

Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now a Startup

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Summary

The novel coronavirus is not just something for leaders to “get through” for a few days or weeks. Instead, we need to treat COVID-19 as an economic and cultural blizzard, winter, and beginning of a “little ice age” — a once-in-a-lifetime change that is likely to affect our lives and organizations for years.

Due to the complex and interconnected nature of our society and economy, the majority of businesses and nonprofits are “effectively out of business” as of today, in that the underlying assumptions that sustained their organization are no longer true.

The priority of leaders must be to set aside confidence in their current playbook as quickly as possible, write a new one that honors their mission and the communities they serve, and make the most of their organization’s assets — their people, financial capital, and social capital, leaning on relationship and trust.

The creative potential for hope and vision is unparalleled right now — but paradoxically this creativity will only be fully available to us if we also make space for grief and lament.

We write this out of love for Christian organizational leaders and their work, with humility in a time of considerable uncertainty, and a prayerful hope that we are proven wrong by God, in his gracious providence, working miraculously through human ingenuity in this season.

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We’re not going back to normal. If you’re a leader in an organization, it is time to rewrite your vision deck — that presentation so many organizations have that summarizes who you are, whom you serve, why you serve them, and what you do and how you do it. In this essay we will explain why we think that for most organizations — businesses, nonprofits, and even churches — this is a time to urgently redesign our work in light of what we believe is not just a weeks-long “blizzard,” not even just a months-long “winter,” but something closer to the beginning of a 12–18 month “ice age” in which many assumptions and approaches must change for good. Almost all of us can and should keep the first three or four slides in our deck; everything else needs to be re-evaluated.

We write especially for leaders of businesses and nonprofit organizations who are fellow Christians, because Christians of all people are equipped to face the current reality with both clear-eyed realism and unparalleled hope. In this essay we outline the major challenges we face and some forward steps we can take, acknowledging that we all are operating with profound uncertainty not only about the future, but even about the present. We write in the confidence that Jesus is Lord, that his Spirit is even now working powerfully in all of our lives, and that God is good.

This time poses the greatest leadership crisis any of us have faced. It can be a moment of amazing creativity, though it also is going to be a time of unavoidable pain and loss. We will discover that while many resources are suddenly unavailable to us, the most essential resource is still available, and the most important reality has not changed. The reality is that God has called us to a time like this, given us a mission and a community to serve alongside, and we still have the most important resource, which is trust in the context of love. Everything depends on how quickly and thoroughly we move to build on that resource, starting today.

The Blizzard

Michael Osterholm, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Minnesota, has spoken about the “blizzard” view of the current crisis. This is, in our judgment, the way the majority of Americans are currently responding to COVID-19 and the restrictive measures put in place by public health officials. To treat the crisis as a blizzard is to acknowledge that things are very difficult, to provide emotional and practical support for immediate needs, and to urge people to take extraordinary measures that not only would be unthinkable in ordinary times, but are unsustainable for long periods of time. If the crisis generated by COVID-19 is a blizzard, it will be over soon, we will all emerge from our shelter, and resume life roughly the way it was before. Our job in a blizzard is to wait it out.

Indeed, because the nature of this crisis is currently fully visible only in hospitals in a handful of US cities, and more distantly in places like Italy and Wuhan, China — places where front-line workers are utterly overwhelmed with work and fatigue, too much so to communicate with the outside world — there are many people (though fewer every day) who need to be convinced that a blizzard is upon us. A great deal of leadership effort has been expended, and still needs to be expended, to convince Americans that an acute, urgent crisis requires their immediate action.

The problem is that there is almost no one working in public health — certainly not Osterholm — who believes a blizzard is an adequate way to understand this crisis. Instead, Osterholm has said in several interviews, we should be thinking in terms of “the beginning of winter.”

Winter

Winter might begin with a blizzard, but it is a season lasting months, not a single event. In cold climates, winter means that periodic acute events (blizzards) punctuate a continuous period in which human activity must adapt to bitterly inhospitable conditions.

This is almost certainly the reality of COVID-19 in the United States and many other countries. This will not be an event lasting a few weeks. The President of the United States, advised by widely respected public health experts including Drs. Anthony Fauci and Deborah L. Birx, stated on March 16 that Americans should expect measures to combat the spread of the virus to last through “July or August.”

Although for the moment federal and local officials are issuing orders and guidance with time horizons between two and three weeks (for shelter-in-place instructions in many localities) to eight weeks (the CDC guidance for the cancellation of public events), no one should imagine that the COVID-19 season will have ended in this time frame, certainly not on a national scale. New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo has stated that cases in New York City will not peak for 45 days (around May 1). But New York City, along with Seattle and the San Francisco Bay Area, is considerably ahead of other regions of the country, which will likely see the same exponential growth of cases in coming weeks. As the President and his advisors stated, Americans should expect that drastic measures will be necessary for the next four to five months, not weeks.

As with winter weather, there will be regional variation. For one thing, the most extreme forms of social distancing, such as the order in San Diego County issued on March 17 that seemed to prohibit gathering in groups of any size outside of family or household units, and the recent executive orders in California and New York, have never been attempted for months on end. They are blizzard-level responses. These measures should certainly have an effect on the number of new cases, including critical cases, to some extent “flattening the curve” and relieving some stress on regional health care systems. As the curve flattens, the pressure on officials to lift the most drastic restrictions will be intense — appropriately so, because such isolation is extremely difficult for human beings to bear and carries its own risks of illness and mortality.

So it is likely that in a few weeks some regions, especially those that experienced health-care “blizzards” earlier than others, will lift restrictions to some extent. But others will be having to impose them for the first time. And the very hard truth is that any relaxing of restrictions is likely to lead to an increase in cases. For several weeks China reported diminishing cases of COVID-19 nationwide, reflecting the country’s success in reducing the epidemiological value called R (the number of people infected by a single carrier) to a value below 1. In recent days, as much of China has returned to work, the nationwide value of R in China has once again increased above 1. Fighting a pandemic with the characteristics of COVID-19 is not a quick endeavor.

There is widespread discussion of the success of countries like South Korea, Singapore, and above all Taiwan in containing COVID-19 to date without the extreme measures that are being imposed in most of the United States. These countries do indeed give us some hope that, to extend the metaphor, winter for some of us might be relatively mild. But life in these countries is far from normal right now, they are culturally very different from the US, and they took steps earlier in the crisis that may not be available to our leaders now. Europe, meanwhile, is seeing a much more dire scenario unfold.

The bottom line is that even as we weather the current blizzard, and convince others that a blizzard is upon us, all of us should be preparing for a winter in which countless aspects of our society are reconfigured. Even in the mild weeks, life will be radically different from what it was just a few weeks ago; and as with winter in the northern US, at any time a storm could arise that brings life entirely to a halt.

Coping with this, all by itself, would be a huge challenge for leaders. But our counsel, and our plan for the organizations we lead and work with, is to prepare for a third reality as well.

The Little Ice Age

“The year 1816 is known as The Year Without a Summer,” the Wikipedia entry on the subject begins. The eruption of Mount Tambora in what is now Indonesia led to a worldwide ash plume that reduced solar radiation, causing widespread crop failures and unprecedentedly cold temperatures, with frosts recorded across Europe and North America even in the summer months. 1816 came toward the end of what is known to climatologists as “The Little Ice Age,” a several-century-long reduction in temperatures in the northern hemisphere that shaped European history in profound ways.

The metaphor is obvious. Just as winter is more chronic and long-lasting than a blizzard, and requires different sorts of adaptation, which are in many ways more far-reaching than merely hunkering down for a few days or weeks — so there are even larger-scale events that reshape the climate through countless successive seasons.

The Little Ice Age lasted perhaps three hundred years. No one expects the effects of COVID-19 to be of this magnitude — we have the inestimable gift of modern medicine, as well as systems of communication and coordination, that almost certainly will allow our world to mitigate the direct effects of the virus within a few years. The Spanish Flu lasted from 1918–1920 in an era before the existence of effective testing or vaccines. This would seem to be a worst-case upper bound for COVID-19 as well. A generally accepted timeframe for the wide deployment of an effective vaccine — though there are huge uncertainties here — is 18 months.

But 18 months is not a season — it is, for many purposes, more like an age or an era. Just to choose one example, the Tufts scholar Maryanne Wolf has theorized that there is a roughly three-year window, from ages 7 to 9, when children can transition from “novice” reading to “fluent” reading. Children who miss this window, for any number of reasons, seem never to acquire genuinely fluent reading skills no matter how much additional instruction they receive later in life. Already, tragically, far too many children in the United States fail to acquire fluency during this window. Interrupt the educations of an entire nation of 7-year-olds and the ongoing cultural consequences, and loss of human flourishing, will be tragic beyond measure.

And this is just one example from our own country. Countless efforts in global relief and development operate on the thinnest of margins, at the cruelest edges of the world, and depend on a flow of resources from wealthy countries. Even the slightest interruption in those flows is a matter of life and death. In the little ice age, in the absence of extraordinary efforts to mobilize generosity and sacrifice, the interruption would not be slight.

What are the reasons for thinking we are entering such an extended “year without a summer”? On Monday, March 16, one of the world’s most eminent scientific teams, based at Imperial College London, released a rigorous paper modeling the likely effects of “non-pharmaceutical interventions” in flattening the curve of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom and the United States. Though parts of the paper are technical, every single leader of any organization of any size should take the time to read the paper and grasp its essential arguments.

A key bottom line of the paper is simply stated: any measures that successfully “flatten the curve” in the coming weeks or months will also extend the curve further out. To the extent we are able to rescue our health care system from total breakdown immediately, that will come at the cost of creating the cultural and economic conditions of “winter,” likely through the end of 2021 — until the population gradually and naturally acquires immunity (at the cost of widespread illness and death), or a vaccine is developed. Furthermore, though it may be possible to lift the most extreme measures, at least for short periods of time, any meaningful impact on the disease burden will require vast, sustained changes in social behavior.

Epidemiologically speaking, we are most likely facing a blizzard today, a winter for the next few months, and a little ice age for years — and that is if we succeed in suppressing or containing the virus enough to avert a catastrophic failure of the health care system this spring and summer with many millions of deaths (both from COVID-19 and other critical causes for lack of health care).

And it has become crystal clear this week that we are not dealing just with epidemiology, but with economics and politics as well. The Spanish Flu hit a world that was barely modern, with slow and simple trade routes between nations. This virus is even now shutting down most of the continent of Europe, may bring the ancient nation of Iran to its knees, and will

have still unknown long-term effects on China. And these are only the regions most acutely affected today. The fortunes of the whole world are tied through communication and trade, and the whole world will eventually suffer together.

The world economy is more than likely about to experience a series of cascading events comparable at the very least to the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and quite possibly the Great Depression of the 1930s. J. P. Morgan’s chief economist has forecasted that US GDP could drop 14% in the second quarter of 2020 alone. “A drop of that size would be steeper than in the fourth quarter of 2008 — the worst of the Great Recession — when the economy shrank 8.4%” (Reuters). This week hundreds of thousands of unemployment claims have been filed across the US by workers laid off from industries that are not just shut for a blizzard, but for a winter, and may well be hampered for the entire duration of the little ice age that is upon us.

The global economy will presumably recover at some point. It may even recover in V- or U-shaped fashion, as it often does after epidemics. It recovered, spectacularly so, after the Great War and the Spanish Flu, which in certain respects were worse than anything we foresee happening in the coming years. (Though just a few weeks ago we would never have foreseen writing this essay, either.) But when it recovered, the world was different, and so ours will be.

We observe that almost no one is currently planning for an “ice age” scenario. Of course, no one can say for sure that it will come to pass — the Imperial College London study specifically does not include potential breakthroughs in areas like testing and detection, “contact tracing,” and disease management, which could have dramatic positive effects. These could indeed come, even within weeks, and there might even be a dramatic “miracle cure” (or more precisely, treatment) that could change the outlook substantially.

Notwithstanding these hopes (or wishes), we believe every leader and organization — every nonprofit, every church, every school, every business — should be planning for scenarios that include years-long disruption.

Almost all of us are in a new business

From today onward, most leaders must recognize that the business they were in no longer exists. This applies not just to for-profit businesses, but to nonprofits, and even in certain important respects to churches.

There are exceptions. As a very rough guess, perhaps 10% of enterprises have business models (whether for-profit or nonprofit) that will be largely unaffected, for good or ill, by the crisis. Firms with long-term government contracts as their major source of income, for example, may well proceed with business as usual. Perhaps 10%, on the other hand, are providentially positioned to make huge contributions by relieving suffering and unlocking

value in this new reality, simply by scaling up their current activities. On a large scale, we see firms like Zoom and Amazon that are amazingly well placed to provide essential services in the coming reality, though small firms and organizations can find themselves in this position as well.

The remaining 80% of ventures find themselves with a strategic and operating playbook — primarily in terms of product offering, business model, and team structure — that simply does not translate in the likely conditions of the blizzard, the winter, and the little ice age.

To be transparent, our own organization, Praxis, is among that 80%. We are extremely fortunate to have cash reserves and committed donors, so we are not going out of business in any sense. But we have built our 9-year-old organization on gatherings of entrepreneurial leaders from around the world for intensive mentoring events, larger community summits, and a summer student academy, all of which have led to an extraordinarily rich community built on deep encounters with one another and with God in the service of redemptive entrepreneurship. At the moment even our core team cannot gather at our New York City headquarters. We do not know when travel will be allowed again, but for months it will be incredibly uncertain at best (much like travel in the stormiest parts of winter).

If your nonprofit organization depends on gathering people in medium or large groups — and it is truly daunting to consider how many do, whether for fundraising banquets, afterschool programs, or in the case of churches for corporate worship — you are not in the same business today. And this is not just a blizzard that you can wait out. We cannot possibly tell when such gatherings will again become routine, but it will not be in a matter of weeks.

Indeed, we at Praxis are developing one potential scenario that assumes that for 12 to 18 months, the largest group that can be reliably gathered in-person for shared formation and creative work will be about ten people, almost always in a local setting. Even if this is too drastic, we do not know the shape of the global economy and the resources that will be available to people when travel and gathering in larger groups become theoretically possible. Perhaps one day your organization, or a new version of it, will be in that business again. Perhaps ours will be, too. For now, if we want to carry out our mission, we have to at minimum design for a considerably modified context.

A typical pitch deck for a business or nonprofit begins with a clear audience or set of stakeholders with a clear need, and a fundamental vision for how that need can be addressed in ways that enhance human flourishing. Call these the first three or four slides of your deck. You do not have to discard these slides — they represent, we pray and believe, a calling given you by God. If you serve at-risk youth, those youth are still there, facing more risks than ever, and you still have tremendous insight into their fundamental needs and capacities. But the rest of your deck — the part that describes the strategies, tactics, financial models, and partners you can mobilize — is functionally different. Whether you have run a software services firm that works with public schools, a nonprofit funded by everyday givers thinking

about global needs, a product company dependent not only on consumers but on a manufacturing, or a commercial real estate firm that depends on long-term leases, you've been built around a multitude of assumptions that cannot survive a 12–18 month “ice age”. You have to build a fundamentally new deck that reflects the new realities of the community you serve, and the tools that are available to you today.

Our greatest resource is trust

At this moment, many kinds of resources are unavailable to us. But there is one paramount resource that by the grace of God may still be available, which is trust.

In the course of your work in the days before the blizzard, your business or organization built relationships with people. Community members, vendors, partners, investors, stakeholders of all kinds — above all, perhaps, your paid or volunteer staff. You are bound to them, at least some of them, not just by contracts or transactions but by respect, friendship, and even love.

Trust is the greatest resource in human society. Without trust, we relate as competitors and in a mindset of scarcity. With trust, we discover creative pathways that unlock abundance we could never have found on our own. All worthwhile human work and life takes place under an umbrella of trust or, to use the stronger biblical word, covenant — the shelter of mutual respect and love that forms a kind of canopy protecting us from the wild and dangerous world, making room for great acts of sacrifice and beauty.

In order to find our way to the new playbook for the mission and people that have been entrusted to us, we will need to act at every moment in ways that build on, and build up, trust.

This is one of the reasons that adding new people to your team today, especially people you do not know, would be tantamount to leadership malpractice. If your current playbook does not work and has to be largely replaced with a new set of strategies and tactics, how can you possibly know that the job description is correct for the job? And how can you responsibly promise a stream of income to someone at this moment? No organization, unless it is in one of the “10%” exceptions described above, should be trying to add new people to their core team right now in the absence of well-established trust.

Likewise everyone can sense almost instinctively that now is a futile time to pursue new donors or customers. Investment capital is not entirely unavailable, but the investors willing to invest in the teeth of a downturn — without a prior relationship with a firm — almost always do so with predatory motives and on exploitative terms.

No — the people who will help you chart the course toward fulfilling your mission in the coming years are the people who you have the deepest trust with today — those currently on mission with you. And so all the efforts of leadership right now come down to maintaining and mobilizing trust.

This trust begins not with concern for ourselves, but with concern for others. Almost uniquely in our lifetimes, every single person we will interact with in the coming days, even investors and philanthropists, is experiencing vulnerability like never before. They are experiencing risk and perhaps financial loss today, but we are in the early days of a pandemic. Very few of us will get through this era without seeing someone we love suffer and very possibly die. Many are contemplating their own mortality in new ways. We owe to everyone we meet tremendous compassion, patience, and concern, before we involve them in our own needs.

Trust is built with transparency and honesty about our situation, framed appropriately for each person's particular stake in the venture. We need to be overcommunicating with everyone in our organization's ecosystem, often with a new degree of openness about the challenges we are facing. At the same time, trust is built (to borrow from the great leader Max De Pree) when leaders bear vulnerability and pain rather than inflicting it on others. We need to have ways to process our own fears that do not involve raising others' anxiety.

Trust is also built through one of the hardest tasks of leadership: taking steps to reduce costs and manage cash flow, so that the enterprise can survive. This is wrenching for anyone who cares about people, but when the alternative is organizational extinction, it is essential. There are ways to cut positions that are sacrificially generous and honoring to the persons involved, and there are sometimes alternatives to outright elimination of positions, such as shared, across the board reductions in hours worked or compensation, with those highest paid taking the biggest cut. As difficult as it is, if we do not make direct decisions about staffing and other costs in light of cash flow, we will forfeit the trust others have placed in us. (This is not theoretical for us. In 2003, in fact, Kurt terminated Andy's employment at an earlier organization in an executive decision that was absolutely necessary and also deeply generous and honoring, and we have remained friends to this day.)

All of this work to build on and build up trust will pay off in new creativity. We can start to ask fundamental questions together. What options are open to us even in the depths of "winter"? What tools and resources are at our disposal? What reserves of talent and skill, money and assets, systems and processes can be deployed in new ways?

Attending to all three realities

We have portrayed these as nested, interconnected realities — as leaders we must react swiftly to the blizzard that is already upon us, and pivot to survive the inevitable winter under severe conditions, and reimagine our organizations to outlast the rigors of a possible little ice age.

It may be helpful to consider how to allocate leadership attention to these three horizons. Our counsel is to immediately direct a substantial percentage of our attention to reinvention for the little ice age, even as we will feel most drawn to operate in blizzard and winter mode. We must ensure our people are safely deployed and cared for in the blizzard, while we build scenarios and take decisive action relating to cash flows, supply chains, customer disruptions, and team capacity. Yet we urge every leader to realize that their organization's survival in weeks and months, let alone years, depends far more on radical innovation than on tactical cutbacks.

This will mean iterating and experimenting very quickly in the coming weeks. At Praxis we have re-formed our twelve-person core team into ad hoc working groups, pursuing six projects that are feasible in the current "blizzard" conditions, aiming to ship responses to some of our community's greatest needs and opportunities in the next two weeks. We are communicating intensively with our incoming entrepreneur Fellows, with our donors, and with our mentors. We will commit to learning, and certainly some experiments will be more successful and enduring than others, but we are building on our deep trust with one another to discern together how to advance redemptive entrepreneurship in a completely changed environment.

Grief and loss, vision and hope

This is a time for grieving. Many of us have loved our work and the people we work with. We thought if we built an organization on integrity, talented people, and innovative approaches, the result would be success. We invested time and relationships in building and stewarding that dream. Even though others are experiencing even greater losses, the loss of business models that could be operated joyfully, profitably, and in ways that honored people is a real loss. No leader will get through this time without making time for all the stages of grief identified years ago by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross — denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance. We and those we lead will experience all these, over and over, in the coming days.

But this is also a time for vision and hope. We have the privilege at Praxis of working with entrepreneurs — people who are restless with the way things are currently done and take all kinds of risks to create new things in the world. One of our greatest joys right now is talking with our entrepreneurs-in-residence and our classes of business and nonprofit Fellows. They see, along with everyone else, the massive challenges that are coming. But they are by nature nimble, willing to learn and change, and convinced that there is opportunity even in the depths of winter.

The strange heart of Christian faith is that these are not separate realities. Grief and loss go together in Christian faith with vision and hope in a singular way, because they are the story of Cross and Resurrection. There is no greater grief than Calvary, the crucifixion of the very Son of God by the ones he came to save. There is no greater hope than Easter. And the risen Lord of Easter made himself known to his disciples by the wounds in his hands, feet, and side. When we rise and reign with him over the new creation, he will be in appearance like a Lamb that was slain. We, too, will bear our scars, and the leaders of our worship will be the martyrs, the ones who sacrificed everything to bear witness to him.

Christian creativity begins with grief — the grief of a world gone wrong. It enfolds it in lament — the loud cry of Good Friday, the silence of Holy Saturday — and still comes to the tomb early Sunday morning. We are burying and saying goodbye to so much in these days, and around the world people are burying and saying goodbye to those they loved. But we do not grieve without hope. If we grieve with Jesus, and make room for others to grieve, we can hope to be visited by the Comforter, the Spirit who breathed over creation before it was even formed. And that Spirit will guide us in the choices we have to make, even on the hardest days that are ahead.

What if we are wrong?

We acknowledge that leaders who act decisively on this advice will face real risks. No matter how sacrificial our own posture and how hard we try to honor and serve others, their trust in us will be tested to the limit, and in some cases it will break. Such is the price of leadership.

All we can say is that the picture we have painted in this document is the most accurate and actionable one we can construct today. If it is true, there is no time to lose. With every day, material resources will dwindle, and without active, bold leadership, others will lose trust in us, or simply stop paying attention in the midst of the urgencies we all face. Leaders need to act immediately to begin to reimagine their organizations, beginning with compassionate and candid conversations with boards and team members about what is ahead.

That being said, all of the authors are optimists by temperament, and we also know that not everyone is reading the trendlines in the same way. We could well be wrong. The winter may be mild and end quickly; the little ice age may never arrive. The amount of human ingenuity that is being devoted to conquering COVID-19 is indeed awe-inspiring. The seriousness and competence of many of our government officials, and the sheer resourcefulness and resilience of people all around us, is humbling and encouraging.

But here is the thing: if we are wrong, and the blizzard passes, the winter is mild, and the little ice age never arrives, our organizations already know what to do. Should this crisis miraculously pass with us and our society relatively unscathed, we can offer fervent thanks to God, resoundingly celebrate the medical professionals who put their lives on the line, and go

back to refined versions of our existing playbooks, with a chastened and strengthened sense of our dependence on God and one another, and a greater appreciation for each day of life. We would all be truly thrilled and astonished if this is the outcome of these days.

Even if that is the outcome, our organizations will be immeasurably stronger for having done the difficult work we are describing here. For the essential work that is in front of us is to vastly strengthen our ability to work through relationships of trust, in small local groups, using all the new tools of electronic media and communication. This is actually the work we needed to be doing all along. If we can return to something like the “normalcy” of 2019, but with our programs and services, business playbooks, and even our relationships purified by creative scrutiny, our organizations will be far stronger.

And there is this other sobering reality: this will not be the last pandemic, nor the last disaster. In any case, even while some of us in the “developed” world were insulated for a time from the worst kinds of vulnerabilities, billions of human beings have been living with that level of vulnerability all along, while much of the world paid minimal attention to their plight. We human beings are far more dependent on God and one another, than we acknowledge in times of affluence and ease. We should not want to simply return to the normalcy of the past years, in which so much injustice was unaddressed and in which countless shared, systemic vulnerabilities grew and grew.

In any case, responsible leaders have no choice, today, but to assume that the winter is upon us, and an ice age of unknown duration is before us. We are playing a game no one now living has ever played before. We are, for reasons only God knows, on the front line, on the starting team. Let us act boldly, today, to build as best we can, for the love of our neighbor and the glory of God.