

# Thrivecast Episode 71: Leading Through Uncertainty

**Trish Kritek:** [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help School of Medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek, and today we're joined by Dr. Tim Dellit. Dr. Dellit is the Dean of the School of Medicine and the CEO of UW Medicine, and several other titles that I'm not going to include right now, but he is the leader of our organization.

And, Tim, I invited you here today, actually invited you to return to Thrivecast, to talk about something that we've spent a lot of time thinking about, which is leading during times of uncertainty. So thank you for being willing to share your thoughts on the topic.

**Tim Dellit:** Happy to be here, Trish.

**Trish Kritek:** You've kind of done this twice.

You might have done it more than twice really, but twice in the recent past. We navigated the COVID pandemic, and then had a little bit of recovery time, and now we've been navigating a time of a lot of [00:01:00] uncertainty and change related to federal policy. So I'm going to call you an expert in this space at this point in time.

So I'm wondering, when you think about entering into these spaces where there is a lot of uncertainty, what are some of the things that you focus on, at least initially, as you kind of take the leadership at that time?

**Tim Dellit:** Yeah, no, that's a really good question. And in some ways, I feel like my whole career has been going from one crisis to another.

Starting smaller, you know, in infection prevention realm and quality improvement, and then now, as you said, really significant events for our community. But I would say for healthcare as a whole, as we navigated the pandemic, and then obviously now with a lot of the federal uncertainty that we face.

And I think for me, I always go back to maintaining the values of who we are as an organization. These are times when we have to focus on our people and how do we [00:02:00] support them as we navigate this uncertainty. And fundamentally, for me personally, thinking about what is our unique role for the communities we serve, and keeping that front and center so that as we make decisions, as we move through, we maintain who we are and the impact that we have.

And keeping that as the North Star, if you will.

**Trish Kritek:** Yeah, that focus on kind of who we are, what our values are, what our mission is, I think is tangible to me, and I wonder how you make it tangible to your teams. Like, how do you communicate that, or what are the ways that we stay kind of keeping that true north?

**Tim Dellit:** For me you know, I am who I am. I try to be genuine. I try to be authentic, and I'm a big believer in transparent communication. Sometimes I may get accused of oversharing information which I don't think you really [00:03:00] can do. But I think it's important to be upfront and acknowledge here's what we know, here's what we don't know, here's what we're going to do to find those answers.

But really trying to bring the team together collectively, because no one person can lead through this environment. You have to have that team and make sure that you have the input, and that team helps you hear the voices from the community in which we serve and our own internal UW Medicine community.

But I think it's about service, right? This is not a time of ego, right? This is no longer about who you are as an individual, but what you collectively are doing, and the sense of obligation that I feel and the responsibility to ensure that we're continuing to be able to do that into the future.

**Trish Kritek:** I appreciate all that.

I'm going to follow up on a couple things that you said. The first one I think you talked about kind of bringing your team together, and I wonder... I've experienced some of these things, but I'll ask you to talk them through a little bit, [00:04:00] of what have been your specific strategies of kind of

making sure the team has cohesion or making sure the team has the information or the decisions that have been made, they know about them?

Tangibly, what are the ways you've done that in different settings?

**Tim Dellit:** Yeah, I'm a big believer in never let a crisis go to waste. And in some ways, you know, for instance, in the pandemic we very quickly set up our incident command structure. What that allowed us to do, and I think, again, taking advantage of the situation, to come together as a system - to bring people together on a regular basis.

If you recall back in that time, right, we had, you know, at least regular weekly meetings with our incident command structure, each assigned with different roles and responsibilities. But it was a way to bring people from all different parts of our system together with a common focus so that we could move forward [00:05:00] together.

Similarly in this uncertainty, right? We have weekly huddles with our broad leadership. We've tried to then share that communication out to our community of, again, where we're at this moment, what's happening on the federal forefront, what we're doing to try to address some of the challenges that we may be facing or supporting our community.

But it really is an opportunity. It almost forces that function of coming together as a system, because you're not going to be successful if you function in a siloed manner. You have to come together as a team.

**Trish Kritek:** Yeah. I think just to reflect on that a little bit, I have found those regular check-ins where sometimes there's lots to talk about, and sometimes there's not as much to talk about, but you know that every Wednesday you're going to get together, or we knew once a week during COVID we would be getting together, was really helpful, and I think that's a great strategy that has been helpful in the past, and I take forward for sure in times when I'm trying to [00:06:00] navigate these with my team.

I think the other one is that kind of inclusiveness of the team so that we're working more as a system and having all the voices there, or as many of the voices as you can have. I'm sure there's too many voices at times. But I do think that systems-ness is very important, and I think that could be on the large level with your leadership, but even when people do that in a smaller

space, making sure they have distributed voices to be heard in those spaces.

**Tim Dellit:** You know, Trish, I like one thing you just mentioned I just want to highlight, is that sometimes it's not about what you say when you come together as a team, but it's just coming together as a team. And I, for me personally, I feel that there's a certain amount of support that when our teams come together, just being in community together really helps.

It's not about necessarily the substance of what you're talking about. Obviously, you know, we want to address critical issues, but sometimes it's just the fact that you've come together, that you're having this shared experience, [00:07:00] that you feel like you're not alone in how you are trying to navigate this uncertainty.

**Trish Kritek:** I couldn't agree with you more.

I think that time, particularly in times of uncertainty, can feel very isolating, and having that sense of community for me has been super helpful. I'll add that occasionally we make each other laugh in those settings, and that has been incredibly therapeutic for me as well. I know sometimes it feels like this isn't a time for laughter, but I think if you don't have a moment to laugh amidst it, it's really hard to keep moving forward.

So that kind of spirit of we're in it together, we're supporting each other, and it is a community, I think has been super helpful for me, particularly when it's been the hardest, I think. You also talked about, you know, taking that work that you're doing with a smaller group that's huddling or a, you know, command center and trying to share that forward to folks.

And so I want to talk a little bit more about communication. It's something you and I have thought about a lot together. I think there's the part about sharing forward and being [00:08:00] transparent, and I think you may have been accused of being overly transparent. I probably prompted that sometimes when I asked you questions that made you be more transparent, so we're in it together.

But I, I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the balance between sharing forward and then hearing voices, because those are complementary but

slightly different, and I wonder how you think about those two parts of communication.

**Tim Dellit:** Yeah, and I think this is something that, you know, through my leadership career really over the last, you know, 25 years here at UW Medicine, I have much greater appreciation of the value and the importance of hearing the voices of the community and striking that right balance, right?

Ultimately, there are some situations where we need to make decisions to move forward, but you can still do that with the input, and you have to think about how do you intentionally hear the input- especially those who may have different perspectives, and create a safe space so that those [00:09:00] perspectives can come forward so that you are aware of them, so that you can think through those.

And that's really important, and I think that's, in some ways, an evolution as a leader to think about how do you do that more and speak less. And that's, I think, something that just you learn over time, at least for me.

**Trish Kritek:** Me too. There's two things in there that I think are really important pearls.

One is a leader isn't always talking. A leader is listening, and I think you're right. As I've gotten more comfortable in my skin as a leader, I listen more, which I think is important. I think the other part that I just want to amplify is, and you need to hear the dissenting voices, the folks who are saying, "What? Why? I don't agree." And that in those times, particularly in these times of uncertainty, sometimes they've been the people or the voices that have helped unearth things that we need to consider or different pathways forward. And I think it's really easy not to want to hear those voices. At least I have found it really easy not to want to hear those voices, and I think it's so [00:10:00] important in order for us to lead during these times.

So I think both of those are really important. A lot of the uncertainty also leads to lots of change. Sometimes it feels like we're changing incredibly fast, and sometimes it's like so many different things are changing at the same time. That was particularly true during the pandemic, but I kind of feel like that now too, because it's always something new.

And I'm wondering for you, how do you manage or how do you help others manage that sense of overwhelming amount of change and the pace of change feeling like too fast or too many different things? Do you have strategies on trying to navigate that?

**Tim Dellit:** You know, first I would say fast is all relative- particularly in academic healthcare where we are not known for our nimbleness.

**Trish Kritek:** True.

**Tim Dellit:** When I think of these times of uncertainty, you almost have to embrace the uncertainty and the opportunity that it provides. And in many ways, there are changes that we know we need to make- that [00:11:00] this almost accelerates those changes in a way that they would happen organically, but now we need to do so in an accelerated fashion.

So I actually see it as an opportunity. In the pandemic, a great example is telemedicine. Right?

**Trish Kritek:** Mm-hmm.

**Tim Dellit:** Medicine was going to move in that direction over the next several years, but we went from 200 telemedicine visits one month to over 20,000 the next. It forced us to make that change rapidly, which ultimately was a positive thing.

It just accelerated where we were going to be going further anyway. Right now, with our school of medicine, there are a lot of changes underway. These are changes that we all know that we need to make to sustain our effectiveness and our impact in our research, our education, our clinical environments. They would be moving, but at a slower pace.

To me, [00:12:00] sometimes this is an opportunity to really come together as a system and really think about how do we do this together. It also, again, is an opportunity... You know, we say often, right, one school, one system, one university. These times of uncertainty are when we have to come together, and that actually can be a positive thing.

And so part of what I try to think about is, yes, there are a lot of challenges, and some of these, quite frankly, are really unpleasant for a lot of our

community, including myself and our leaders. At the same time, how do we find those opportunities to move things forward that perhaps otherwise would have stalled or been delayed?

And so I try to find that place where you can navigate, and again, be comfortable in that uncertainty. That is hard, but I think as leaders, you have to find a space where you can be comfortable in that space, comfortable with what we know, what [00:13:00] we don't know- And for me, having the confidence in our team that we will find the solutions together moving forward.

**Trish Kritek:** Yeah. I also sometimes don't think our pace is the fastest, and can see the opportunity. I'll just highlight a second one. You earlier said that we have to really focus on our people, and I actually think we amplified that really quickly during the pandemic. I remember one day you and I were talking and I said, "I think we need Anne Browning at a full FTE to keep doing these things to support the wellbeing of our people."

And you're like, "You're right. Let's do it." And we changed it like that. And I can assure you that's never happened another time when I wanted more FTE for anybody. But the concept of it was sometimes it pushes you to do the things that actually are really great for the community or the team or the space or whatever you're in, and that, that pace of change sometimes is really great.

And it can feel like a lot to people. I want to just acknowledge that. And you can have new opportunities. I also thought it was one of the [00:14:00] times where we didn't argue about, should we do this at UWMC the same way we're doing it at Harborview? And we actually just said, "We're doing it together." And that was also really inspiring.

So I think those are really great aspects. And I think it can still feel like too much change, and that kind of coming back to the values and who we are and how we support each other resonates with me in that space. You have been optimistic in all of this as we talk about navigating uncertain times, and I think that is one of the things that makes you a great leader, is that you are an optimist.

And I'm going to ask you, what's the hardest part for you when you're trying to navigate these times? Because they can be hard at times.

**Tim Dellit:** You know, I have a really unique privilege in terms of the lens that I have into our organization and across all aspects of our organization. Really is unique and it's a great privilege for me.

But it also means that [00:15:00] there are times when there's information that I have or a small cohort may have that we can't share for a whole variety of reasons at the moment, right? And I try to be as transparent as I possibly can- and yet I also appreciate that for a given individual in a different type of location within our system and their lens, that a given decision or direction or initiative may not always make sense.

And I think that's one of the challenges, is that, you know, sometimes you'd love to be able to explain in a little bit more detail, but you just, for a variety of reasons, you just have to be a little bit cautious in terms of what you can share when. You know, a great example is, you know, navigating some of our federal investigations right now, right?

There are certain general information that we can share, and then there are some, [00:16:00] you know, really challenging decisions that come to a very small group. And I think you also have to feel comfortable that ultimately I know that all the decisions, whether they're made by my leadership team or me, ultimately I'm responsible for all of UW Medicine in that regard.

And so I think that personally can be challenging at times. I truly believe I try to do what I believe is right for the organization, best for the communities we serve and our people, but I also appreciate that there are different perspectives and lenses on that based on the information that you may have available to you, and that sometimes can be challenging.

I don't want to say it's isolating. You know, that's, I think, overused in leadership positions. But y- as you move into different leadership roles, there are fewer and fewer peers where you [00:17:00] can really seek that direct counsel, and that sometimes can be challenging. And so that's where I'd also try to really be very clear when we are making significant decisions why we're doing this, as best I can.

And I think both of these situations, the pandemic, the current state, have allowed us to focus a lot on how we communicate information to our

people, which is a real challenge when you have a big, complex organization like ours.

**Trish Kritek:** It is. I agree. I think it is an incredibly challenging thing to think about communication, and I very much understand that feeling of sometimes there's stuff that can't be shared for a variety of reasons, and it makes people feel like the story that they're hearing or telling themselves or putting together with the pieces of the information that they have, which is understandable, doesn't resonate with them and doesn't feel good.

And so I understand that a lot, and I also understand the kind of there's a smaller and smaller circle. I'll just say for folks [00:18:00] who are listening who are not the dean and CEO, it is important to find those trusted peers, and they are around. Like, I think the department chairs use each other as that cohort, and I've seen, you know, hospital leadership teams use each other as that cohort.

And I think it's trying to find those people that you can go talk to because super important during these times, and unfortunately, you, Tim, have a smaller pool from folks to find for that. Probably the word resilience is overused, and I think it sometimes it feels like, you know, don't ask me to be resilient when it's really hard.

And I believe that the way we get through these things is by being resilient, and that could be about an organization, but I'm asking about it kind of personally. How do you stay resilient during times that are hard, when there's new bumps in the road on a regular basis, and a decision one day suddenly doesn't feel like the same impact as it did the day before?

What are your strategies there?

**Tim Dellit:** Yeah, I think it is. And I'll just say everyone has their own approach to how [00:19:00] they navigate this. For me, there's a part of this, I have a picture of my father on my desk. And, you know, again, we all have different life journeys, but for me, at age 22, caring for my father dying of AIDS, then being, as an only child, managing the estate, packing up the house, moving the stuff from Florida back up to Iowa, you know, doing that at a young age builds a certain resilience in you that I often think, "You know, there's not a whole lot worse than that can happen to me."

And so part of it is a perspective of what we are facing relative to what, not just me, but others are experiencing in their own lives, right? And so I think trying to balance and keep that perspective really helps. It's really important in leadership roles, I think, to be able to separate out kind of what is, quite frankly, just part [00:20:00] of the business of the role relative to personal.

Meaning that you have to, at least for me, I have to be able to separate out and not take something as a personal affront, but rather ... And especially, I think, you know, through the pandemic and in this recent experience, really learning that when someone responds in a challenging manner, I try to step back and say, "Okay, what's going on with that individual that's leading to this type of a reaction?"

Because often the individual topic is probably not actually what it is. And so I think being able to Think more about and connect with that individual as a fellow human if you will and trying to understand where they're coming from I think is a big lesson. And for me, it's self-preservation too.

You have to be able to separate out some of that. You know, unfortunately or fortunately we learn that often [00:21:00] through our medical education, be it as students and especially as residents, you almost have to dissociate certain things that happen or that you are exposed to. It's not that you don't have empathy, not that you are not a caring physician, but you have to be able to kind of preserve your core and understand even if there's an error, even if there's, you know, harm that has happened, learn from that, but you have to dissociate taking that as a personal affront or these jobs become very difficult.

I also, I see my role, quite frankly, especially when they're really difficult things, I need to be the tip of the spear. I want whatever pushback, whatever feelings may be out there, I want them directed to me and not to my team. And so I know coming into this role, that is [00:22:00] part of my responsibility. Part of my responsibility is to help protect the team, allow them to function at a high level, and also, quite frankly, handle some of the real complex things and take that on.

And I knew that as I moved into this position. And so you have to have a mentality of how you're going to approach that, and a willingness to be in harm's way and take that heat, and I'm very comfortable doing that.

**Trish Kritek:** And I think many of us deeply appreciate that, so I think that's important. There's so much you just said.

I'm just going to tease out a couple of them that I heard. This last part about protecting your team, I think that is an important thing that I think a lot of leaders take as kind of central to who they are. I very much appreciate that some of the stuff we learn in becoming physicians are helpful in navigating these times as a leader.

I think about the fact that I have so many patients who die, and I need to be able to work [00:23:00] through that and keep moving forward, and I think that informs a little bit of how I can navigate some certain things as a leader. I think a lot of my communication skills actually come from being a physician to be honest, and talking to patients and families.

But I think the last one that I'll just end on of what I heard there is this ability to be curious about the person who's upset with you, to be able to try to tell a different story about why they're showing up the way they are and I think that's a great leadership message because there's always a more to the story.

And if you just go with the face value of this angry email, which you and I have both received over time, that's probably not the whole story. So I really like all of those messages. And I'm going to ask you if you have one last pearl that you want to share. You've told us a lot about strategies that are things that people can take and put into action as well as things that give insights into kind of who you are as a leader.

So if you had one last pearl to share with our listeners about leading during times of uncertainty, what would that be?

**Tim Dellit:** Yeah, I've shared this [00:24:00] in some of our other leadership conversations, too. I'm a big believer in focusing on the job at hand, focusing on your current role and responsibilities, and do the best you can in that moment, especially in times of uncertainty.

Again, this is not about you as an individual. And I think sometimes where leaders get challenged is when they are always looking for that next job, when you are spending more time thinking about that next job as opposed to focusing on what you're doing. My experience, and again, I've been very

fortunate through my career, is, you know, focus on what you're doing in this moment.

Do that well. It'll be recognized, and opportunities will be open to you. And I think that has always been my approach. And again, I've been very fortunate in my career here at UW Medicine. But especially in times of uncertainty, this isn't about you. This is about how do we lead the [00:25:00] community? How do we maintain our impact for those we serve?

It has to be about that bigger picture. At least that's for me. What helps me continue to move things forward is that bigger picture of maintaining our impact for this wonderful region of WWAMI, and beyond, that we serve.

**Trish Kritek:** Thank you for that. Definitely resonates, and I think it resonates that sometimes the job in those uncertain times is a little different than what you did before, and just focus on doing that job well.

I think that's a great message. And I think you shared a ton of wisdom today with folks listening to Thrivecast, so just want to say I know you're busy, so thank you for taking the time to stop and talk about this with me. I know that people will really enjoy listening to this episode.

**Tim Dellit:** Well, thank you for having me. Always a pleasure.

**Trish Kritek:** And with that, I'll say, as I always do, that if you want to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your [00:26:00] podcasts. You can also find them at the UW School of Medicine faculty website at [faculty.uwmedicine.org](http://faculty.uwmedicine.org). Thanks for listening, and have a great day.