

Coronavirus Local Response Initiative Session One: Crisis Leadership Essentials “Real-Time Problem-Solving Under Uncertain Conditions”

This handout reviews key points from session one of the Coronavirus Local Response Initiative for city leaders, drawing on the work of Herman B. “Dutch” Leonard, Juliette Kayyem, Arnold M. Howitt, David Giles and Jorrit de Jong.

“In a crisis situation, you must make decisions with 10 percent of the information you want, and you must accept 100 percent of the consequences”

— HKS Crisis Management executive program participant

There are **three important leadership tasks** that underlie all other aspects of the work of responding to a crisis.

The first is to **assess where you are in the life cycle of the crisis** with as much accuracy as possible. This will inform the ways in which you allocate your attention and activities and organize the work.

The second is to **establish a problem-solving process for a novel threat**. Routine emergency management processes will not be sufficient for responding to this crisis, which will require rapid integration of new (and incomplete) information, learning on the fly, and nimble reactions to emergent issues.

The third is to **understand the political aspects and identify risks** to be managed in order to keep order, secure and retain support, and create the conditions for effective collaboration under extreme circumstances.

TASK 1: Assess where your city is in the life cycle of the crisis.

The goal is to establish **situational awareness** for yourselves, your team, your organization(s), and the public. All of you are already responding to the crisis, even as the event continues to unfold. As Mayor Durkan of Seattle noted in the *Washington Post*, “Initially, the number of cases remained small and concentrated in one location. But the threat was already growing.” In such a dynamic situation, getting the 360-degree view is not easy, but the effort to do so is vital.

- Understand what has happened to date in your city, where it is today, and where it is headed.
- Marshall the data that you have available to help determine where you are. Identify the gaps: What data do you need?
- Name the specific tasks and responsibilities associated with the phase you are in and clarify who is working on which tasks for the current phase.
- Look ahead to what’s coming and determine who will work on which tasks for the next phase.
- Ensure that your team understands the fundamental needs for the current moment and what to focus on.

- Communicate priorities, needs, and responsibilities to the broader organization.

TASK 2: Put in place a problem-solving process to navigate an unprecedented crisis.

In common or routine emergencies, the issues are familiar and easy to identify; there is clarity and consensus on priorities; the questions are apparent and readily framed for decision-making; prior experience informs decisions; tasks are precisely specified; the orders that need to be issued are clear; and the means to execute them are at hand.

None of those conditions are present in the COVID-19 crisis. We don't have sufficient knowledge about the virus and its consequences, the situation keeps evolving, and the secondary and tertiary effects are hard to predict or even imagine. There is no known "playbook" for how to proceed. Instead, you need an **integrated, comprehensive process for engaging in real-time problem-solving.**

There are six basic principles for creating the conditions for effective leadership of that process:

I. Establish a critical incident management team and process

Form a team to oversee all aspects of the event and response. This team will work together to:

- Identify and understand emerging issues and competing priorities.
- Reframe issues as questions for decision-making.
- Deliberate about key questions and decisions.
- Delegate problem-solving for specific issues to other groups.

II. Assemble the right people (from three categories)

There are three (possibly overlapping) groups of people you need engaged in the process of understanding the crisis and deliberating on responses:

- (1) People who understand and can represent the city's key priorities, values, and goals. (This does not mean people with identical interests! These people should represent multiple interests and points of view.)
- (2) People who have expert knowledge in areas relevant to the virus and its consequences (medicine, public health, logistics, interdepartmental and cross-sector coordination, etc.).
- (3) People who have intimate knowledge of the city, the community, and the workings of city hall.

Diversity is key: people with different backgrounds, perspectives, skills, expertise, experiences, and knowledge will enable you to consider a broad range of options and develop a better and more creative approach. You will likely need to reorganize and reconfigure the team as the event continues to unfold.

III. Engage in iterative, agile, creative problem-solving with continuous updating

The basic steps of the process are:

	Problem-solving step	Leading the intellectual action
0	Establish goals, priorities, and values	Moral reasoning
1	Understand the key issues of the situation	Description
2	Develop options	Creative thinking
3	Predict outcomes from each option	Analytical reasoning
4	Choose the best option	Executive decision-making
5	Execute	Administrative tasking
6	REPEAT!	Reflection and group learning

Note that the process begins with step (0), in which you discern the key values at stake in the situation and set priorities. This process is logically prior to all other decisions because it shapes all of the others. For example, different options are relevant depending on which priorities are chosen. This step may have to be revisited as the process unfolds, since not all values at stake will be evident at the outset.

IV. Create conditions for an effective agile problem-solving process in a diverse team

Skilled facilitation of the problem-solving process is crucial. To create the conditions necessary for problem-solving:

- Appoint a **facilitator who is not the decision-maker** to operate the process to avoid deliberations converging prematurely to what the “boss” seems to want.
- Keep the design of the decision-making process relatively flat. You need everyone to speak up and share their information and views. In a setting where we don’t yet know the best answer, we also don’t know where the best answer will come from.
- Work hard on developing the “**psychological safety**” of people in the group so that all participants can contribute effectively.
- Make sure the group maintains a spirit of *joint inquiry* (revealing weaknesses of the current thinking in the hope that others might see a way to ameliorate them) rather than *individual advocacy* (arguing for your point of view and against the views of others).

V. Execute in a spirit of experimentation and learn your way forward

Remind everyone (your team, your organization, your outside stakeholders) continually that you are in unprecedented circumstances, so your current best answer may need to be revised based on what happens next.

VI. Set and maintain reasonable expectations

In these circumstances, making your best effort, maintaining focus on the things you care about most, and learning as quickly as possible is the best you can do as a team. When dealing with an unprecedented situation with deep uncertainty and very high stakes, the best way to meet that expectation is to build and operate, again and again and again, the best available process for learning your way forward across these dark and uncharted waters.

TASK 3: Understand the political aspects and identify risks to be managed.

You will need to take a number of radical decisions that will deeply impact people's lives and the local economy. There will be dilemmas and trade-offs involved, and you will have to decide with limited information—under time pressure. You may not always make the right decision, and some decisions will divide people. Securing and maintaining support for your political leadership from the public and stakeholders is critical.

To manage political risks, the following considerations are key:

- Your response team must include effective **structures for political response** and public communication as well as practical response. Not every member of the team will want to address the political side, but the team's work is inherently political, and political management is a core function.
- Bear in mind that the purpose of politics is to handle value conflicts. **The public invests authority to make decisions about values and priorities in its elected leaders**, and relies on them to bring the right people together for legitimate decision-making processes. Managing the unprecedented conflicts between priorities is one of the essential task of crisis management—your task in particular.
- In an emergency that cuts across organizational, jurisdictional, and level of government boundaries, it may be unclear who has a legitimate claim to decision-making authority for particular decisions. Senior officials should **address the conditions and procedures for delegating decision-making authority** upward or downward.
- With this slow-moving and invisible threat, **worry more about underreacting than overreacting**. Acting sooner rather than later may be politically painful in the present, but it is your responsibility to think ahead. Assume you are two weeks behind the curve with what you know and can observe at present.
- **Lean into the possibility of more restrictive measures early and often** in your public communications to start building credibility for these measures before you need them. As important as it is not to underreact or over-reassure the public, **acting too restrictively too early risks backlash** that can undermine the public's compliance with your response.
- **Give people the the truth about what you know and don't know, and give them hope**. Think about what anyone would want to know: How many are sick? How many have been tested? How many fatalities are there? What's closed? What's open? What should they expect?

- **Place trust in your public.** Most people are at their best in a crisis and want to help. **Enlist their help.**
- **Establish a steady drumbeat in your communications.** Keep people informed every day at the same time.
- **Remind people of the things that they do not need to worry about** at present: there is enough food, there are no anticipated disruptions of electricity or water. Anxiety is high; take problems off of their mental plate.
- While we are in a period of high uncertainty and will be engaged in a prolonged response to a slow-rolling threat, remind people that **what they do right now is important, and has implications for what happens next.** The situation is fluid and we're learning as we go. **It won't go right back to normal after two weeks, but neither will it stay the same indefinitely.**
- **Encourage resilience:** invite creativity and imagination from people, artists, businesses, and social sector organizations. Urge them to think about the skills and capabilities they have and how those map to the situation as it evolves. Ask them to **spot opportunities** where they can help with physical needs, emotional challenges, and the sense of isolation. (Singing songs out of windows at 6 pm in Italy was a spontaneous, decentralized, and intuitive community response—and a beautiful one.)
- Think through how you will communicate with and respond to the needs of **specific populations.** For example, teens and twenty-somethings may erroneously believe they are not at risk and do not pose a risk to others.
- Assess the impact of the crisis from an equity perspective and have a **transparent planning process** around how you will provide for economically vulnerable constituents.
- Be especially aware of the **elevated needs of particularly physically vulnerable populations** (nursing home residents, people in homeless shelters, people in jails and prisons, etc.) that may not have a powerful or organized voice. Prioritize reducing physical proximity and density in shared spaces.
- Work across boundaries to **engage with local, state, and federal government as well as the private sector** to coordinate the response, align communication, and mobilize resources.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

For information from the CDC on crisis and emergency risk communication, see <https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/>.

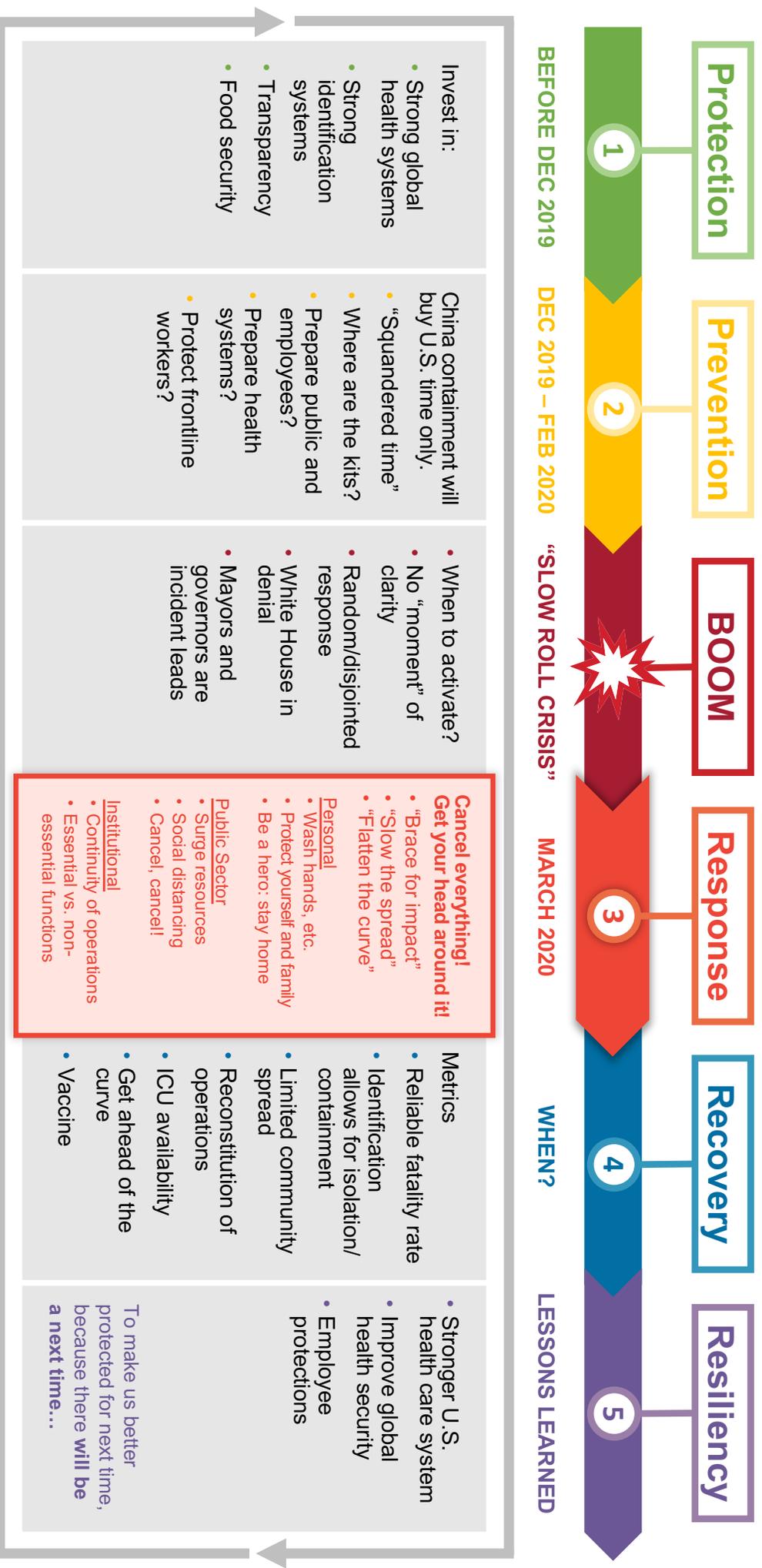
For further reading on crisis problem-solving processes, see "Crisis Management for Leaders Coping with Covid-19" by Leonard, Howitt, and Giles.

"Effective leadership in a crisis situation is a good enough decision, soon enough to matter, communicated well enough to be understood, carried out well enough to work."

–Leonard, Howitt, and Giles

The Five Stages of Crisis Management:

Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the U.S.



A CRISIS HITS A CITY AS IT IS, NOT AS IT WOULD LIKE TO BE.