



A PRACTICAL TOOLKIT FOR  
POLITICIANS DURING THE  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**CRISIS COMMUNICATION  
GUIDE**

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE



# INTRODUCTION

Crises require clear, concise and consistent communication. Crisis communication encompasses components of normal political communication but also differs in distinct ways. At times of crisis, political leaders, parties and governments are called on to provide a quick, empathic and trustworthy response. The public wants to understand what is going on, what political leaders are doing about the crisis and what they themselves should do.

A crisis, by its very nature, contains many unknowns and uncertainties, and this leads to fear, anxiety and anger, mostly about what could happen. This makes effective crisis communication a strategic resource that can contribute to the success of the crisis response. As a politician, party or government there are important rules that apply to crisis communication.

During a crisis there is often little to no time to plan or prepare elaborate communication strategies. Rather crises require immediate skills to communicate with the public. Politicians, parties and governments must ensure that crisis communication is timely, transparent and based on correct information, but also honest and frank, showing empathy and understanding about the public's concerns. In the current pandemic, crisis communication is essential to ensure that people understand the risks of COVID-19 and follow recommendations to protect their health and limit the spread of the virus. It can be a tool that helps manage or even reduce the scale and impact of a crisis. This guide provides important recommendations for politicians, parties and governments to effectively use crisis communication.

Coen Pustjens, April 2020

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## 1. What is crisis communication?

Crisis communication is "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation." Communication during a crisis is one of the key tools politicians, parties and governments can use to manage perceptions and reduce the impact of a crisis.

There are several differences between regular political communication and crisis communication. Regular political communication mostly aims to gain attention through positive work and is proactive, forming people's perceptions about a topic and framed by politicians, parties and governments. Crisis communication, on the other hand, deals with negative, unintended and unexpected impacts. It is, at first, reactionary in nature and tries to improve or change existing perceptions about crisis events that already took place. It is aimed at mitigating negative perceptions and associations. Crisis communication serves four goals:

1. **Inform citizens** by providing accurate and timely information about the crisis.
2. **Manage public perceptions** about a crisis and how politicians, parties or governments are responding to it.
3. Limit the duration or reduce the impact of the crisis by **providing clear instructions** on what to do or how to help.
4. **Restore confidence** and provide future-oriented perspectives.

## 2. Ten Rules of Crisis Communication

Several key principles apply to crisis communication. These should inform the language, style, content and structure of crisis communication. There are ten crisis communication rules to abide by, which are outlined below:

### 1. Respond quickly

- Making announcements early shows leadership, leads to trust, reduces rumors and can save lives. It signals the politician, party or government has ownership of the crisis and is willing to step up and resolve it as quickly as possible. Delayed or slow crisis communication, in turn, creates panic and uncertainty about what is happening and who is in control. It allows the crisis to grow unchecked and enables unwanted perceptions to become "mainstream." Moreover, it breeds speculation and allows spoilers to fill the information gap with inaccurate or deliberately wrong information. Providing information, sharing regular facts and updates and communicating frequently counter these developments.
- During a time of crisis, abide by the rule that making a good decision today is better than waiting for a perfect decision tomorrow.
- Time is important, but crisis communication should not be rushed. Do not speculate; instead, wait for basic important information about the crisis to become available before communicating.
- What we say during a crisis helps define perceptions, assumptions and policy preferences. If we do not act quickly, those associations will have already formed and will be difficult to change.
- In the case of COVID-19, it is essential to provide quick information about suspected cases and how and where the virus is spreading, as it gives citizens the ability to respond and limit further spread of the virus.

## 2. Focus on facts

- First response crisis communication should answer the following questions:

- ***What is the nature/origin of the crisis?***
- ***Who has been affected or is at risk?***
- ***Where did it or is it taking place?***
- ***What are the risks and dangers to the public?***
- ***When did it take place or how long is the crisis expected to take?***
- ***What should people do in response?***



- Use and reference data, statistics and visuals as much as possible. These shows you are making informed decisions based on objective, independent and evidence-based information that anyone can consult.
- Avoid theorizing about the crisis or speaking about technical areas with which you are not familiar. Never give personal opinions, never say "no comment" and never over answer questions.
- Avoid stigmatization or assigning blame to vulnerable groups at all cost.
- Politicians, parties and governments often want to resolve a crisis as quickly as possible, but that is not the primary goal of crisis communication. Rather it is to provide consistent and accurate information that allows people to understand what is going on, what decisions are being taken to resolve the crisis and what people can do.
- In a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, using and visibly positioning health experts is a good way of showing they have an important voice in the decisions that are being taken in response to the crisis.

## 3. Build trust and provide reasonable reassurances

- Without trust, the public will not believe or act on information provided by politicians, parties or governments. This can exacerbate or prolong a crisis.
- Explain who is in charge and whom citizens should listen to, implying who they should not be listening to and who is not in charge.
- Discuss next steps and what is being done in response to the crisis. Highlight emergency measures and policy responses that are being taken to control, limit or end the crisis.
- Set clear expectations. Try to explain what the next steps of the party/government is going to be in response to the crisis, what potential developments are likely to take place and how those will affect people's lives, as well as when the next communication will take place.
- Acknowledge uncertainties and admit if you do not have the answer to certain questions, while ensuring the answer is provided at a later moment. It is better for citizens to know what information is missing than to give wrong information.

- Give reassurances that the crisis is being managed, by whom and how, but do not over-reassure. Communicating everything will be ok, giving unfounded advice or answers or implying parties/governments have everything under control will undermine crisis communication. These are all areas that parties/governments cannot control, so when things happen that they said would not happen, people will start distrusting information and its messenger. Being a reliable source of information during a crisis is important.
- Making experts part of the conversation and allowing them to take center stage at times reinforces that decisions are made by including those who are most knowledgeable about what is happening.
- Look at the future and provide perspective, do not linger on the past or what went wrong.
- Be optimistic and hopeful in tone, not defensive and somber.

*In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "I'm absolutely sure we will overcome this crisis. But people will pass away. How many loved ones will we lose? That is up to our collective response."*

#### 4. Show empathy

- Do not trivialize people's concerns, minimize problems or imply they should not worry. Those are completely understandable and healthy reactions to a crisis.
- Talk about the way the crisis is likely going to affect people's lives and what they can do to minimize the impact. For example, explain where people can go to get help or their eligibility for emergency measures or relief.
- Speak from the heart and show emotions. For example, "It's natural to feel anxiety. This is a worrisome situation for all of us." Or express how you personally feel, mirroring widely held feelings of fear, frustration or concern.
- People are looking for hope during a crisis, so give examples of resilience, unity, bipartisanship and positive news, even if they are unseen benefits. For example, a lot of people cope with tragedy by trying to help their community. Highlight campaigns and relief initiatives set up locally by civil society or citizens.
- Acknowledge victims and those that have been directly impacted by the crisis if possible. Moreover, make sure their basic needs, like food or water, are provided.
- Put politics aside during a crisis. Crisis communication should not include political messaging or attacking political opponents. Average citizens are at the center stage of crisis communication. Building citizen trust requires solutions and messages emanating from broad political consensus.

*Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg conducted a press conference for children and answered questions from kids on a popular children's TV program. During the event she said, "It's OK to get a little scared when so many big things happen at once."*

#### 5. Be honest and open

- It is important that people understand what is known and unknown about the crisis, so detail what still needs to be learned. This will create realistic expectations.

- Speak about the remaining uncertainties and risks of the crisis, but come back to it at a later point when there is more clarity.
- Explain the underlying decision-making processes that inform political decisions in response to the crisis. People want to know why and how decisions are made, which legitimizes them and creates transparency and understanding.
- Trying to contain harmful information, postponing critical information or thinking the flow of information can be controlled during a crisis is naïve and wrong. Many crisis communication examples around the world show these approaches almost never works and backfire once information gets out, because the person/institute responsible for the information will be blamed for hiding the information; this ultimately undermines their credibility and trustworthiness in the process.
- Admit mistakes, but explain what you have learned from the mistake and how the new insights will be used to correct the mistake.
- Explain if there is a change in advice or if there are major developments surrounding the crisis and rationalize how these impact your decision-making or response.
- Take out your own trash. If you have bad news to share, then tell it before someone else does it for you. Someone else will likely present it less favorably than you will.

## **6. Make it easy for the media to report on the crisis**

- During a time of crisis, the media is your ally; treat them as such. If there have been differences or disagreements with certain media outlets or journalists in the past, now it the time to put these aside. Provide the same information to all media outlets and not play favorites.
- Frequently and actively provide media with up-to-date information before their deadlines.
- Have a regular schedule for briefings, make sure they are held consistently at the same time and day so journalists know when to expect new information and can plan to attend.
- Establish a media center where briefings are conducted, press packets are produced and distributed, the latest developments and data are shared (possibly through fact sheets) and questions can be raised and answered.
- Answer questions as quickly as possible, and if you do not have the answer inform journalists when you will get back to them. Delays in providing information or answers could create the perception that you are hiding something.

## **7. Involve communities and affected stakeholders**

- Decisions that directly impact citizens should be made and communicated in coordination with them. Inclusion is key; get people's views, bring them into the conversation, listen to them and include them in decision-making. The public is entitled to information that affects their health and lives and, therefore, should be involved in the process of message creation based on their reactions and feedback. Allowing citizens to feel ownership and create buy-in is essential for maintaining a higher level of support and compliance with emergency measures.
- Involving communities and stakeholders allows politicians, parties and governments to build grassroots networks that can provide them with on-the-ground information and serve as a mechanism to disseminate important messages and communication.



- Crisis messaging cannot only be 'top down.' Trust is a hard thing to earn from the top. Grassroots organizations and community leaders need to be included while disseminating important crisis messages. Crisis communication needs to go where people are. This will not only increase the reach of crisis messages, but will also be more impactful. Remember that people trust information from sources they know more than those that they do not, including people.
- Disseminate crisis information in all major languages spoken in the country, including indigenous languages.

## 8. Communicate often

- As long as the crisis communication is related to the crisis, it is almost impossible to communicate too often. However, crisis communication should not become a political platform intended for leaders, parties or governments to overtly showcase personal performance.
- All available communication tools should be used to communicate with citizens during a crisis: press conferences, press releases, public service announcements on TV, radio and in newspapers, email chains, Facebook posts, postal mailings, phone banks, mass text messaging, banners and posters in public places.
- People only remember information after having been exposed to it several times. Repetition of important messages is essential during crisis communication. Ideally, citizens are exposed to the same message at least seven times.

Several cities, including Sofia, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Tokyo and Bogota have established 24/7 online one-stop communication channels dedicated solely to the CO VID-19 outbreak, providing news, information, updates, advice and communication portals.

## 9. Move from reactionary to proactive communication

- A crisis is never planned or expected, it is the very nature of a crisis is that it is unexpected. That means crisis communication is always reactionary at first. It responds to something that has already taken place and that people have formed existing perceptions of.
- Try to get out in front of the crisis, strategize about scenario's that can develop and make a communications plan on how to respond to those developments. If communication remains reactionary, it becomes damage control rather than crisis communication.
- Manage and set expectations about what is likely going to happen, what you, the party or the government are doing in response, what citizens can do and where they can find information.
- Before talking to the media, anticipate likely questions and have answers ready for them. Be aware and honest about gaps in your information, and know where you are most vulnerable to media scrutiny.

The Governor of the U.S. state of Maryland, Larry Hogan, said, *"Until a vaccine is developed, the way we go about our daily lives and the way we work is going to be significantly different for a little while longer."*



## 10. Consolidate message content and communication platforms

- During a crisis, different actors communicate different messages with citizens. Politicians, parties, (local) governments, civil society organizations, experts, community activists and international organizations will start responding to the crisis. However, a lack of conformity in messaging causes confusion and weakens the impact of essential crisis communication. People will not know who to trust and which information is important. Therefore, parties and governments should make a concerted effort to keep the gathering and dissemination of information centralized. Collect information from a variety of sources within a single coordination point, but then designate one or two people as official spokespersons with sufficient standing and expertise to have credibility.
- National and subnational governments and all their communication channels should have the same messaging. That includes spokespersons, political leaders from governing parties, cabinet members, websites, etc. The same applies to political parties - all messaging should be standardized. Whether the party leader or a local mayor gives an interview, if they are from the same party they should have the same message. If resources are scarce, politicians and parties do not have to develop their own messaging, but can instead repeat and reinforce existing messages from experts. It is time and cost effective and reinforces crisis messaging.
- The communication platform (how the message is communicated) and the messenger (who communicates the message) influences who is listening and if people trust the message. Make sure crisis communication reaches everyone by using the right communication platforms and messengers.
- Identify who is respected or an influencer in a community, and get them to reinforce and repeat crisis messages.

Political parties in Turkey, and elsewhere, have issued circulars among party members, elected representatives, branches and municipalities. These included information on how to behave responsibly in reaction to the pandemic (modeling good behavior), party messages, health advice, policy recommendations and recommendations for leaders to cancel party events, spread awareness about crisis measures and abide by quarantine instructions.

## Appendix 1: Useful reference materials on COVID-19 crisis messaging and communication

- A good example of pro-active government communication from the U.S. state of Maryland can be found here: <https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Slides-April-24-1.pdf>.
- New Zealand's government has been credited for its effective communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their website can be found here: <https://covid19.govt.nz/covid-19/>.
- The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has developed two documents, one guideline for communicating about the coronavirus disease for leaders and another on risk communication and community engagement. They can be found here: <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/covid-19-guidelines-communicating-about-coronavirus-disease-2019-guide-leaders>; <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/covid-19-risk-communication-and-community-engagement-rcce>.
- Lessons on crisis communication from Liberia's Ebola epidemic: <https://buildingstatecapability.com/2020/04/08/public-leadership-through-crisis-14-lessons-on-crisis-communication-from-liberias-ebola-epidemic/>.
- Suggestions for how progressives should talk about COVID-19: [https://medium.com/@anthonytorres\\_91296/how-progressives-should-talk-about-covid-19-8eaeaa9fcda5](https://medium.com/@anthonytorres_91296/how-progressives-should-talk-about-covid-19-8eaeaa9fcda5).
- Examples of framing of the coronavirus pandemic in different countries, including Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and USA: [https://commonslibrary.org/progressive-framing-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/#Talking\\_About\\_Coronavirus\\_Centering\\_Language\\_around\\_Inclusion,\\_Empowerment,\\_and\\_Justice](https://commonslibrary.org/progressive-framing-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/#Talking_About_Coronavirus_Centering_Language_around_Inclusion,_Empowerment,_and_Justice).
- Key messages and actions for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools by the World Health Organization (WHO): [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52\\_4](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4).