RIP THEM UP AND START AGAIN?

Travel industry resilience | Covid-19 debate | Cybersecurity | Online tribalism & vigilantism | Frontline responder wellbeing | Karachi floods | Asteroids
Contents

News

COVID-19 questions & comment .......................... 6
Emily Hough and Andy Towler introduce a debate that will raise difficult questions, but is aimed at working out the best way forward.

Where next for UK emergency planning? ............. 14
Martin Traylor says that current arrangements need reform and improvement.

Customers at the heart of response ................... 16
David Wales suggests that a much more human-centred mindset is needed when designing response strategies.

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News

Counting the cost of waste .......................... 38
The recent monsoon season has brought Pakistan’s financial capital, Karachi, to its knees, Lusatu Zahid reports.

Cybersecurity

Cyber and Covid-19 ........................................ 40
Many organisations have concentrated their management response so much on Covid-19 that other serious threats have been ignored, according to Lyndon Bird.

Cybersecurity crisis on the horizon .................. 44
It is not too late to make an action plan, says Keyyan Williams.

Combating the cyber storm ........................... 46
Ronald Banks advocates a whole-of-nations approach to cybersecurity, particularly when it comes to attacks on critical infrastructure.

Cybersecurity & industrial espionage ............... 50
Mike Nolan says the pandemic has forced many companies to adopt technology advancements more quickly than planned.

Cyber resilience and ESG .............................. 52
In the throes of the pandemic, malign cyber actors sense a world of opportunity. Organisations must therefore be cyber resilient, writes Andrea Bonime-Blanc.

Leading a cyber incident response team .......... 56
Jelle Groenendaal and Ira Helsloot explain how leaders and their advisors can make effective decisions and implement them.

Civil unrest

Post-lockdown tribulation .............................. 60
Ian Pearson explores the different tribes manifesting as behaviour during lockdown and why it is so important for emergency planners and responders to be aware of these developments.

Terrorism & vigilantism: p64

Mental health in emergency services .............. 83
Khoo Siewe Giam, Cyrus Ching and Ng Song Lim review the Singapore Civil Defence Force’s successful peer support system to improve wellbeing.

Insarag Guidelines – fit for purpose .............. 86
The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group has reviewed its guidance for dealing with sudden events involving large scale structural collapses. Anwar Abdullah outlines the group’s strategy.

Creative crisis problem solving ................. 88
Desiree Matel Anderson suggests that innovation is not just about solving crises and recurring extreme events, especially when looking to the future, as shown in a deadly tornado incident in Alabama, USA.

Connecting the dots with drone mapping .......... 90
Collaboration is the key to staying ahead of the curve in the rapidly evolving landscape of drone technology. This is where CRJ Key Network Partner VR4D’s software comes in – and experience of – emergencies, including the influence of social psychology.

Leaders, crisis management & Covid-19 ........... 10
Harman B Dhillon, Leonard Arnott, M Howitt, and David W Gilles explore how leaders and their advisors can make effective decisions and implement them.

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News

Time to take the asteroid threat seriously ........ 34

Time for a new kind of hero .......................... 28

Human-centred response: p6

Cyber espionage: p50

Terrorism & vigilantism: p64

The Great Reset: p96

Counting the cost of waste

Lusatu Zahid

Cybersecurity crisis on the horizon

Keyyan Williams

Combating the cyber storm

Ronald Banks

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Post-lockdown tribulation

Ian Pearson

News

Time to take the asteroid threat seriously

Emily Hough

Time for a new kind of hero

Eric McNulty

Human-centred response: p6

Sergio Legorlatti

Cyber espionage: p50

Giacco Bonner

Terrorism & vigilantism: p64

Anas Parvaz

The Great Reset: p96

Cover story: Is it time to stop up our assumptions?

Cover image: Gracie Broom

Comment

This edition of the CRJ is about challenging assumptions, unpacking the strands of the Covid-19 pandemic and its multiple cascading consequences, all the while being mindful of how they are conflating with other disasters and emergencies, such as the storms, oil spills, extreme weather and wildfires sweeping across the world.

Many crisis assumptions about emergency preparedness systems, society, security and international relations have clearly been misguided and, in part, this stems from a historical lack of emphasis on preparedness and mitigation in favour of past-crisis responses. On this note: “The ever greater demands we place on responders are the result of design failures in our institutions, systems and communities,” asking “how often have you seen... horrors...?”

This leads us to the status of the complex horizontal and vertical relationships between governments, emergency preparedness experts, media and the public. The power relationships, so central to our understanding of crisis, are being addressed or recognised by authorities, unrest and dissection can be expected.

Starting on p60, CRJ looks at some of the manifestations of such unrest, from lockdown tribulation to cybercrime. These trends affect us all – business, emergency planners, responders, governments, communities and individuals – and Jennifer Hesterman provides a sobering reminder of what happens when online crime, terror and vigilantism spill over into the real world (p64). This is backed up by the heightened vulnerabilities highlighted by authors in our cyber feature (p48).

CRJ is not for tearing down systems that work, nor does it advocate the indiscriminate rip up of assumptions. But failure to ask questions and debate the more difficult subjects that have been skirted around for many years, can only lead to crippling atrophy.
Crisis communications during Covid-19

Drawing upon the ‘Stockdale Paradox’, 
Herman B ‘Dutch’ Leonard, Arnold M Howitt and David W Giles provide a few simple frameworks that can help leaders to formulate their messages, particularly in times of crisis.

In facing Covid-19, elected and public health leaders have struggled to find a clear roadmap to navigate the challenges of this pandemic. As they move step-by-step to deal with this crisis, effective communication with the general public and various stakeholder groups can make a decisive difference in managing these stresses. But how should leaders think about what they are trying to say — and how to say it? A few simple frameworks can help in formulating the messages that leaders can, and should, convey to guide their communities and organisations.

In dire circumstances, leaders must help people understand and cope with an ultimately unavoidable reality. For this purpose, we commented and slightly modify the ‘Stockdale Paradox’. Admiral James Stockdale, the senior American officer incarcerated and tortured in North Vietnamese prisoner of war camps during the Vietnam War, has been credited with saving many of his fellow inmates. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins characterised the Admiral’s approach to extreme conditions as the ‘Stockdale Paradox. Leaders must do two seemingly incompatible things: be brutally honest about the reality they face, but also offer a rational basis for hope.

False hopes

Stockdale, drawing on ideas that go back at least to Napoleonic times, explained that people who did not grasp the reality of deprivation, torture and disease, but instead harboured false hopes of near-term relief, were the first to die. This was because they were inevitably devastated when their expectations were not realised. By contrast, those who grasped the harsh reality but could sustain a realistic confidence in ultimate release, could withstand extreme hardship and survive.

To these ideas, we suggest adding a third: leaders must show empathy for the losses and suffering of their followers. In leading people toward the future, it is important to acknowledge the challenges and suffering they are experiencing. This must be authentic and true to the leader’s personal style, but it is important not to be aloof from the grave realities that people face.

Adhering to these principles, German Chancellor Angela Merkel provided a strong example of crisis communication in a speech to the nation at the outset of the pandemic in March. Merkel starkly but calmly stated the grave dangers posed by Covid-19 and gave clear guidance on what citizens could do to protect themselves and others, even amid great uncertainty.

In unusually personal terms, she also demonstrated the seriousness with which she took the threat. Having lived under an authoritarian regime in former East Germany, Chancellor Merkel cherishes civil liberties in a democracy; she thus only very reluctantly concluded that restrictions on travel and public assembly were necessary to curtail the spread of the disease. She also offered words of hope, ending her address by emphasising that unified action could bring an end to the crisis.

In televised daily public briefings in April and May, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo similarly combined reality, hope and empathy.

At the peak of the Covid-19 outbreak, he was very clear about the spiking numbers of infections, hospitalisations and deaths, as well as the potential consequences if physical distancing and barriers to viral transmission were not implemented — while nonetheless offering reasons to believe that they could be. He also expressed personal sorrow in acknowledging the loss of life and suffering of affected families.

In true crisis events like the Covid-19 pandemic, people implicitly or explicitly seek answers to the following canonical questions:

- **Situation**: What is happening? What are the key facts and defining circumstances?
- **Identity**: To whom is this happening? When people say: “We are in this together,” who is included? Am I part of the affected group? Do leaders care about and pay attention to me and others like me — and what matters to us?
- **Values and interests at risk**: Why should we care? What things that we especially value are threatened?
- **Action**: What should people like us, with values like ours, do in a situation like this?

People will inevitably formulate answers to these questions whether or not leaders address them directly. They will find the answers in what leaders say, in what they don’t say and also, critically, in how they behave.

In crafting crisis communications, therefore, leaders should address these questions explicitly — knowing that there will likely be resistance, leaders need to calibrate the process of educating the group at a sustainable rate. Too much, too fast can lead to panic or rejection.

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can manage and
Even in a crisis, stakeholders
news in a way leaders must with what they do. The following provide some
is included? Whose interests are taken into
and then ensure that what they know about them and what they have done or are doing is often inaccurate. An old military adage applies: “The first report is always wrong.”
A modern adendum would be: “The second report is always wrong in different ways.” When a US Navy vessel shot down a civilian airliner in the Persian Gulf (the_Flight_105) incident, Admiral Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff formulated this as his “80 per cent right, 20 per cent black, as the New_Orleans_Times_Picayune put it: “When something happens far away, at least 80 per cent of the first reports, and 50 per cent of the second, are invariably wrong.”
In sharing that information, therefore, it is important to describe the source and how that knowledge is derived carefully.

When making a case to people that is new or different:

■ Say what you know: (and the basis of that knowledge), speaking expertly to keep someone busy, but are logical – things that is to, the features of the situation, the community involved, and the values and interests at stake.
It is worth noting that one important exception to this rule arises in law enforcement efforts to acknowledge and clarify situations, in which – for obvious reasons – it is not always wise to let adversaries know everything that you know about them and what they have done or are doing.

In crises, leaders must be conscious of presenting bad news in a way and at a rate that stakeholders can manage and adjust to. Building on Ronald Heifetz’s ideas about adaptive leadership, we have found it useful to frame a leader’s role as the process of bringing a new and generally unwelcome reality to an individual, group, organisation, or society, and helping them adapt to it successfully.

Avoidance mechanisms
Pacing is therefore extremely important. Undertaking this form of leadership – doing the organisation with an unpalatable reality – tends to raise its members’ level of stress. Some people respond with avoidance mechanisms – things they can say or do that will allow them not to have to undertake the adaptive work needed to face up to the real circumstances. The response to Covid-19 social distancing and protective measures in many places illustrates this obstacle.
Knowing that there will likely be resistance, leaders need to calibrate the process of releasing the group at a sustainable rate. Too much, too fast can lead to panic or rejection; too little, too late will leave the problem festering and unaddressed. A major challenge is to find that right rate – fast enough to confront the problem realistically and honestly, but the Stockdale Paradox requires, without causing a wave of resistance that will undercut the effort. Effective crisis communication is a skill, not an art – a skill that, helped with the frameworks presented here, can be developed with experience. [6]

This article is an abridged version of Crisis Communication for Covid-19, available at http://bit.ly/CMCovid

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questions repeatedly, concisely and authentically, so that stakeholders understand and retain critical information.

In practice, public communications in high-stress events, there is a simple, general template, which could be termed first three questions – that is, to the features of the situation, the community involved, and what the leader hopes to achieve. It is worth noting that one important exception to this rule arises in law enforcement and national security situations, in which – for obvious reasons – it is not always wise to let adversaries know everything that you know about them and what they have done or are doing. The enemy’s interest in what the leader is doing is often inaccurate. An old military adage applies: “The first report is always wrong.” A modern adendum would be: “The second report is always worse wrong in different ways.”

When a US Navy vessel shot down a civilian airliner in the Persian Gulf (the Flight 655) in 1988, Admiral Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, formulated this as his “80% or 20% rule.” As the New York Times put it: “When something happens far away, at least 80 per cent of what you first report, and 20 per cent of the second, are invariably wrong.”

In sharing that information, therefore, it is important to describe the source and how that knowledge is derived carefully. As our colleague Marty Linsky suggests, in crafting crisis communications, “Four Ms” are useful:

■ Message: To who is the message addressed? What is her or his frame of mind or reference, state of knowledge, degree of understanding, world view, means of absorbing and processing information and preferred methods of communication?

■ Message: What, exactly, should be conveyed to the chosen audience? Say what others should do, thus answering the fourth canonical question: What, exactly, should be done?

■ Message: What is the right source of the message? Whose authority, legitimacy, standing, political capital and expertise is best to invoke to make the message persuasive?

■ Messenger: Who will deliver this message? The source of the message and the messenger together form the credibility. Do they appear to be knowledgeable, believable and trustworthy?

As the Stockdale Paradox prescribes, leaders should express hopes only when the facts on the ground create a rational basis for doing so, and not to divulge information that would be useful to your adversaries.

■ Say what you should do, thus answering the fourth canonical question: What, exactly, should be done?

■ Say what you are doing; let people know what actions are being taken and how they respond to the situation. Important messages are part of a sequence of communications, which over days, weeks, or months weaves a larger fabric of information, conclusions and recommended actions. Several factors help make that sequence effective, as follows:

■ Clarity: Make the ideas in each message as precise as possible.

■ Consistency: Make each message as succinct as possible, within the bounds required by accuracy and clarity. Because stakeholders have a lot going on, you need to focus on the essentials.

■ Coherence: Ensure that different parts of a message are aligned and internally logical.

■ Consistency: Even in a crisis, leaders must be conscious of presenting bad news in a way and at a rate that stakeholders can manage and adjust to. Building on Ronald Heifetz’s ideas about adaptive leadership, we have found it useful to frame a leader’s role as the process of bringing a new and generally unaccepted topic to a society, individual, group, organisation, or society, and helping them adapt to it successfully.

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Knowing that there will likely be resistance, leaders need to calibrate the process of releasing the group at a sustainable rate. Too much, too fast can lead to panic or rejection; too little, too late will leave the problem festering and unresolved. A major challenge is to find the right rate – fast enough to confront the problem realistically and honestly, but the Stockdale Paradox requires, without causing a wave of resistance that will undercut the effort.

Effective crisis communication is a skill, not an art – a skill that, helped with the frameworks presented here, can be developed with experience.

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In high-stress situations, some listeners may feel they need to acknowledge danger or, in contrast, bound their concerns appropriately. Some may be in denial and not paying attention to the seriousness of the situation. For others, shock or fear lead them to oversimplify the severity of the event. To the extent possible, help people to obtain perspective by explaining the information accurately and providing realistic comparisons with other situations that help ground their perceptions realistically.

As a corollary, leaders must emphasise the values and interests that stakeholders will internalise and respond to. Express hopes only when the facts on the ground create a rational basis for believing those hopes can be realised. This means leaders should not make statements unless they have a rational basis for believing those hopes can be realised.

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In regard to the new normal and presenting bad news in a way and at a rate that stakeholders can manage and adjust to. Building on Ronald Heifetz’s ideas about adaptive leadership, we have found it useful to frame a leader’s role as the process of bringing a new and generally unaccepted topic to an individual, group, organisation, or society, and helping them adapt to it successfully.