

# COVID Challenges in Caring

Leadership Lessons Learned from Healthcare & Health Professions Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

## CASE STUDY



## Overcoming Staff Burnout and Feelings of Hopelessness

Telling the Story of: Sandra Ramelli, MBA, B. Ed, Hons B.Comm, ACC Integrated Vice President of People and Strategy, St. Joseph's Health Centre Guelph & St. Joseph's Lifecare Centre Brantford



**Sandra Ramelli**  
MBA, B. Ed, Hons B.Comm, ACC



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When she received notice that St. Joseph's Health Centre Guelph was officially in the midst of another COVID-19 wave, Sandra Ramelli, the Integrated Vice President of People and Strategy at the Centre, needed a moment to regroup. She placed her phone face-down on her office desk and stared at her computer screen. It was a year and a half into the pandemic and Sandra had hoped that by now, these waves would have been a haunting memory, but instead they seemed to be resurfacing across Ontario and Canada with frequency.

Prior to the fateful phone call, Sandra had been deep in concentration, revising visitation protocols for the long-term care sector of the Centre based on incoming provincial guidelines. Now, she nervously checked her email inbox and sure enough, there was further confirmation that the Guelph Wellington region was experiencing a high number of COVID-19 cases. This news meant that she would need to revise safety protocols once again, but more importantly, the patients, residents, clients, support staff and front-line workers at St. Joseph's were at risk and she was genuinely concerned for their safety and well-being. Fueled by her escalating emotions, Sandra stood up from her desk, reached for her N-95 mask, and went to assemble an urgent team meeting to strategize the Centre's next steps.

St. Joseph's Health Centre Guelph is a multi-sector organization composed of a long-term care facility, a hospital, ambulatory care services, as well as community services with a nursing-led outreach team.

Being home to some of Guelph's most vulnerable elderly population, Sandra knew that a great deal of caution and care was needed to protect those patients, residents, and clients from COVID-19, however, there was a great deal of complexity around following strict isolation mandates when the long-term care and hospital were subject to a different set of regulations. It was a tricky context to navigate, but Sandra and the rest of the senior leadership team's years of experience and commitment to the organization's mission and values helped them to remain focused on their priorities to produce fair and equitable protocols across the organization. Fortunately for Sandra, when she began her position at St. Joseph's Health Centre 12 months into the pandemic, she was walking into a values-driven organization that fundamentally cared about its staff, patients, residents, clients and their families. She joined an organization that lived its mission and values which enabled her and her team to rise to the challenge of COVID-19 and its myriad of implications.

Sandra always brought energy to each round table discussion and motivated her team to keep charging ahead. Today, however, the news of the new wave cast a shadow over the team and even Sandra found it difficult to be the beacon of optimism that her team members had come to know. In this moment, Sandra longed to be able to remove her mask and have a face-to-face conversation with her colleagues to reassure them that this was the final wave. Immunizations were rolling out across the province and there

was, indeed, a sense of hope that the darkest days of the pandemic would soon be behind them. This sense of hope is what drove organizations such as St. Joseph's Health Centre to persevere during the first year of the pandemic and inspired healthcare workers and support staff to work tirelessly. There was a hypothetical end in sight and front-line workers fixated on that. However, as Sandra looked at the concerned faces across the table that morning, she found herself wondering what would happen if this wasn't the last wave. She wondered how she and her team would motivate and reassure the organization if there was another surge of cases or, worse, another outbreak in the facility. Unfortunately, one year later, this was precisely the predicament Sandra found herself in.

## The Challenge of Staff Burnout and Feelings of Hopelessness

Two years into the pandemic, there was a shift in focus from developing processes and systems that integrated across the organization to managing a human resource crisis and instilling a sense of hope for staff experiencing burnout. Managing the pandemic became a way of life that healthcare workers did not anticipate enduring for a sustained period of time and their hope was gradually eroding.

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Repeated exposure to trauma, suffering, loss, and fear eventually began to take its toll and staff at St. Joseph's Health Centre grew weary. The impact of the pandemic was a vicious cycle of staff shortages that led to a human resource crisis that not only inflicted St. Joseph's, but all healthcare settings and organizations across the province. Burnout led workers to take time off. Staff shortages left those working the front lines exhausted and vulnerable to illness (including COVID-19) which perpetuated staff shortages and further burnout. It was a vicious cycle that ultimately culminated in feelings of hopelessness across St. Joseph's Health Centre. Sandra and her team were charged with the task of restoring hope and fostering resilience in the staff at St. Joseph's, and for Sandra, this was her top priority.

## DISCUSSION

- 1 What impact do you believe loss of hope has on healthcare teams? What role does hope play in resilience?
- 2 What strategies might you consider in addressing hopelessness and staff resilience?

## Building Roots to Resilience

Sandra referred to the initiative to build staff morale and restore hope as Roots to Resilience. Building off the metaphor of a tree's roots and their interconnected nature, she likened St. Joseph's Health Centre to a Redwood tree. With time and nurturing, Redwoods grow very tall, not because of the depth of individual roots, but because of the interconnectedness of its root system, making it resilient against the elements.

Akin to this process is how, over time, by establishing a collaborative, cohesive network, Sandra believed that St. Joseph's could foster resilience at the level of the organization to overcome the burnout and hopelessness caused by COVID-19.

One of the ways Sandra and her team explicitly went about nurturing staff cohesion and interconnectedness was by showcasing workplace stories of staff, illustrating their collaborative efforts. The stories demonstrated their values in action and caring for residents, clients and patients and for each other. The philosophy behind this storytelling approach was to allow the staff to not only be seen and heard, but to illustrate the compassionate and collaborative nature of the staff's day-to-day experiences and to present the organization as a community of practice that banded together in the face of adversity.

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Sandra and her team turned these stories into videos and pop-up banners and shared them at a Storytelling event. They also implemented CARE Stories in the organization's weekly newsletter. Sharing stories in this light nurtured resilience at the level of the organization.

Although emphasis on the development

of resilience at the team level was a priority for Sandra, she and her team also constructed programs to foster resilience at the level of the individual. For example, she established an appreciation program wherein members of the senior and operational leadership teams would walk around the facility with kindness carts every couple of months, publicly thanking staff for their effort and dedication to the organization and inviting them to choose a token of appreciation from the cart.

Another initiative that Sandra launched with the support of the St. Joseph's Foundation was the opportunity for staff to engage in learning and professional development through the newly formed Centre for Resilience Learning and Growth at St. Joseph's Health Centre. She and her team developed this Centre to promote resilience and growth in an effort to help staff achieve their full potential and be their personal best. The hope was that if individuals had the opportunity to grow and develop through the organization, they would be more likely to feel invested in the organization and, reciprocally, feel that the organization was invested in them.

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To further support people, Sandra spent time trying to understand the aspects of the organization that “made staff want to stay” and “what they needed to be supported to thrive at work”. She collected this information through informal conversations as well as through an organizational health survey and presented the findings to senior leadership to encourage discussion around staff retention, staff resilience and self-fulfillment.

## **Challenges to Overcoming Burnout and Feelings of Hopelessness**

Although the need to address burnout and low morale was pressing, Sandra had to remind herself and members of the team that

it would take time for their efforts to become visible. Not only did it take time to plan and implement the initiatives, but their trickle effect was cumulative and breaking the vicious cycle of staff burnout would take time and concerted effort. A tremendous amount of patience and perseverance was needed to overcome the health human resource crisis at St. Joseph's and across the province. To compound this challenge, Sandra also encountered a gap between what the team acknowledged needed to be done to address feelings of hopelessness and what they could actually do to address it. With multiple pressing priorities, changing ministry directives and lack of staff at all levels, the team could not always do what they knew they needed to do. She referred to this as the “know-do” gap. Furthermore, for many of these transformation initiatives it was important that there was a readiness to adopt new ways of thinking and working. Everyone in the organization was affected by the pandemic and members of the leadership were not immune to the effects of burnout.

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It took a great deal of support to put ideas and strategies into action on all fronts. Collaboration was essential at all levels to persevere through the pandemic.

## **“There's a Leader in Every Chair”**

To roll out the Roots to Resilience initiatives and launch of the Centre for Resilience, Learning and Growth, Sandra firmly believed that her role was to facilitate team discussions rather than drive them, per se. Although she always had a vision, her prerogative was to ensure that all the voices at the table were heard and that all ideas were taken up so that strategies and plans were co-created. She was careful not to dictate plans and instead provided opportunities for collaboration because she strongly believed that the more the members of the organization were involved in developing programs and strategies, the more meaningful and relevant they would be for staff. Staff input and



perspectives were key to the success of the initiatives. Sandra achieved engagement from staff by engaging others and by leveraging her team's experience and relationships in the organization. She also led discussions with team members by posing meaningful questions to shape discussion and listening to all the suggestions around the table to empower her team to collaboratively generate solutions. As a leader, Sandra was guided by the philosophy that each member of her team played a collective role in shaping the organization. If each member had a stake in the organization, they would be inherently compelled to address issues such as staff burnout and feelings of hopelessness.

## Listen Authentically

Sandra was half way through composing an email when there was a knock at her office door. A Clinical Manager from one of the programs within the organization wanted to share a wonderful story about a birthday party her nursing and recreational therapy staff had planned for a patient with the support of the patient's family. It was a touching story and Sandra immediately knew she had to include it in the weekly newsletter. She took notes as she listened intently to all the details of the story. One of the best parts of her job these days was listening to the stories of the staff. Sometimes the stories were uplifting, but at times they were also about the hardships that the staff were enduring. While she enjoyed the positive stories, she found the stories detailing challenges to be powerful and necessary to share. Sandra believed that her role was to create a climate where people were inspired to do their best and to achieve that, she stressed the importance of listening to them. Feedback from staff, both positive and not so positive, was an essential resource that informed her leadership in the organization. The programs and initiatives Sandra and her team developed largely grew out of the feedback she obtained from staff regarding their needs, challenges and hopes for the future.

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After the Clinical Manager left, Sandra opened a new window on her computer and started to document the touching birthday party story. The nurses in the program were currently short-staffed and so she was particularly excited to be able to celebrate their successes despite the circumstances. St. Joseph's was, indeed, in a better place than it had been 12 months prior, but the cycle of burnout was still in play. Importantly, however, there was a renewed sense of hope in the organization. Ontarians had done their part in getting vaccinated and waves of COVID-19 were lessening. A new sense of normalcy was settling in. Furthermore, through various initiatives, outreach and support, the organization had become more resilient. Importantly, there was a sense of unity and camaraderie in the organization that provided much-needed reassurance. The staff at St. Joseph's Health Centre had weathered an incredible storm, and although it was not over, through effective leadership, collaboration, and the perseverance of the front-line staff, they were better equipped for the challenge.

## CLOSING DISCUSSION

- 1 What are some ways in which you can empower others to participate in problem solving without simply telling them what the solutions are? What is the value in having collaborative problem solving in an organization?
- 2 What are some ways in which you can foster resilience at the level of the team/organization as opposed to solely focusing on resilience at the level of the individual? What is the value in a team approach to resilience building?

To see **Sandra Ramelli** tell her story, you can view it by clicking on the **QR Code** below. You may also access it by going to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D785yuQwH5Q>

