

## How Governments Help Citizens and Communities Navigate COVID-19

The scale of the coronavirus outbreak is a challenge at every level: from individuals and families to communities, states, and even nations. What strategies should governments adopt now to best manage this unprecedented crisis?

One of the biggest challenges facing governments is that we don't even know if we're in the beginning, middle, or end of the crisis. In our recent series, we've highlighted how businesses can manage the curve of this crisis, during all of its [three phases](#): Panic & Disruption, Fear & Isolation, and Recovery & The New Normal. In this piece we explore how governments will have to mitigate, manage, and message on the impact to communities and citizens.

### Words matter

Communities and citizens everywhere are being impacted by COVID-19. This pandemic is the first truly global issue since the end of World War II. In fact, the language of war has been invoked by multiple global leaders.

On March 18, U.S. President Trump [called](#) COVID-19 an “invisible enemy” and the battle against it has made him “in a sense, a wartime president.” Two days earlier, French President Macron also [declared](#) “we are in a health war” against the virus.

Evoking a common enemy can open you up for disapproval but can also be a powerful strategy. For the first time, we are all facing the same singular threat. Every country, every type of people, every type of class in society. We really are in this together.

Talking about this crisis as a war also puts people in the mindset that it's something that we'll be in for the long haul. This language helps spur a sense of universal sacrifice—that we're all going to be called on to do more with less and to figure out how to help our fellow citizens. However, it's important to consider the context as this harsh language isn't welcome in every culture or country.

Key lesson: Language and word choice is important. Being thoughtful about what you say, and how you say it, can inspire criticism or camaraderie.

### Communication is key

We know we'll be dealing with the repercussions of COVID-19 for years to come, but there's no reliable data model to know if the virus is controlled or if it's going to come back. Is it waxing or waning? The smartest people we have are all trying to answer these questions. But it's going to take a lot of time, energy, and resources to do so. In the near term, governments need to help their citizens through the unknown we're in right now.

This crisis has underscored the importance of clear and trustworthy communication. Politicians should surround themselves with the real experts in science—immunologists,

pathologists, virologists—right now. These experts must not only have a seat at the table where crucial decisions are being made, but also be part of any communications strategy.

We're seeing in a lot of countries that citizens are concerned about what's next and what it will mean for them. Politicians should tap their best experts to speak to the public about the work being done to come up with real solutions. For example, Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Dr. Deborah L. Birx, U.S. Special Representative for Global Health Diplomacy, are regularly present at the White House Coronavirus Task Force daily press briefings. Other institutions, like the European Commission, are not communicating enough. Dr. Mauro Ferrari, the EU's chief scientist, [resigned this week](#) as the head of the European Research Council in part due to his frustration at the EU's handling of the outbreak.

Key lesson: Now more than ever, creating trust and communicating in a trustworthy manner are of the utmost importance.

### **Get nimble**

Businesses long ago adopted agile thinking, and they're putting it to good use now. Companies like General Motors and Dyson (along with many others) have been able to quickly re-purpose their factories and equipment to produce ventilators. Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, is using his Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to spend billions of dollars on seven makers of a possible vaccine, allowing them to scale up quickly and begin human trials.

Governments, however, are more prone to pragmatic thinking. Decisions often require many different steps and different levels of bureaucracy. If there ever was a time to revisit bureaucratic requirements, it's now. Getting rid of some of the barriers, making good decisions, and delivering timely help to citizens is crucial.

That's been done to varying degrees of success in different countries. Within the U.S. government, the NIH is a model of agility. The agency quickly got notices out to its grantees to provide funding for research topics related to COVID-19 and began fielding research trials as early as February. HHS ASPR and CDC were likewise able to quickly issue emergency supplemental funding opportunities to their existing cooperative agreement recipients. FEMA has also coordinated the delivery of equipment, staff, and supplies throughout the country in response to direct federal assistance requests.

South Korea gets a tremendous amount of credit for learning from its experience with H1N1 swine flu. The country has put surveillance and control measures into place that are helping it "flatten the curve" with COVID-19. Within the EU, how each of the different member nations is responding is different—and it's actually resulting in a difference in terms of survival rates.

Key lesson: Clear lines of authority, coordination, collaboration, and responsibility are important. But perhaps more important is the agility to recognize what areas are working well and shifting that mindset over to what is not working.

## **Allow room for participation**

In Italy, citizens of various towns began singing from their balconies to lift each other's spirits under quarantine. They also began to applaud every night at 8:00 p.m. to thank doctors, nurses, and other health care workers.

This organic movement, and other small community actions, has spread across the EU and the U.S. There's definitely a lesson in this for governments about the power of micro versus macro responses.

It's in these moments that we see how each individual person is trying to find a way to connect with the whole. More people seem to be asking themselves what it means to be a citizen of the world. People are isolated, yet they're seeking out ways to come together. How can I participate—even in a small way—in something that's bigger than myself?

A fundamental principle of democratic citizenship is participation. The U.S. was founded on the principles of participatory democracy, whether that is voting, jury duty, or community service. Perhaps at the end of this crisis we will see an era of reinvigoration and re-empowerment of the impact that each person has on the success and viability of our country as a whole.

While this is a devastating moment that we never would have wished to happen, there's no doubt it's also a good time for introspection. People in isolation now have time to look at their habits, routines, and the way they have been living. Are they being responsible citizens?

Governments can aid these efforts by encouraging positive changes and by supporting policies such as increased telecommuting options. We're seeing what's possible in that realm right now, so governments should stay intentional in retaining those options.

Key lesson: Government should allow room for—and encourage—citizens to contribute and to be part of the solution as they navigate through this crisis to arrive at the New Normal.

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