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COMMUNICATING IN CRISIS:

How to Build Trust in an  
Untrustworthy World

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# COMMUNICATING IN CRISIS: HOW TO BUILD TRUST IN AN UNTRUSTWORTHY WORLD

As we enter the first full week of the global pandemic and crashing financial markets, we are all looking for who to listen to, and who to believe.

**We're looking for a trusted voice in the storm to help guide us**, one that can steer us toward the truth as it unfolds, and away from lies and misstatements, be they well-meaning or malicious. This is the leaders' task – to provide that “True North” to employees, community, customers, investors, and stakeholders.

But this is an almost impossible task in such a topsy-turvy landscape, where it can be impossible to distinguish sky from ground.

Sequestered — quarantined by choice or fiat, or simply avoiding exposure by working from home — our choices for who to listen to have changed. No more can we comfortably sit across from our boss in a group meeting and use all of our senses to tell whether he or she is telling us the whole truth. Working

remotely, half of the sensors we are used to using are missing.

And while we're incredibly lucky to have video and teleconferences, podcasts and webinars, live streaming, virtual chat rooms, and virtual galas, salons, board meetings and policy meetings — still that personal touch is missing, and with it many of the clues we use to determine integrity and truthfulness.

## So who do we trust? And how can leaders establish trust?

As the paucity of believable messages from political leaders grows, and political considerations may also taint our respect for health organizations, it becomes the responsibility of corporate and academic leaders worldwide to help fill the void. Here are some suggestions:

### FIRST, STAY ON POINT

Now is not the time to talk to the public about anything extraneous. All communications need to be about, or take into account, the pandemic crisis. Anything else feels callous, and off.

Even ads, if you've seen them on television this weekend, are becoming more and more irrelevant or annoying if they don't take the new reality into consideration. For example, I even saw

ads this weekend for cruise ship lines and plane flights: pretty tone deaf in our new reality. And they actually did harm to the brands they were supposed to enhance.

Eventually some semblance of normalcy will return... but not now. Not yet. For now, it is best for leaders to admit that information is imperfect, and plans uncertain, but that they deeply care about the physical, financial and emotional health of their constituencies, are working as hard as they can and will update communications in real time. **Aspiration, intention and compassion matter in times of grave crisis.**

It was the same right [after 9/11](#). Communications had to be at a higher, more inclusive and caring level, as opposed to commercial. That came later, but not initially. And so our public communications need to be at the highest levels today as well. Communicate about offering help in the crisis or hold off and be silent.

## **SECOND, COMMUNICATE MORE FREQUENTLY THAN EVER BEFORE WITH YOUR TEAMS**

Many leaders have instituted a daily early morning briefing call with their entire teams. Often that follows an even earlier morning briefing with the crisis or

executive team. Part boosterism, part information, and part indoctrination, these briefings cascade key messages to clients, customers, vendors, and all contacts for the day. The best financial leaders did this in 2008 during the recession, helping their employees to stay on message, stay calm and clear, and stay armed with data.

## **THIRD, KNOW HOW TO DELIVER BAD NEWS**

Today, written communications have taken on the status of art forms. And they follow the cycles of the unfolding crisis. The first communication from a CEO or college president during this pandemic has been about support for the community, commitment to help ride it out, and courage.

The second communication often has been about decisions, such as making work, courses, lectures or exams virtual, and allowing staff to work from home, or students to leave the campus, while staying flexible to constituent preference.

But the third wave of communications, which is where we are this week, is more rigid. Now the tough news will start to be delivered — inviolable rules, scarcity, new laws, layoffs, financial rout. Now the pain will begin as more

folks begin to really get ill, fear mounts, tempers fray, bank accounts empty, and deaths become more common.

**Here the trusted voice to deliver bad news is straight-forward, kind, but powerful and ready to lead the fight.** We all need to see that we have a common enemy in the contagion, and not in one another. Now we need a benevolent field general who can give us tough love and lead us into battle. There is a reason why the surgeon general has military rank, and that is what the evolving voice of trusted leadership needs to be in the third phase of the communication cycle.

### **FINALLY, THE ANTIDOTE TO INEVITABLE PANIC, FEAR, AND MASS ANXIETY IS UNASSAILABLE EXPERTISE**

The country's and world's best doctors are a bit busy these days, but one sees examples of the finest medical advice all over. Dr. David Ho was on MSNBC this weekend talking about the project he is leading to fight the virus, bankrolled by Alibaba founder Jack Ma. It was a ray of distant light.

Private communications from world-class physicians are also migrating to the internet and list-serves. One of my favorites is from my own ENT physician, Dr Jacqueline Jones, who is a beacon in

the New York City medical field. Her expert advice is featured in my recent column [Expert Advice From Front-Line Physician On Leadership Needed To Combat COVID-19](#).

But do think about tapping the expertise in your own organizations — if you have physicians or scientists who can add to the conversation, add professional calm, and give us continual insight as events unfold, then by all means, think about showcasing them in your communications. Their gravitas and credibility will also help your efforts to build trust with every constituent.

Be safe out there.

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Strategists, coaches, writers, and social media experts are available “25/8” to assure that every crisis is addressed, and every opportunity leveraged.

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