**THE BEST MEDICINE FOR TREATING THE CORONAVIRUS IS CLEAR MESSAGING AND PLANNING**

BY Chris Webb
EPiCC Director and former Head of Media at the Metropolitan Police Service
Emergency Practitioners in Crisis Communication (EPiCC)
https://www.epicc.org.uk

Like with any major incident public information is key to the successful delivery of the operational response. The coronavirus brings unique challenges for authorities as unlike a disaster which normally impacts on one site or a particular area you are literally dealing with a moving target. In context it reminds me of the widespread public disorder in 2011 across the UK where literally from day-to-day and night-to-night we had no idea where the next riot was going to occur. Trying to manage an incident of this nature can be extremely testing.

That's why co-ordination with those charged with delivering public information in support of the operational response is vital. In the post 9/11 era I was asked to set-up a group to co-ordinate the media and communication response with category 1 responders – the emergency services, local authorities, hospitals and transport sector etc.  This led to the formation of the first Local Resilience Communication Group which I had the privilege to chair for 10 years. One of our objectives was to ensure that public information was joined up at every point during an emergency to provide continuity, confidence and credibility.  Local Resilience Communication Groups now operate in every region across the country. Whilst the Government are doing a good job at a national level in providing information, there appears to be a woeful lack and contradictory information at a regional and local level. I have seen this at first hand with friends who work in different schools across the county being given different messages.

Colleagues who handle counter terrorism have got this off to a fine art whereby when a terrorist attack takes place you have the national position that is then reinforced by the regional and local position - the same message, but tailored to the needs of the local community. Such an approach brings considerable benefit especially public confidence. Those charged with managing the coronavirus could learn a lot from this approach. We must get away from a one size fits all response and get smarter at tailoring our messages to meet the needs of different audiences. The needs of those in metropolitan cities are different from those in remote towns and villages. The needs of business people in London are different from farmers and fishermen across the country. The needs of corporate organisations are different from the local plumber who has to rely on his work to provide for his family. Unless people feel that the messages are relevant to them, their families and business they will switch off and ignore them.

We must also move away from the parent/child approach where the statutory authorities are the parent and the public are the children. Having led the crisis comms response to hundreds of incidents over 30 years my approach was that people can only make informed decisions if they are given all the facts. You cannot expect the public to make decisions based on half-truths. If the public think you are keeping information from them they will start to distrust you and this will impact on confidence. I am reminded of the many times I have been told that you cannot say that because of concerns that it 'might worry people'. I'm sorry, but I don't buy that and the key to keeping people safe is that you share with them all the known risks and threats.

This was clearly illustrated to me recently when I was training for a large institution that attracts people from across the UK and globally. We were talking about responding to a marauding terrorist attack and I asked if they had used the excellent video *Run, Hide, Tell* produced by National Counter Terrorism Policing Headquarters that gives clear advice and instructions about what you should do if faced with such a situation (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYPyZ3ErFy0). I was amazed by the response that *'we can't show that because it might frighten people'*. The public can only prepare if they know what they are preparing for and what they should do, the so-called *call to action*.

Whilst the Government have rightly talked about washing hands, blowing your nose in a tissue and self-isolating for 14-days, there has been a complete lack of information about other key areas that will see the country and society continue to deliver business as usual. Why aren't companies and organisations being encouraged to prepare business continuity plans for a major outbreak of coronavirus for example? If the Government need to take tougher measures as spelt out in many of today's newspapers what happens if you lose key staff or they cannot get into work? How do you continue to provide your businesses and services? Is there a different operating model that you can use to deliver your business by staff working from home or by housing them in hotels so that they don't have to travel? These are just some of the issues that we should be encouraging business and organisations to consider now. As Benjamin Franklin once said that *'by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail'* and never was a truer word spoken.

Coronavirus is manageable, but in this age of social media where information moves across borders and communities with ease and within minutes, effective crisis communication is vital and it must be embedded into every part of the strategic and operational response.

There is a great quote that we use at EPiCC: *'if you hear the thunder it's too late to build the ark.'* The storm clouds are starting to gather across the UK and we need to prepare businesses, organisations and the public now before the anticipated deluge starts. In this way we can keep people safe and ensure that that life can carry on as best as it can, whilst being faced with a degree of uncertainty.

As Winston Churchill once said: *'Let our advance worrying become advance thinking and planning'.* Let's start that today before it's too late.

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