

Tackling the COVID-19 crisis: Advice for leaders in government and the public sector

Introduction

How should a leader in government organise both to manage this unprecedented crisis AND to prepare for the future beyond?

This paper is in two sections:

- Part one: Managing the crisis
- Part two: Managing everything else

I have imagined the reader as a minister in charge of the response to the crisis, but it is relevant to public sector leaders generally. As you read through, you will see where you need to vary it for your own circumstances.

Part one: Managing the crisis

Governments face crises all the time: natural disasters such as floods, mudslides, bushfires, tsunamis, hurricanes; economic crises such as the financial crisis of 2007 and after; and service breakdown crises too, such as with crime, immigration or public order.

In my time in No. 10 we ranked problems and crises according to their intensity; Level One (it's a problem but we know both how to solve it and who should take responsibility) to Level Four (it's a very big and urgent problem, a genuine crisis, the solutions are unclear and responsibility is spread across numerous ministries and agencies). By categorising and then facing them we learnt how to manage our way through and became better at it.

But we never faced anything like COVID-19. This really is unprecedented in scale, urgency and depth. It is not just a health crisis; it is an economic and social crisis too. On the Level One to Level Four scale it is off the charts.

Even so, I'm confident the lessons from past crises are relevant now for those leading the response of governments, ministries, agencies and large public institutions. Part one of this document outlines these lessons.

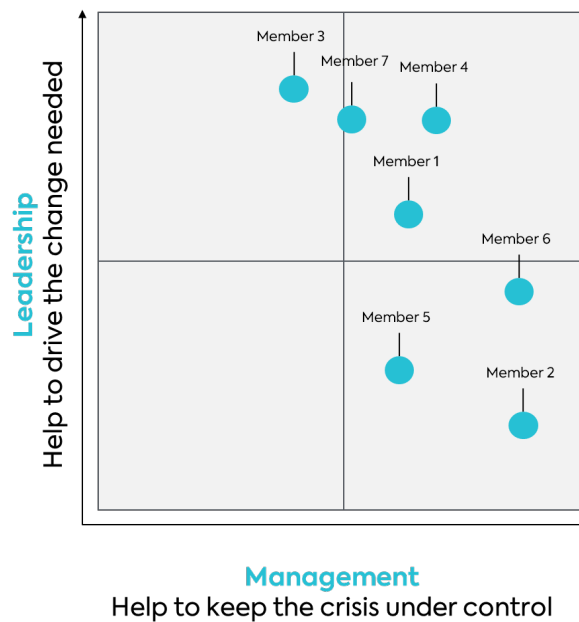
If you are leading this work, assume you'll be doing a 60-70 hour working week through the peak of the crisis.

1. Build a team

Urgency and focus are essential. Exude a calm sense of purpose. Don't panic. Listen carefully.

Create a small trustworthy team around you to manage the crisis. Include in it both leadership and managerial profiles and the best scientific and health experts you can find. Make sure the group doesn't do groupthink; before reaching a decision encourage robust debate and diverse views. Unflinching honesty is priceless.

Figure 1: Illustrative profile of the team



Source: Adapted from *Leading Change*, John Kotter. Harvard Business Review Press, 2012. Chapter 4

2. Establish routines

Build routines to manage the crisis. Your crisis management team should meet at least once a day – twice a day during fast-moving phases. Clear your diary as far as possible and only meet people who can help you manage the crisis.

Make sure you have reliable, up-to-date data, well-presented, at each meeting of your group. If the numbers you really need are not available at the start of the crisis, make it a top priority to collect them and start using them. Do not tolerate excuses or delays.

In February 2010, a magnitude-8.8 earthquake occurred off the coast of central Chile and left damages equivalent to 18% of Chile's GDP. The government put together an Emergency Team with four main goals on housing, health and education. Every morning the Emergency Team met to review the data, identify challenges and operationalize solutions. Just 45 days later, they had helped put 4,000 emergency housing units in place, provided 3 million vaccines, set up 19 field hospitals, and helped get 1.25 million students back in school.

3. Make decisions

Make decisions. That is your job. The experts will advise; your team will help you think through the different angles; the data will inform; you have to decide.

Remember that in a crisis, effectiveness (solving the problems) comes before efficiency (don't slow things down in the hope of better value-for-money). Waiting to decide is a decision itself and could be much more risky than acting decisively right away, even with the uncertainty.

“The future is unknowable, but the past should give us hope.”

Winston Churchill

“In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower

4. Have a plan and follow up

The acute emergency phase of this crisis could be longer than more familiar crises in the past. It is likely to come in waves. Draft a plan and act on it, but also prepare ex-ante worse and worst-case scenarios that could trigger additional actions.

Check that the plan is implemented promptly and effectively.

Review progress and learn rapidly. You will inevitably make mistakes working under this pressure through an unprecedented crisis, but make sure you learn as fast as you can what is working and what isn't. Correct mistakes.

5. Communicate

Co-ordinate across government and organisations as necessary. Those at the centre of the crisis management should not hesitate to command and control. That is what a major crisis demands. Equally, it is vital the centre doesn't become a bureaucratic bottleneck which slows everything down.

Communicate regularly with the relevant workforce and the public. Convey both the brutal reality and a sense of hope.

Every day at noon, Martin Vizcarra, the Peruvian President, holds press conferences to update the country on the COVID-19. He explains the state of play, the progress of interventions, the improvements being made, the challenges ahead, and the restrictions in place. He set expectations by defining stages in the response, he draws on and pays tribute to the experts, and he gives hope, based on evidence. The President has sanitising gel on his table, the ministers use masks, and they sit 6 feet apart.

6. Create the culture you need

From the outset, build a culture for crisis management based on:

- a bias for action;
- team spirit;
- a positive frame of mind (“There is always a solution.”);
- fearless honesty;
- ambition;
- an openness to new ideas.

“Authorities need to manage disequilibrium, a productive level of stress that allows people neither to be overwhelmed nor to be complacent.”

Ronald Heifetz, Harvard University

Part Two: Managing Everything Else

In these unprecedented circumstances, it is clearly right that leaders focus intensively on managing the crisis. This note assumes you will do that but then urges you to give a small amount of time and attention to what is beyond the crisis.

7. Beyond the crisis

The priorities: You had priorities before the crisis. They were important to you and your organisation. After the crisis they will be important again. Pick the most important two or three of these priorities and set up a small team to drive them forward as best they can during the crisis – progress may need to be slowed but aim to maintain some momentum. Ask this team to update you with a brief note (2 pages max) every two weeks and to tell you what is going well, what is going less well and what they are doing about the problems. They might finish with a question or two for you. Respond promptly – reading the note and responding should take you no more than 30 minutes a week.

The future: The crisis may dominate for months, perhaps longer, but there will, eventually, be a future beyond it. Can you find the resource to task a small number of talented people to start planning the future now?

In 1940, less than a year after Britain found itself at war, when London was being bombed almost every night, when France had been over-run by the Nazis, and when Hitler was planning an invasion of Britain, a small number of senior officials from the Ministry of Education requisitioned a few rooms in a hotel out of London and set about their task – to design a school system for after the war. The war lasted another five years but the design they drew up provided the foundation for legislation in the last year of the war and the system after it.

Can you do something similar? If you had to build your system again from nothing, how would you build it better? There could be huge benefits later from starting on this task now. How much time should this require for you per week? Some weeks none; give it a dedicated hour once a month.

The lessons: The usual way governments go about learning the lessons from a crisis is to set up a Commission of Inquiry afterwards to examine what happened, how it was all handled and what lessons can be learned. Often the reports produced are excellent – but often they are produced too slowly and by the time they report the world has moved on. The lessons don't get learnt. Can you find a way to learn the lessons as you go? At the end of each week, and again at the end of each month, ask yourself and your team: What have we learnt this week/this month? What mistakes have we made and what can we learn from them? What have others in other countries done that worked or didn't work and what can we learn from them? Apply the lessons immediately if that makes sense. In any case, ask someone to write them down in a page or two, weekly and monthly, and you'll find by the end of the crisis you have the first draft of a handbook on how to manage a crisis. How much time should this require for you per week? No more than 45 minutes.

I make that between 1 and 2 hours a week out of your 60-70 hour working week. If you can be disciplined enough to find that much time as the crisis swirls around you, it will turn out to be an outstanding investment of your precious time.



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