



*"All that you touch, you Change. All that you Change changes you.
The only lasting truth is Change."*

— Octavia E. Butler, Parable of the Sower

Leading in and Through COVID-19

Facing a global public health emergency, bracing for an impending recession, handling the needs of our own families and teams, and then focusing our time and more limited financial resources—all of this requires the deepest listening and learning. None of us have a scripted way to solve this whole set of interconnected problems.

Thriving in this moment requires us to recognize where we are expert and where we really don't know what to do. More than ever, on behalf of our communities, we have to lead and to run our organizations by applying what we know and simultaneously learning in the moment. In our virtual team meetings, we face significant decisions about budget, staffing, and future planning in an environment in which the future is unclear and the connections to team are more tenuous. The gravity of our choices requires us to consider equity up-front and ask the questions that make us uncomfortable and challenge our core values throughout. Our resources may be decreasing but the stakes remain high.

Making progress on what matters right now, without even being able to define the problem yet, is the very definition of confronting adaptive challenges¹.

AchieveMission grounds our approach to leading change in *Adaptive Leadership* – an approach that helps you mobilize your team to identify and shift the values, beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors needed to close the gap between aspirations and reality.

¹ *Adaptive challenges are those for which there is no easy answer, challenges that don't have an off-the-shelf solution and require learning. The challenge is in the gap between the values people stand for (that constitute thriving) and the reality that they face (their current lack of capacity to realize those values in their environment). Technical problems have an answer that can be applied by those outside engaging proven expertise.*



The adaptive leadership framework can help individuals and organizations thrive in challenging and changing environments. It views leadership as *an act* and one that helps groups make progress on complicated problems they may face.

[Interconnected Problems in this Moment](#)

This unprecedented crisis affects social sector organizations in myriad ways. As we speak with clients and partners, we hear some consistent themes emerging:

- ***Fiscal Challenges:*** Nonprofit leaders are stressed about the very real fiscal challenges deeply affecting organizations in the sector, trying to meet the increasing direct service needs of their stakeholders, and even keeping their doors open in a time of financial scarcity. Across the sector, executives are having to make difficult decisions to cut staff, restructure delivery models when staff are sick and cannot work, and face the question, “How do I operate in the throes of this new normal in a way that is operationally prudent and aligned with our values?”
- ***Deep Inequity:*** COVID-19 is both highlighting and exacerbating deep and long-embedded inequities in our system. African Americans are disproportionately dying of Covid-19. People of color and grassroots-led nonprofits have fewer pre-existing relationships with banks and philanthropic donors and thus are more likely to have difficulty obtaining or sustaining funding. School closings and shifts to virtual instruction highlight the digital divide and the division between those whose jobs allow them to work-from-home and adjust schedules for child care and those whose jobs do not.
- ***Lack of Space for Deep Listening:*** Nonprofit leaders are being inundated with information in this moment about how to respond to COVID-19 concerns. We are experiencing an overload of being talked to; “Zoom-fatigue” and “Parent Burnout” are real. In addition, multiple research studies on stress show that anxiety makes it difficult to focus and to stay focused - fear of the unknown is one of the greatest sources of stress for human beings. What people are missing in this moment is the opportunity to listen to their own inner voice and to be *listened to* by others, acts that give way to growth.



[What We Offer - Always and in this Moment](#)

Executive Coaching for Transformation

Multiple studies in this period have indicated that executive coaching is highly needed and effective for leaders wrestling daily with the toughest situations and weighty decisions. Our coaching with each executive is designed in partnership around identified individual leadership challenges and priorities. Together, we set goals for the coaching period and beyond, encourage coachees to take on new behaviors, adapt them with feedback, and find ways to reflect when it feels like there is limited space to do so.

Leadership coaching focuses on the individual as part of a system, offering options for their challenges in context, with our repository of next level practices and simple, straight-forward tools. Most often these are blended technical and adaptive challenges, meaning that the leader may understand some aspects of the problem but needs to be informed by learning and growth to confront it fully. That is where the transformation happens – not in applying known solutions but in finding new ways, in a new time.

As coaches and as consultants, we are both seasoned experts and lifelong students of leadership, bringing wisdom and humility to this moment's organizational conundrums.

Equitable Leadership and Succession

The COVID-19 crisis and its continued impact has led many nonprofits to look at short-term "replacement/continuity planning" in the event someone falls ill which may also be leading to broader discussions about leadership development and succession. These fertile transitions offer the opportunity for nonprofit leaders to fully imagine future scenarios and to strengthen internal leadership development now, on-the-job. Keeping equity at the center requires teams to ask challenging



questions, interrogate assumptions and how they play out in organizational practice, and work in new ways to create environments in which all talented staff are positioned to advance.

Our approach to succession begins with this shift in mindset about what “succession management” is, how it can become the backbone of the talent development system, and how race equity and succession planning are inextricably linked. When succession means the Executive Director or the CEO is planning to leave, we work with the board directly and coach the executive-in-transition to move through this emotional and complex process.

More specifically and practically, we teach the tools and practices to facilitate a robust succession management process inside the organization. This includes skills and content to:

- Integrate new talent development, succession, and leadership practices
- Launch a succession management plan for both staff and board, with an explicit race equity lens and methodology, clear equity-informed measures, and targeted outcomes
- Recognize how racism and bias are embedded in current ways of seeing and how assumptions and biases influence how talent is developed in the organization
- Diagnose adaptive challenges (factions, values, learning) and know how to disrupt unproductive patterns

Leadership Team Effectiveness in a Virtual Environment

Even before this time, many organizations had some flexible and work-from-home policies in place and leadership teams found themselves contending with a host of new needs to sustain relationship, foster intentional communication and decision-making and assure meeting engagement with more than continuous partial attention (e.g., multi-tasking). Now, all that came before feels like practice. Everything is online and many will remain in their home offices, or at their dining room tables, for the foreseeable future. Building trust and relationship in this new context is essential to get things done.



Our leadership team effectiveness work operates at the level of trust, building key team practices to work together even as people face many new challenges. We integrate tools and models for teaming and decision-making that consider and even optimize the virtual environment. We work with teams to get organizations to and through this time with new ways of working together that assure that the small screens where we now see each other are not all that we can see and know.

Strengthening Organizational Culture and Design to Get Through and Thrive

When we focus on organizational culture and design we begin at the highest level of intention and what is most important: *Who do you want to be in this time and what is the future you are creating?* These are not easy questions to answer, especially when the need to answer them feels urgent every day. We partner to stay present to the needs of the moment and to work with your teams to imagine and build the equitable future culture into which you are living.

We always return to center, to purpose, to the north star of equity and to the organization's strategic objectives. Culture has to support purpose. Design has to support culture. How will the decisions and choices now become those that define your culture and the way things work well into the future? Structural changes can be our go-to, but sometimes lead to worse problems if underlying culture issues go unaddressed.

On culture and design, we enable you to both gain altitude AND dig in at the deepest and most systemic levels. Ultimately, it is about organizational resilience, which requires that your deep partnerships inside and outside the organization will continue to inform achieving your mission.

[What Makes AchieveMission Unique](#)

AchieveMission was founded in 2009 to transform the leadership and management of social sector organizations to realize deep partnership and achieve mission. We



will not rest until we see a social sector filled with equitable organizations developing leadership at all levels. Our work is distinguished by three ways of working:

- 1. Our Integration of Race Equity and Intersectionality.** At AchieveMission, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is one of our three strategic priorities and is integrated in all we do. This lens and our staff's skill in this domain transform behaviors, systems, policies and practices that perpetuate structural inequalities in our management and leadership practices across our workplaces and in our communities. We are committed to surfacing tough DEI challenges in organizational practices and policies and identifying and facilitating ways to learn and shift mindsets and behaviors for our partners and ourselves.
- 2. We Enable Adaptive Capacity Throughout the System.** We get to the heart of the matter quickly and in partnership with those who know most about the problems – the people in the system. We know that most adaptive and values-based challenges require highly informed, embedded and sustained shifts in behavior rather than simply expert “fixes.” They also require that individuals and teams learn to view conflict as a constructive force that reveals the issues that need to be addressed. This collaborative approach leads to deeper ownership for the solutions that get implemented over time.
- 3. Our Guideposts for Partnership.** We commit to a way of working that reflects our values. One of our hallmarks is achieving outcomes while also enabling stakeholders to deftly navigate an uncertain, ambiguous, and complex environment to strengthen the day-to-day practices of leading and managing, all day, every day, fully aligned with the strategic objectives that matter.

Our team includes respected experts in leadership, talent management, and DEI with experience across government, nonprofits and global corporations. Collectively, our team has overseen more than 1,000 consulting engagements and has taught leadership and management at some of the world's most respected academic institutions. We have coached and developed hundreds of leaders in the social sector and have helped achieve new outcomes with some of the country's most



innovative and influential nonprofits and foundations, including Higher Achievement, ROCA, Independent Sector, The Democracy Fund, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Harlem Children's Zone, and Martha's Table.