

Coronavirus Local Response Initiative Session Two “Communicating in a Crisis”

This handout reviews key points from session two of the Coronavirus Local Response Initiative for city leaders, drawing on the work of Juliette Kayyem, Herman B. “Dutch” Leonard, Arnold M. Howitt, David W. Giles, and Jorrit de Jong.

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

—Admiral James Stockdale

WHY THIS CRISIS IS DIFFERENT

1. **Uncertainty:** We are dealing with a virus that is incompletely understood and continually evolving with unpredictable results. In response, we are taking unprecedented actions with unclear consequences.
2. **Ubiquity:** The global scale of this pandemic and the fact that we live in an interconnected and interdependent world means that ripple effects will continue to impact cities everywhere, even if or when the public health aspects are under control.
3. **Open-endedness:** We will not know to a moral certainty when adults can safely go back to the office and children back to school. From a public-health point of view, the pandemic doesn’t end until we have an effective vaccine that can be widely administered—perhaps 18 months or more.
4. **Pressure:** To contain the spread and the impact of the virus, leaders are making enormously consequential social and economic decisions. Pressure from those suffering economic losses will increase. You will be asked to predict the future, announce when things can go back to normal, or lift restrictions—even when that would put more lives at risk.
5. **Judgment calls:** It is too late to prevent tragedy entirely; our goal is to manage it within the limits of scientific progress and public tolerance. There will be many judgment calls to make. The challenge is to discover, innovate, and learn our way forward into an unknown future.
6. **Community:** The encompassing and protracted nature of this crisis will reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the formal and informal systems and structures in your city and test the character of the community you lead.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Your top goals for communication in this crisis are to convey **information** (transparent, trustworthy, consistent, and coordinated), **empathy** (for everyone affected), and **hope**.

1. Craft your communications thoughtfully. Consider:

- *Messagee*: Who are you trying to reach? Filter the message through their perspective on/understanding of the issue.
- *Message*: What exactly do you want to convey?
- *Messenger*: Who would lend the most authority, expertise, legitimacy, or political capital as the source of the message?
- *Messenger*: Who is the best person to deliver the message effectively to the messagee(s)?

2. Link facts, people, and values to desired actions and outcomes:

- Situation: *What is happening?*
 - Define and describe the event in the terms you want your stakeholders to internalize and respond to. How serious is it? How bad could it get? How long is it likely to last?
- Identity: *Who is this happening to?*
 - Be clear about who is included in the group you are defining. Who is particularly likely to be affected? Whose interests are you trying to understand and taken into account?
- Values at stake: *Why should we care?*
 - Describe what you think is at stake. How will this event affect the things that matter to us most? What should we focus on preserving? What trade-offs might have to be made and what losses will we be asked to absorb?
- Action: *What should we do?*
 - What are the specific steps people should take? What should they do to reduce risk to themselves and others? What should they do if they have symptoms? Who are the experts they should listen to? What are the range of potential actions that government may take and *what are the triggers for those actions?*

3. Take communication very seriously. Keep these recommendations in mind:

- Don't "wing it." Prepare carefully and consistently.
- Coordinate with colleagues to ensure consistency in messaging.
- Say what you know and how you know it. Let the metrics lead the narrative.
- Be honest about what you don't know. Don't make predictions.
- Defer to experts and reinforce what they're saying.
- Don't cast blame. Look to reassure and build confidence.
- Say what you are doing and why, and be clear about what you are asking others to do.
- Show compassion for those who are sick, appreciation for those working so hard to respond, and empathy for those whose lives are disrupted.
- Pace the unwelcome news. Adaptive leadership is about helping people adjust to changing realities. Find a rate of information fast enough to keep pace with the problem, but not so fast that public reaction will undercut the effort.
- Whenever possible, look for a simple refrain that gets to the heart of complex ideas (for example, Dr. Fauci's statement: "You don't make the timeline. The virus makes the timeline.")