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HARVARD Kennedy School
Program on Crisis Leadership

Crisis Communications for COVID-19

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Effective communication between leaders and stakeholders is crucial in the face of trying conditions. The COVID-19 crisis confronts leaders in the United States, and in the global community at large, with unprecedented challenges for which no existing playbook, plan, or set of tactics can reliably provide a best-practice roadmap – or even the promise of a good outcome. The situation is extremely uncertain, ambiguous, even chaotic. And there is no reason to think that this uncertainty will abate any time soon. COVID-19 as a medical phenomenon may continue to evolve to produce additional surprises – while the unprecedented actions that many jurisdictions are now taking will almost surely produce unforeseeable follow-on effects and new challenges to surmount. Leaders and their organizations will need to operate in an agile, problem-solving mode for an indefinite time to come.³

Communication with employees, customers, investors, constituents, and other stakeholders can contribute decisively to the successful navigation of these stressful circumstances. But how should leaders think about what they are trying to say – and how to say it?

This short note lays out simple frameworks that can be used to formulate the messages that leaders can and should – indeed, **must** – convey to help their communities and organizations make their way forward as effectively as they reasonably can.

¹ The authors are, respectively, the two Faculty Co-Directors and the Associate Director of the [Program on Crisis Leadership](#), Harvard Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. The observations presented here are based on our best understanding of information available from public sources, our judgment about which of those reports can reasonably be relied upon, and our research into prior epidemics and other crisis events.

² This paper is part of a series of short essays concerning the COVID-19 event prepared by the same authors at the Program on Crisis Leadership. It may contain text that also appears in other papers within this series.

³ For a discussion of these processes, see “Crisis Management for Leaders Coping with COVID-19,” another of the papers in this series.

The Stockdale Paradox, Slightly Modified⁴

In difficult circumstances, leaders must help their stakeholders understand and face up to their ultimately unavoidable reality. Admiral James Stockdale, the senior American officer incarcerated in the POW camps in North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, was responsible for trying to help his fellow inmates. He has been credited with saving many of them. Asked how, he said that in dire circumstances leaders must do two things:

First, they must be **brutally honest** about the reality;

Second, they must offer **a rational basis for hope**.

To the original version of the Stockdale Paradox (or, perhaps better, the Stockdale Principles), we suggest adding a third element:

Third, they must **show empathy** for the losses and suffering of their followers.

First, Stockdale explained that people who did not grasp the reality but instead harbored false hopes were the first to die – because they were inevitably devastated as their hopes proved false. By contrast, those who were helped to understand reality but had a rational basis for belief that things might eventually be better were able to withstand extremes of deprivation, mistreatment, torture, and disease – and still survive.⁵

Second, in crafting messages about COVID-19, you need to combine honest description with rational hopes about how to navigate a more positive path forward. For example, leaders might say, “Rigorous social distancing will certainly create very difficult hardships for us all – separation from loved ones, personal economic woes, difficulties securing groceries and medications, among other problems. But, hopefully, by slowing the spread of COVID-19, we will keep the load on hospitals manageable and give ourselves time to develop a vaccine, as well as medicines to alleviate the symptoms of those infected.”

Third, in our view it is important to acknowledge the challenges, difficulties, and suffering created by the difficult circumstances you are leading people through. This must be authentic, and appropriate to the way in which you express yourself – but it is important not to seem aloof from the situation or from the grave realities faced by your constituents.

⁴ Author Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, coined this nomenclature for this leadership idea and approach. The advice is much older, dating at least to Napoleon, who famously characterized the leader’s job as articulating reality and then offering hope.

⁵ In recent days, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York has provided good examples in his COVID-19 briefings of messages combining reality with hope. He has been very clear about the realities of the situation and the consequences if physical distancing and barriers to the transmission of the virus are not effectively implemented – while offering a rational basis to hope that they can be, and images of how much better things will be if they are. Similarly, a recent speech by Chancellor Angela Merkel has been widely cited as a strong example of crisis communication during the pandemic. Addressing her fellow Germans, Merkel starkly but calmly stated the grave dangers posed by COVID-19, provided clear guidance on what citizens could do to best protect themselves and others amidst such a high degree of uncertainty, and illustrated the seriousness with which she was taking the threat – and the measures she was implementing to counter it – by framing part of her speech in what, for her, were unusually personal terms. Having lived under an authoritarian regime in the former East Germany, she explained, she now cherished the civil liberties a liberal democracy such as modern, unified Germany afforded its citizens – and had thus only very reluctantly concluded that restrictions on travel and public assembly were necessary to curtail the spread of the disease. Like Cuomo, she also offered words of hope, ending her address by emphasizing that collective, unified action could bring an end to the crisis (for an English translation of Merkel’s speech, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=652&v=F9ei40nxKDC&feature=emb_logo).

The Four Canonical Questions

True crisis events – large scale, highly uncertain circumstances, like the COVID-19 pandemic and its myriad of follow-on consequences – are “whole of community” events: literally, all of us are in the event together (though different groups may be affected in different ways). Generally speaking, however, we all are implicitly or explicitly seeking answers to four central questions:

- (1) **Situation: *What is happening?*** What is this event? What are the key facts and defining circumstances?
- (2) **Identity: *To whom is this happening?*** Who is included in “*we*” when people say “We are in this together?” Am I part of the group that is affected? Do leaders notice, care about, and pay attention to me and what matters to me – and others like me?
- (3) **Values and Interests at Risk: *Why should we care?*** What are the things that “we” especially value that are threatened by this event?
- (4) **Action: *What should people like us***, with values like ours, ***do*** in a situation like this?

People constantly seek – and will inevitably find – answers to these questions, whether or not leaders directly address them. They will find the answers in what you and others say, and in what you *don’t* say, and, critically, in how you behave.

As a leader, you will do better when you speak explicitly to these questions, and when you then behave in ways consistent with what you said. (It doesn’t help much if you say people should keep personal distance from one another and then you are seen on television shaking hands at press conferences.)

A major priority for a leader in crafting crisis communications, therefore, is to decide what answers to give to the four canonical questions – and then to ensure that what you say is consistent with what you want to convey. The following provide some guidelines for addressing the questions:

- (1) **Frame and describe the event** in the terms you want your stakeholders to internalize and respond to. How serious is it? How long is it likely to last? Who is particularly likely to be affected?
- (2) **Clearly indicate how you are defining the community involved.** Who is included? Whose interests are you taking into account? Are there significant differences among subgroups within that larger community?
- (3) **Describe what values and interests are at risk.** What is likely to be affected that matters to us? What are we most interested in preserving? What is essential to us? What may we be forced to leave behind as we move forward?

- (4) **Describe how you want people to behave.** What are they supposed to do? What should they not do? What sacrifices are they going to have to make to preserve what they really care about?

Speak intentionally, repeatedly, and authentically to this set of questions. Always remember that your stakeholders are looking for – and will surely find – answers whether you provide them or not. Better to articulate thoughtful answers to these questions clearly and authentically. Because people will be stressed and distracted during crises, it is crucial that you speak not only clearly but also concisely, so that stakeholders can comprehend and retain the critical information you are trying to convey.

A Template

To frame public communications in high-stress events, there is a simple “template,” derived from analysis of both effective and problematic messaging. These rules are designed to be very general, so as to cover a wide range of circumstances:

(1) Say what you *know* (and the basis of your knowledge), speaking especially to the first three canonical questions.⁶

Situation: Frame and describe the event in the terms you want your stakeholders to internalize and respond to. How serious is it? How long is it likely to last? Who is particularly likely to be affected?

Identity: Clearly indicate how you are defining the community involved. Who is included? Whose interests are you taking into account? Are there significant differences among subgroups within that larger community?

Values and Interests: What is likely to be affected that matters to us? What are we most interested in preserving? What is essential to us? What may we be forced to leave behind as we move forward?

You will generally have a better grasp of what is happening (better “situational awareness”) than your stakeholders. Share what you know, but be careful to describe how you know what you know. In crisis events, early information is often wrong.⁷ It is fine to say “on the basis of what we have learned so far from _____, we currently believe _____” (so long as there is reason to believe that the stated source may be reliable). If your sources later change their view, you are in a better position to announce the changed information than if you put it in your own voice.

⁶ One important exception to this rule arises in law enforcement situations, in which for obvious reasons it is not always wise to let criminal adversaries know everything that you know about them and what they did or are doing.

⁷ There is an old military adage that applies to crisis events: “The first report is always wrong.” A modern addendum would be that “The second report is always wrong, too, but in different ways.” Admiral Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time when a US Navy vessel shot down a civilian airliner in the Persian Gulf (the “Vincennes incident”) formulated this rule as “Eighty percent of the information that a headquarters commander receives on the first day from a new bad event will be wrong – you just don’t know which eighty percent it is.”

Note that an important rule embedded here is that you should **not** say things that you do **not** know:

Don't speak from hope. You can speak **to** hope – that is, you can say why you think there is reason for hope. But don't confuse your hopes about the future with the facts as they are now on the ground.

Don't speculate about exactly what *has* happened (which you may not know yet) or about *why* it happened (which you almost surely don't know yet).

Don't make predictions. You don't know what will happen next, so forecasting is risky; any prediction you make is most likely to draw attention if it turns out to be wrong. (But an exception: you can say when you will be back to say more – because that you can control.)

Don't suggest that you can control the future – this power is not given to you. “We will (characterization of a hoped-for outcome)” is a very risky statement to make.

(2) Say what you are doing.⁸ Let people know what actions are being taken and how they relate to your understanding of the situation. Importantly, this should include how you are seeking further information and what perspective you can offer on what may be a rapidly evolving event.

(3) Say what others should do, thus answering the fourth canonical question. Provide guidance and direction to your stakeholders. What should employees do? What should your customers or your suppliers or the public do? In stressful situations, people want to be proactive rather than passive, so providing ideas about what they can usefully do may be helpful to their sense of well-being. It is not therapeutic to be told to sit quietly and do nothing – try to help people find something useful that they can do, because most will want to actively contribute. In some situations, this may be nothing more than telling them where, when, and how they can access further information. But avoid suggesting actions that are make-work or likely to prove inconsequential, which can damage your credibility and authenticity.

(4) Offer perspective. In high-stress situations, people may find it hard to acknowledge danger or, in contrast, appropriately bound their concerns. Some may be in denial and may not be paying attention to the seriousness of the situation. For others, shock or fear leads them to overstate the severity of the event. To the extent possible, help people get perspective by explaining how to regard the new reality and by providing realistic comparisons that help ground their perceptions.⁹

⁸ Again, in law enforcement situations this general rule may need to be modified so as not to divulge information that would be useful to your adversaries.

⁹ A good example is Rudi Giuliani's response after 9/11, in which he made reference to the bombing of London by the Nazis in World War II, invoking the fact that people with whom New Yorkers felt a bond as English-speaking, big-city dwellers had faced even

Considerations in Crafting the Statement

A framework that many have found useful in thinking about how to craft the message you are formulating is the “Four M’s.”¹⁰

Messagee: Who is the message addressed **to**? What is her or his frame of mind or reference / state of knowledge / degree of understanding / world view / means of absorbing and processing information / preferred channels of communication?

Message: **What**, exactly, are you trying to say to the audience you have chosen?

Message: Who is the right source of the message / person to say the message is coming **from**? Whose authority / legitimacy / standing / political capital / expertise is best invoked to make the message persuasive?

Messenger: **Who** is the best person to **carry / deliver** this message? In whose voice will it be best heard, received, and positively responded to? From whom will the message be most likely to seem legitimate and acceptable?

In crafting these four elements of the message, it is useful to bear in mind two key determinants of the power of the message as it will be encountered by the audience:

Empathy It is important to start with an understanding of the messagee’s approaches to the world and the state of their information. An empathic analysis is crucial to crafting the message in a form that will be persuasive. A common mistake is to imagine that the argument that convinced you will convince others as well. The point, you need to remember, is not to persuade **you**. (You are already persuaded, presumably.) Since others do not necessarily share your prior information, priorities, world view, or means and methods of absorbing and processing information, they will not necessarily be impressed by the same arguments that persuaded you. Instead, you need to work the problem from **their** perspective. Given their premises and approaches to reasoning (or narrative), what formulation of the relevant facts and arguments would most likely persuade **them**?

Whose Voice? We often think of an argument, by and of itself, as being persuasive. But people can almost always resist being persuaded if they do not wish to be. It is useful to remember instead that being persuaded is a gift from the persuadee to the persuader. What would make the intended persuadee willing to make this gift of allowing her or his mind to be changed by this message? Who has standing with this audience? By whom will its members be willing to allow themselves to be persuaded? Will it be an expert or scientist, a political leader, a prominent business person? If you can figure out the answer to this question, you can more effectively solve the problem of **voice: from whom** should this be coming, and **by whom** should it be carried?

greater challenges. A more recent example, within the COVID-19 event, is Chancellor Merkel’s statement, “Since German unification—no, since the Second World War—no challenge to our nation has ever demanded such a degree of common and united action.”

¹⁰ We are not sure of the origin of the 4-M’s framework. We first heard it from our colleague Marty Linsky, who has a background in both politics and journalism.

Crisis Communications as a Sequence

Each of your messages will be part of a sequence of communications conveying important information to your followers and constituents. Thus, you need to make sure that the messages are both individually well-crafted and also that they make sense when viewed across time. Seeing each message as part of a larger fabric or pattern makes it important to focus for each message in turn on “the Five C’s:”

Clear: make the ideas in each message as precise and crystalline as possible;

Concise: within the bounds required by accuracy and clarity, make each message as succinct as possible – your audience has a lot going on, so your message needs to focus on the essentials (only!);

Coherent: make sure that if your message has different parts, they are aligned with one another and that your overall message is thus internally logical;

Consistent: make sure that your messages at different times are aligned with one another and make sense as a group across time ... and that if your message is changing over time that you explain what is driving the changes; and

Credible: make sure that the facts you convey are accurate; stay within what you know, to preserve your long-term believability.

Pacing the Unwelcome News

Finally, leaders must be conscious of unfolding bad news in a way and at a rate that their stakeholders can manage and adjust to. In his work on “adaptive leadership,” Ronald Heifetz formulated the problem of leadership as helping stakeholders adapt to new realities.¹¹ In our teaching about leadership in crisis situations, we have found it useful to formulate this idea in this way:

Leadership is the process of bringing a new and generally unwelcome reality to an individual, group, organization, or society, and helping her, him, it, or them successfully adapt to it.

Pacing therefore is extremely important. Undertaking this form of leadership – dosing the organization with an unwelcome reality – tends to raise the level of stress in the organization. Some people respond with “avoidance mechanisms” – things they can say or do that would allow them not to have to undertake the “adaptive work” that would be implied by facing up to the real circumstances you are describing. Some people go into denial, some make excuses (we are too busy, we need more resources, ...), some attack the leader (that is, **you**). Knowing that there will generally be resistance, you need to calibrate the process of educating the group, organization, or society at a sustainable rate. Too much, too fast can lead to panic or rejection;

¹¹ See, for example, Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Harvard University Press, 1998.

too little, too late will leave the problem festering and unsolved. A major challenge for you, thus, is to find the right rate – fast enough to deal with the problem without causing a wave of resistance that will undercut the effort.

Leaders can benefit from the ways of thinking about public communication outlined in this brief, crafting their messages for stakeholders with honesty about the facts but with a rational element of hope for the future. To be effective, this basic purpose requires thoughtful analysis of the audience for the message, the way in which it is framed to be informative and persuasive, and how it can best be presented as authoritative and legitimate.

About the Program on Crisis Leadership

Through research, teaching, and work with governments and practicing professionals, the [Program on Crisis Leadership](#) (PCL), Harvard Kennedy School, seeks to improve society's capacity to deal with natural disasters; infrastructure, technology, and systems failures; emergent infectious disease; and terrorism.

Jointly affiliated with the [Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation](#) and the [Taubman Center for State and Local Government](#), PCL takes a comprehensive perspective, looking at risk reduction strategies, emergency preparedness and response, and disaster recovery.

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