



TONY BLAIR  
INSTITUTE  
FOR GLOBAL  
CHANGE

# COVID-19: Crisis Communications

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# Clear, consistent and transparent communication is vital to containing Covid-19



## Objectives of Covid-19 crisis communications

**Cushion peak pressure on health care systems**



**Stop contagion**



**Ease economic burden**



## Strategic levers

**Suppress:** Coordinate a response across government that emphasises saving lives. Enforce behaviour change in order to suppress the outbreak by remaining in isolation and practicing social distancing.  
*e.g. Taiwan, South Africa compulsory isolation*

**Test and trace:** Eliminate testing fears that hold citizens back. Offer transparency about the real availability of testing solutions. Rapidly test to determine localities at greatest risk of contagion.  
*e.g. South Korea & Germany drive-thru testing*

**Revive:** Coordinate a national economic response plan. Message early that government is doing everything it can to stabilise markets, protect livelihoods, and return to economic growth.  
*e.g. US stimulus package, ECB loans*

# Poor communication can undermine policies and accelerate contagion



## Lessons

**Don't downplay the threat**

Where leaders downplayed the threat in public statements early on, **higher contagion and death rates followed.**

**Eliminate contradictory signals**

Where leaders have given contradictory messages to their top officials, they have created **confusion amongst the public, resulting in panic.**

**Avoid press leakage**

Where government containment messages were leaked to the press in advance of their announcement, panic worsened, leading many to leave the 'red zone', **increasing the risk of contagion to less affected areas.**

**Be evidence-led**

Where leaders have failed to act on outbreak data and allowed regular life and large-scale celebrations to continue, **contagion accelerated and spread the outbreak to new locations.**

# From past experience we have learned to establish trust, share information and act decisively during crises



## Ebola in Liberia



**Problem:** In 2014, Liberians didn't trust their government, causing the Ebola media campaign to fail.

### Establish trust

**Solution:** Volunteers were recruited from villages to disseminate information, answer questions and engage citizens.

## SARS in Taiwan



**Problem:** In 2003, Taiwan was not prepared to gather sufficient data or redistribute resources during the SARS outbreak.

### Share information

**Solution:** The government established a National Health Command Centre to act as the operational command point for communications.

## Financial Crisis in the US



**Problem:** In 2008, US capital markets froze and consumers and investors began to lose trust in the financial system.

### Act decisively

**Solution:** The government followed up swiftly with a major initiative, showing the public their commitment to help homeowners and workers.

# Communications from leaders should be tailored to each phase of the response to the pandemic...



**Suppress**



**Test and Trace**



**Revive**



**Suppress** the outbreak by clearly outlining containment policies such as travel bans, quarantines and basic hygiene and prevention measures.

**Test and trace** as many people as quickly as possible to detect cases, understand where the outbreak is and dedicate resources to those locations and populations.

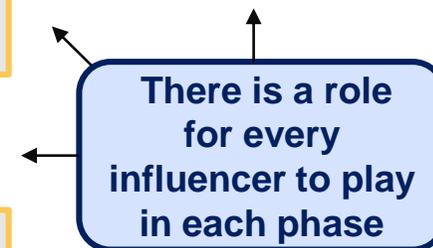
**Revive** government functions, health systems and the economy through tailored measures (tax and utilities, income compensation for workers and employers, credits and investments).

# ...and designed to activate key influencers who can amplify the leader's messages



Key: Sample messages

Influencers	Suppress	Test and trace	Revive
Praise the role of <b>religious and community leaders</b>		<i>"Don't fear testing. There is no shame in being infected"</i>	
Reach across to <b>political opposition</b>	<i>"We take a unified approach to our response"</i>		<i>"We must work together to heal our nation"</i>
Thank <b>health professionals</b>		<i>"Thank you. You are the heroes of this crisis"</i>	
Engage <b>investors and big business</b>			<i>"We need investment to rebuild"</i>
Involve <b>development partners</b>		<i>"We need your immediate assistance to increase medical capabilities"</i>	
Voice support to <b>SME associations</b>	<i>"Government will do what it can to help your family"</i>		
Update the <b>media</b> regularly and counter fake news		<i>"The media has a responsibility to ensure our citizens get the facts"</i>	



# Immediately and consistently message the importance of behaviour changes to suppress the outbreak



## Potential leader-level talking points

“The arrival of Covid-19 is frightening, and we should take it seriously, but **we must not panic**. We have faced hard times before, and together we can face this one.”

“**The goal is to slow the spread of the virus** so that fewer people need to seek treatment and we don’t overwhelm the healthcare system.”

“We face an unprecedented global pandemic and we are all vulnerable, **but no one is powerless**: we ask everyone to keep distance, reduce public life and follow basic hygiene.”

“We have instituted restrictions...These are temporary, **but indispensable to protect lives**.”

“Like in every crisis, misinformation is spreading. **Please don’t believe in rumours**, only trust messages from the emergency committee and credible institutions.”

## Tactical options

 **Conduct regular briefings**

 **Establish a central command post**

 **Launch a public awareness campaign**

 **Promote images of leaders following guidelines**

 **Send text messages to update the public**

## Other considerations

**Make the first announcement ASAP:** helps establish the parameters of trust. After that, establish a regular rhythm to communications.

**Assign spokespeople:** head of state must make first announcement, but updates should come from experts and health officials.

**Don’t just state decisions:** offer a personal tone and include actions the public can take to make themselves less vulnerable.

**Give context and reassure citizens:** remind them what you’ve done already, what you’re doing now, and what you will do next if necessary.

**Recruit other stakeholders:** people trusted by the community should disseminate regulations and personal hygiene recommendations.

# Encourage testing and tracing to prevent further contagion



## Potential leader-level talking points

For countries with testing capabilities:

“Our goal is to **test as many people as possible**. If you are experiencing symptoms or have been in contact with someone infected, get tested.”

“**Testing helps us allocate resources properly**. If we don’t know where the infection is, we won’t know where to direct our public health efforts.”

For countries with resource constraints:

“These are not abstract numbers. **Every life counts**, and as a community, we’re committed to doing everything we can to protect them.”

“We are working with countries and institutions to increase our testing capacity, but we also need everyone to **stop all non-essential activities**.”

For all countries:

“**I want to thank our health professionals** who are risking their lives everyday to protect us. You are all heroes.”

## Tactical options



**Conduct regular briefings**



**Publish updates on testing**



**Share the leader’s story**



**Monitor media for rumours or misinformation**



**Enlist health experts for support**

## Other considerations

**Start each briefing with factual updates:** don’t be alarmist, but be honest about the reality faced and the consequences we’re facing.

**Promote transparency to ensure public trust:** however, keep in mind that using these limitations to withhold alarming information is discouraged.

**Speak directly to the public:** avoid letting ministers or other officials brief journalists anonymously.

**Coordinate federal and local governments:** this is especially important as information changes and spreads rapidly.

**Recruit other stakeholders:** scientists, doctors and medical professionals are optimal spokespeople to convey credibility and trust.

# Preview a vision of revival that rallies efforts to bounce back better



## Potential leader-level talking points

“This epidemic has affected all continents and has become one of the **most serious health and economic crises to ever hit our country.**”

“I know the measures put in place to contain the virus are **particularly tough for businesses and workers supporting their families.**”

“I can assure you we are doing everything in our power to **ease the economic consequences for businesses and preserve jobs.** We are focused on limiting the economic damage by...”

“We are **committed to reviving our economy** and ensuring our citizens can live successful lives.”

“Thank you to the businesses that support their staff and to the clerks helping restock stores. Every act of kindness is a reminder: **we will get through this.**”

## Tactical options



**Speech by head of state**



**One-on-one interview with head of state**



**Launch media campaign for new measures**



**Publish an FAQ about the measures**



**Enlist variety of voices, including microbusinesses**

## Other considerations

**Keep citizens updated:** governments must keep the population familiar with the full plan and describe the journey through the crisis.

**Acknowledge it is a sensitive topic:** some may not be satisfied with the measures passed; it is essential to show empathy here.

**Keep it simple:** economic measures can be complex and confusing; it's essential to clarify the measures passed for all.

**Avoid making empty promises:** ministers and officials cannot claim to be in precise control or make economic promises they cannot deliver.

**Recruit other stakeholders:** both expert economists, and microbusiness owners and farmers who have found ways to remain resilient under economic strain can be useful problem solvers and messengers.

# Appendix 1: A crisis daily briefing can provide useful information and shape the media narrative



## Successful daily briefings



**Andrew Cuomo**  
*New York Governor*

Daily morning briefing



**Ashley Bloomfield**  
*Health Director-General*

1pm briefing every day



**Yoon Tae-ho**  
*Health Ministry Official*

Two briefings every day

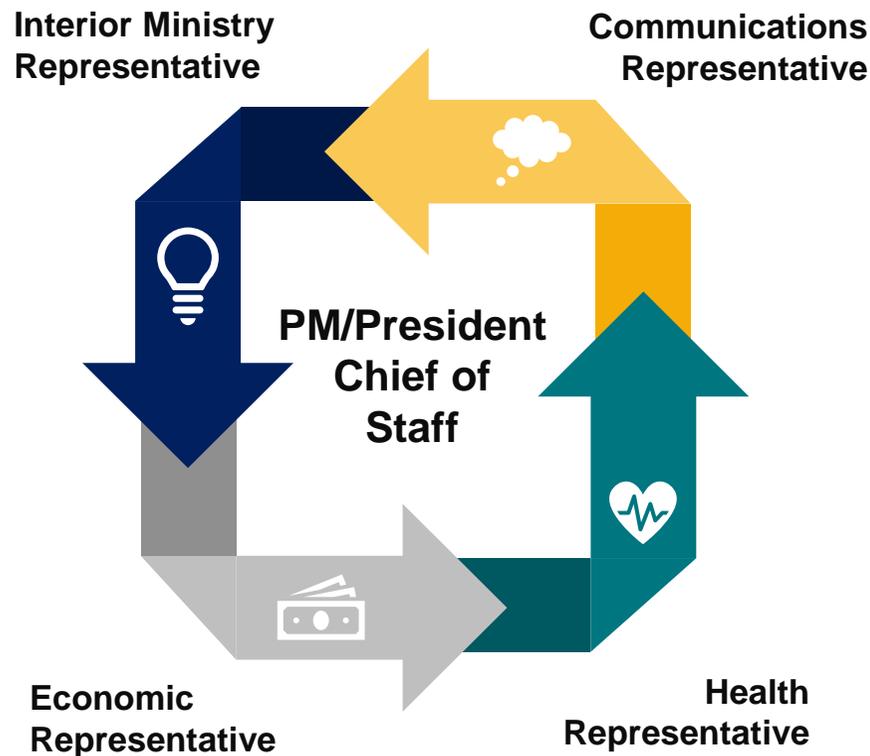
## Daily briefing checklist

- Reiterate the goal – we are doing everything we can to save lives
- Provide factual updates
- Express sadness and regret at death, thank those in public service
- Have stories to tell of development and recovery from your country and others
- Describe the government's response
- Prepare for questions ahead of time
- Look the part – people need to see and hear confident and prepared leadership
- Host briefing in the morning to control the narrative; update later if needed
- Use visuals and graphics

# Appendix 2: A crisis communications coordination team at centre of govt. can increase message effectiveness



## Structure and suggested members



*Including deputies and media and communications representatives of each, and local government representation to ensure enforcement and coordination at local levels*

## Roles and responsibilities

### Ensure coordination

- Develop and share the comms plan
- Set up approval process for documents
- Clarify responsibilities and set expectations throughout government

### Develop messaging

- Launch central command post as repository of information
- Set up daily briefing and tailor logistics
- Develop materials needed

### Prepare spokespeople

- Identify and train spokespeople
- Recruit and brief third party advocates
- Set up mechanisms to update spokespeople regularly

### Monitor, evaluate and respond

- Set up media monitoring and rapid response operation
- Address misinformation ASAP
- Share sample materials with others