

The predictable and preventable panic of an infectious disease outbreak



Pandemics have struck fear into humans over the ages, but today perhaps the only thing moving faster than the virus itself, is misinformation about it and the actions that people should take

Most people are not educated in epidemiology and cannot differentiate between accurate information, speculation, and fearmongering when it comes to challenges such as the novel coronavirus. This is where the actions of leaders can make the difference between panic and calm concern, says **Eric McNulty**

Perhaps the only thing moving faster than Covid-19 itself is misinformation about the virus and the actions that people should take. There are reports of social distancing from people who appear to be of Asian descent, fears of dining in Chinese restaurants, and more – including rumours that the virus was released intentionally to drive demand for vaccine.

Part of the challenge rests with a novel threat: scientists cannot initially say what the menace is definitively, how it spreads and how deadly it might be. That information only emerges as data accumulates, tests are run and potential remedies are developed. Most people are not educated in epidemiology and so are not equipped to differentiate between accurate information, speculation, and fearmongering. This is where the actions of leaders can make the difference between panic and calm concern.

Evolutionary psychologist Brian Spisak of the University of Otago in New Zealand explained to me that humans evolved with two sometimes competing instincts: collaboration and competition. Never the fastest or strongest creature in an ecosystem, humans survived and thrived as a species by learning to work together to hunt, for protection and to overcome other challenges. Simultaneously, there has always been competition for primacy within the group and between groups for scarce resources.

Collaboration requires order: individuals know what is expected of them and what to expect of others. With predictability of those expectations, the danger of sacrificing some self-interest in favour of benefits for the group is lowered. This engenders generosity and adaptability to changing circumstances.

Individuals are able to make decisions that affect the group when they know and conform to the general parameters that govern group behaviour.

In a control-based environment, competition arises around who gets to assert that control. Adaptability is restricted because a dominant individual, or individuals, make unilateral decisions about what is best.

There can be greater certitude through control, yet it also breeds rigidity. Control may also beget resistance if followers do not fully trust the leader, circumstances described by the leader do not match those seen by people on the ground, or when there is perceived personal or family risk that outweighs the potential costs of disobedience to a central authority.

The tension between order and control is not an either-or choice. It is a matter of balance. One challenge in achieving the right mix is that many people in leadership positions have arrived there as a result of successful competition. They have mastered tests to get into university or a public safety academy, bested rivals for position, and defeated enemies. They have often benefitted through asserting control to consolidate power.

President Xi in China, President Trump in the United States, Prime Minister Johnson in the UK and many CEOs are all examples of classic competitive leaders. They collaborate when they must, though their comfort zone is clearly asserting dominance through control.

On January 30, President Trump was quoted as saying that the current coronavirus outbreak was: “Very well under control.” Elected or appointed officials often fall into the trap of reassuring constituents with some version of: “Don’t worry. We’ve got this,” when they actually do not.

Leaders in China are not being criticised for doing the wrong things to combat the coronavirus. Rather, the complaint is that they moved too slowly in trying to rein in the situation. The number of cases and fatalities continues to grow. In an attempt to catch up, actions are increasingly heavy handed. Clearly, they don’t have this under control, nor do other officials, despite implementing increasing rules and restrictions. The dissonance between what leaders say and what followers perceive erodes trust. This, in turn, diminishes the leader’s ability to foster order.

Confronting an outbreak of infectious disease requires admitting that there is a lot that is out of control. The typical levers of persuasion are useless: reason, incentives and threats do not work on viruses, which are not intimidated by a barrage of Tweets or an official proclamation. Viruses can mutate quickly and in unpredictable ways, despite the predictions of sophisticated models. This lack of control can flummox and frustrate those trying to lead.

The first step forward is acknowledging that order is the true goal. Control what you can – your decisions and actions as well as the actions of the people working with you – and try to influence the rest. Assert authority to the extent that it contributes to order and hold back when it does not. For example, quarantining those potentially exposed to Covid-19 is prudent, based on the science. Here, control is appropriate. Admitting the limits of your control opens you and those who follow you to tap into our innate collaborative instincts.

Here are some further tangible moves for leaders that will help to enhance order.

Express empathy. The unknowns of an infectious

disease outbreak breed natural fears. Those affected, their friends and families will be feeling genuine pain. These emotions require a sympathetic, emotional response that establishes a human-to-human connection. When you meet this expectation, the people you hope follow you are more likely to see you as their leader, not just someone with a lofty title.

Create islands of certainty by being transparent about what you know and what you are doing based on that information. State the number of cases and fatalities, if any. Quantify the number of scientists working to find a solution. Actively and openly debunk rumours. Establish a regular rhythm for updates on which people can rely for the latest information (and stick to it). Each of these steps helps people build confidence, and ultimately trust, in you and your organisation.

Confusion and fabrication

Acknowledge what you do not know and how you are seeking answers. Lacking omniscience, there will always be gaps between what you know and all that there is to be known. That space will quickly be filled by speculation, rumour and conjecture. The best way to defuse the secondary threats of confusion and fabrication is to admit that you know the gaps exist and describe credible efforts to address them.

Signal that guidance will change. Nothing depletes public confidence faster than officials who say one thing, only to modify direction unexpectedly. Developments will invariably drive shifts in what leaders want and need people to do. Prepare them. Say, for example: “Based on what we know now, it is safe to go outside. However, that may change, and we will use all our media channels to keep you informed. Check our website daily and sign up for text alerts.” When you set expectations for modification, updated instructions reinforce your credibility rather than depleting it.

Model collaborative behaviour. People look to their leaders for cues. No matter what is said, they perceive whether competitive or collaborative behaviours have primacy. If there is tension between the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the various national public health agencies, for example, the public will pick up on it. Every decision and action should signal that experts are working together to face a common threat. Silos of specialised activity should be visibly linked in ways that leverage knowledge, expertise, and capabilities.


This may seem like a lot for any leader. Fortunately, it can be done, as shown by Dr Richard Besser, an alumnus of the NPLI, who was acting Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US during the early phase of the H1N1 pandemic response. Watch his performance at a press conference early in the response to see textbook examples of each of these techniques.

No one alone can stop Covid-19 or any other infectious disease. Together, however, we can limit its spread and fashion an effective response.

Some of that work falls to scientists, analysts and other experts. The rest is on the shoulders of public facing leaders, who must rally citizens across all sectors to participate productively.

Science alone is never enough. Leadership matters, and never more so than amid the uncertainty of a global public health emergency.

Author

 **ERIC J MCNULTY, MA** is Associate Director of Harvard’s National

Preparedness Leadership Initiative. He is co-author of *You’re It: Crisis, Change, and How to Lead When It Matters Most* and a Member of CRJ’s Advisory Panel

■ To see Dr Richard Besser’s press conference, watch: www.youtube.com/watch?v=almHc5TWVJU

