Security Nexus Perspectives

STRATEGIC CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN COVID-19

By Dr. Deon Canyon[*]

When unimaginable crises, such as COVID-19, become a reality, leaders initially struggle to understand cause and consequence in an information-poor environment, which makes for a challenging decision-making domain. Crises require adept public leadership and communication to ensure that political consequences are acceptable. A well-managed crisis not only limits the impact of a crisis, it restores public trust in government. Several crisis scholars propose that crisis leaders in particular, must master six key capabilities to be effective.[1]

Firstly, they need to be able to detect issues and discern when they have the potential to turn into a serious problem. Their ability to carry this out depends entirely on the extensiveness of their preparedness efforts. When COVID-19 presented outside China, it was found that China had already been withholding information on the internal spread of the virus as they had done for SARS.

Secondly, they need to be able to make sense of the information flow. Sourcing information from multiple stakeholders from different domains helps to address the problem of information rapidly becoming outdated and inaccurate in a complex crisis. The ability to sort the wheat from the chaff is a valuable talent. The World Health Organization was delayed in getting into China which meant that leaders could only assume that the virus would be similar in epidemiology to SARS. All leaders globally were hampered by China's reluctance to share information.

Thirdly, crisis leaders need to make difficult decisions with incomplete information and implement them without knowing whether they are making things better or worse. This requires a particular kind of personality and a higher than normal tolerance for risk. Every decision leads an agency or nation down a different path with new threats and opportunities. A crisis leader's ability to adapt on the run and make decisions to deal with continuous novel challenges is fundamental. The lack of clear information on COVID and widespread concern caused governments around the world to take very different courses of action. Some leaders took no action while others made recommendations to their populations. Some locked down hard internally, while others locked down internationally. In this uncertain environment, some leaders

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were proactive while others were complacent. As further information arose, national leaders became more uniform in their decisions.

Fourthly, a crisis leader must understand how to control official and public narratives through the use of influence. Ideally, these narratives are helpful and inspiring, but they must be entirely convincing. Failure in this department results in the media or other political players seizing control of the narrative, which can have grave consequences. Some leaders were successful in their crisis communications, while others failed. Some nations backup up their communications with curfews and security, while others did little. In France and Germany, the large numbers of the public were to be found frolicking in the parks even after dire warnings were issued.

Fifthly, transparency and accountability are vital to maintaining oversight. While public officials assume authority to plan, act, decide and implement tasks to prepare for and respond to crises, official leaders have a special duty to provide strategic direction for these tasks and to ensure that these tasks are performed well by holding responsible parties accountable. In the end, stakeholders and the public need to know what was done to manage a crisis and why it was done. The COVID-19 crisis is mid-stream, but already there are calls for accountability when leaders are perceived as being less reactive. Leaders should proactively be planning how they will negotiate this key area in the aftermath of the tragedy.

And lastly, crisis leaders must ensure that all stakeholders have the opportunity to learn from their lessons and take remedial action. Merely noting strengths and weaknesses is inadequate. Changes must take place to modify and improve all areas with identified deficits. Ideally, this is an ongoing, iterative process that takes place throughout the entire crisis.

Furthermore, crisis guru Ian Mitroff stated that, at its very core, the practice of crisis management is all about being constantly on the lookout for secondary and tertiary consequences and ripple-effects that have the potential to originate from any crisis touchpoint.[2] Our response to SARS gave us little fore-warning that financial markets were going to crash, that the airline industry would require a bailout, that people would lose their jobs, that social distancing would close down restaurants, and that teleworking would become the new norm. The U.S. reliance on China for most of its antibiotics was not considered a weak point by the health system. Nobody thought the U.S. would be so incomprehensibly tardy in making test kits available. Even the lack of toilet paper and other consequences of hoarding were unforeseen.

By most of these measures, the world has done a very poor job of containing COVID-19. Together with the six key capacities, vigilance, consequence management, and proactive leadership are the secret sauce for improving public leadership in future crises.

References

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