

Staying on Message when Everything Changes All the Time

with Juliette Kayyem

A CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

It's no secret at this point that the United States has failed utterly to contain or respond adequately to the COVID-19 crisis. With the federal government still lacking a coherent strategy to protect American lives, state and local leaders must take the lead in informing and protecting the public.

As much as these leaders would like to slice through the noise with credible information and clear instructions, they are up against at least:

- A news environment that thrives on political conflict.
- Social norms that too often raise the preferences of the individual above the needs and health of others.
- Torrents of disinformation shared rapidly and widely (wittingly or not) on social media.
- A constantly shifting operational environment.
- Widespread social unrest.

Somewhat paradoxically, the failure to contain the virus simultaneously weakens the credibility of public officials even while it strengthens the claims made by those officials who took the threat seriously enough to embrace, repeat, and act on reliable information early and often.

The good news is that at least three quarters of Americans understand that keeping their distance from one another, wearing masks, and washing their hands are the best tools currently available for protecting themselves and others. And that number is growing. While a small minority may openly defy the guidance, some members of the public still fail to comply out of ignorance rather than bad faith.

The task before mayors is to **communicate with authority in the absence of certainty, with hope in a time of dread, and with a message of solidarity in a time of acrimony.**

This means embracing the work. Specifically:

- **Embrace Data:** Stick to facts and tailor them to your audience.
- **Embrace Empathy:** Construct an empathetic bridge (see below).
- **Embrace Reality:** Build “herd immunity” to misinformation and the politicization of science.
- **Embrace the Public:** Most people get it—and want to help. Enlist the public as partners.
- **Embrace the Future:** Foster hope for a better future by sharing your vision and the steps you are taking to get there.

STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL COMPACT WITH EMPATHY, HOPE, AND NUMBERS

In the first session in this series, Professor Danielle Allen spoke about the need to recommit to one another and embrace a social compact predicated on the idea that **we don't abandon anyone**.

The force of this simple premise should lie behind all of your communications. **The public needs to hear the data, understand the numbers and trendlines and grasp how they relate to one another.** That is part of the work. But to build solidarity within a public that is all over the map politically and emotionally—fearful, numb, cynical, cautiously optimistic, defiant—your leadership is necessary.

You need to educate the public around not just the facts but also the values at stake in how everyone behaves going forward—not just around **what** should they do but also around **why** they should do it.

Marshall Ganz offers the “Empathetic Bridge” as a tool for communicating in this way—“a way of describing the kind of interaction between a ‘self’ and an ‘us’ that seems to be critical for enabling others to respond well.” There are four sequential steps that create this bridge:

1. Acknowledge the **disruption** (loss, fear, pain, frustration) without downplaying it.
2. Establish an **empathetic** connection by sharing your own experience. Do not presume to know how anyone else feels, but acknowledge feelings that others may share (frustration, for example).
3. Anchor **hope** in shared values, past experiences, and solidarity. Do not give false assurances, but do share hopeful stories.
4. Create an opportunity for **agency** by identifying the choices before “us.”

