from family, but the level of humanitarianism is shown when they made sure that there would be an ambulance that would return them home upon being released.

“All the beds and ventilators in the world won’t help without the trained medical professionals to operate them and make judgements about how best to care for very sick and vulnerable patients” (p. 42). Northwell redeployed and recruited all levels of medical professionals and created a basic standard of training to get those less familiar or specialized up to speed. By creating a standard of care and a set of protocols, they were able to get everybody on the same page and create an easier workflow and learning curve throughout. The amount of patients and their complexity that these frontline workers saw was far from what they were accustomed to. “A crucial development that helped with redeployment-that actually made it possible-was a declaration of emergency in New York State, which gave Governor Cuomo broad powers to suspend existing laws and regulations” (p. 45). This was pivotal for the possibility at any success in the hospitals, from the amount of staff willing to help to the actual ability to properly care for these incredibly sick patients. While the constraints and regulations created in medicine are for the safety and staff of patients, when they are outdated and stripped away in midst of a crisis, such intelligent and altruistic minds can do something really spectacular for the greater good. iPads were used to facetime patient’s families, CPAP machines were converted into ventilators, baby monitors were used to keep an eye on patients while keeping the nurses out of the patient’s room, and alternative treatment areas were created in record time.

The frontline workers were seeing coworkers die, living in fear of bringing home the virus to their loved ones, and watching patient’s die alone without their family. The importance of these staff members is evident and the amount of PPE needed to do so was shocking. Fortunately, Northwell had done a great job of having a large stockpile of PPE prior to COVID. However, as news had begun spinning about COVID in Wuhan, the team had started to notice that the shipments of PPE that they usually ordered had suspiciously halted. Soon enough, PPE prices skyrocketed and became sparse at the time that the teams were needing it the most. This was a lesson learned that they would need to be finding vendors and manufacturers that were local to the United States, rather than relying on International manufacturers to supply them overseas during a global pandemic leaving them vulnerable. Northwell made sure that their staff knew they had constant supply of PPE and knew exactly where they could grab it from. This

sense of consistency and comfort, is exactly what they needed in a time of so much uncertainty. As you read through the book, the overall tone from the leadership team at Northwell is truly touching and telling of how much they care and appreciate for all of their staff. They go well beyond the basic supply of PPE; The leadership covered funeral expenses for their staff, offered tranquility tents, praised their heroic acts, converted cafeterias into grocery stores, and gave monetary bonuses, as well.

Throughout the book there is reference to the power of politics, but also the amount of divide it caused. The leader of the United States did not emphasize the power of social distancing, mask wearing, or the stand behind the scientific research. Northwell did their best to spread the correct information and offer resources to their community the best they could to counteract what their community was hearing and desperately looking for answers in times of fear. During times of needing unity most, there was a divide, sense of misinformation, and lack of trust in science. Nonetheless, you could see signs of hope and appreciation from the city of New York. Whether it was pots and pans banging in the neighborhoods, cheering in the streets, and banners everywhere for frontline workers who quickly became America's hero. This type of morale boosting is oftentimes what kept them going when what they have seen will live with them for a lifetime.

“And it was by understanding the depth of the fear that we learned a great lesson: that the men and women who have chosen health care as a career will take on any challenge, overcome any obstacle, to do the majestic work of caring for their fellow human beings” (p. 134). As COVID is still here and may always will be, Northwell has learned a lot but has also shown us how important having an emergency preparedness culture, an integrated health system, addressing inequities in healthcare, protecting the health of staff, and having strong leadership in healthcare can have a true effect on the number of lives saved. I imagine a lot of healthcare systems will be mirroring the actions taken by Northwell before, during, and after the pandemic as many's weaknesses were brought to light in such a dark time. Dowling and Kenney did not leave a dry eye or a page unturned in this must-read.