

LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS



13 WAYS
There's Always A Way

LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS

This document has been prepared as a source of guidance and support for communities facing an emergency that affords limited time and capacity to prepare and react. This advice has been specifically created for community and municipal leaders, especially those in smaller communities where capacity, expertise, and time may be limiting factors.

This document is **not** exhaustive, absolute, or perfect. Every emergency is unique and requires a tailored response to address it successfully. This document is meant to provide common approaches in general emergencies — and it contains approaches specifically nuanced to the COVID-19 pandemic emergency.

The advice offered here is based on my experience managing the response to, and recovery from, the floods in Southern Alberta in 2013 which impacted 29 communities, as well as my responsibility for oversight of the Alberta Emergency Management Authority during my time as Minister. I worked with many talented professionals over those years.

I have compiled everything I learned into this short and simplified document for you to use at your discretion.

In all cases, provincial, state, and federal directives and recommendations take precedence. This document is provided as a guide in the absence of clear directives, orders, or recommendations from existing emergency management professionals.

1. DON'T PANIC

In most crisis situations, the impact of the event is made worse when decisions are based on fear and people begin to panic. Panic manifests itself as fear or anger. Panic is contagious. It can quickly spread around the community by word of mouth or social media. It is important to ensure your community does not panic or you will quickly lose control of the situation. It is even more important to ensure your emergency response team does not panic.

What everyone in your community needs right now is a calm rational reasonable voice. It does not mean you must have all the answers or even all the information, but you must be able to pass on answers and information you do have. It means you also accept questions you don't have answers to in a reasonable and rational manner. Leadership in a crisis is distinguished by one characteristic: it doesn't panic. It communicates.

2. COMMUNICATE

People are afraid. They are going to be looking for answers and a calm steady voice at the helm. They are looking for someone to express their fears to, who will listen, and take what they say into consideration. It is important to understand that facts and information are not everything though. Facts don't quell fears. You can't make someone who is afraid of flying feel better by telling them that only 1 in 1,000,000 planes crash. Facts don't quell fears. Only two things will help:

- **Calm, rational, reasoned voices and ears:** You should consider simplifying the communications channel to get information out. One email address, one phone number, and one face where people can go for information, and concerns. That person should have a calming demeanour. Messaging needs to be consistent and concise. Consider giving updates often, even if there is no big, new information to give. People must hear things many times (as many as seven times, in fact) before they comprehend the message. And remember, it's only when people believe they have no conduit and no connection that they feel they are being left in the dark. Then they become afraid and panic can take over. Communicate often.

- **Solutions to immediate situations/issues help:** In crisis situations people feel calmer and more trusting when something is being done. Sometimes when anything is being done. You don't have to have the entire response worked out before you share. In a crisis, most people worry about the issues right in front of them, and to maintain confidence and prevent making the situation worse with panicked citizens, address those issues right in front of them. Announce the work done to secure water. If people are simply restless, find things for them to do, even if it's as simple as distributing board games. We often get so focused on the big issues, we forget the little ones, but addressing the little ones may be the most important to address.

3. WORK THE PROBLEM

In a crisis, we often want to eliminate the cause as quickly as possible to the point we forget things that can and should be done in the interim. Focus on boiling the problem down into doable things that address the current challenges your community faces, rather than the entire crisis. Working the problem also means focusing on what you can do, not on what you can't. However, keep in mind we often can accomplish more than we imagine. We tell ourselves we can't do something when, in fact, we can. (See #7.)

For instance, let's say you don't have any tests for the virus left at the hospital. There's no point getting angry at somebody about it or blaming somebody now. You have a situation on your hands. You will be unable to test for the virus. But there are other things you can do. Test temperatures, and triage or quarantine accordingly. Find space for them, make them comfortable, and address their ongoing needs. It will prevent panic. Just remember, work the current problem for a solution you can implement.

That said, there are three main factors to consider as you work this pandemic problem:

- **Isolate and Protect the Vulnerable:** Seniors, those with compromised immune systems, and those with significant health issues related to their respiratory and circulatory systems, are the most vulnerable. Whenever possible it is best to keep them in place for comfort and convenience but securing their location from risk vectors should be a priority.
- **Reduce the Infection Curve:** Hospitals generally operate at between 60% and 80% capacity, depending on their location, their services, and the time of year. It may seem like they have a lot of room, but they don't have as many empty beds as you think, and even if those beds are empty, they are not all resourced for severe issues. In this case, most patients recover since the mortality rate is ranging between 2% and 3%. However, if even 10% of your community becomes ill and needs some level of care, your resources will be overrun.

Again, it is important to reiterate, the mortality rate of this virus is low. The real issue is managing the rate of infection to ensure your health resources are not overrun. (In every other crisis we can call on backup from other communities. In a pandemic situation, however, it is most likely that every other community is equally challenged and will have no resources to send.) Social distancing, cancelling public gatherings, closing schools, and self-quarantining are important steps to control the infection curve, so the situation is as manageable as possible.

***In future situations there are multiple factors to consider in managing a pandemic, such as:**

TRANSMISSION VECTORS: Does it require contact? Is it transmitted in the air?
Is it open in the community? How long can it survive on surfaces?

INCIDENCE OF INFECTION: How many people will the average infected person infect?
How many people show symptoms of infection? How long do symptoms take to appear?

MORTALITY RATE: What is the percentage of patients dying?
What factors mitigate the risk of death in populations?

AT-RISK POPULATIONS: What populations are most at risk?

4. ASSESS YOUR RESOURCES

The only way to work the problem successfully is to know what you have to work with in your own community. You should conduct a quick and ongoing inventory of the physical and human assets available. Consider how this situation could unfold and what challenges it will create. Every situation and every community is unique, but there will be similarities:

- **Health Resources:** You may need new spaces for the ill to be cared for, and whether your health professionals admit it or not, their human resources may become overwhelmed. Although the rules say they cannot use volunteers, if the situation becomes bad enough volunteers will be a requirement.
- **Isolation and Care of the Vulnerable:** Most will likely have family members who will care for them, but some won't. How might you help ensure those folks in the community remain isolated from possible infection, but get groceries and other supplies they need, and do not isolate in a way that can create greater physical and mental safety risks?

Don't wait until the crisis requires an urgent decision or immediate action. As you anticipate the challenges coming with the crisis, seek out and assess the resources you have available in your community to address those anticipated challenges. Buildings, people, expertise, food and water, healthcare, and so on are all resources. If you don't need any of it then you are ahead of the demand curve and that is wonderful. However, that information will be useful for any future crisis event. If you don't gather and assess your resources, you will be playing catch up . . . and you will likely never catch up.

5. MAKE CONNECTIONS

This is not about calling on other communities or governments for resources, but about sharing information and solutions to challenges. In a crisis we are worn down physically and mentally by the challenges, but also by the sense that we are alone in bearing the responsibility and solution seeking. We are not. I have always said we are stronger together, and this situation may prove that point more than any other.

It is important these relationships are made before a crisis unfolds. Frankly, if you don't pick up the phone until the crisis arrives, it is likely your counterparts in neighbouring communities will be as overwhelmed as you are, and they won't have time to pick up the phone. However, it is not too late to try. We are early into this situation, and it is not too late to share ideas on how to address the arising situation, and possibly how you will work together.

6. ABANDON PRIDE AND BUILD THE TEAM

The COVID-19 virus is the enemy. Pride is one of its allies. Pride keeps us from asking for help. Pride keeps us from admitting our weaknesses. Pride keeps us from listening to others. Pride keeps us from focusing on others, because it has us focused on ourselves. In this situation, it is the public you serve that is most important, not you. It doesn't matter if you don't have all the answers. It doesn't matter if people are angry at you. What matters are the challenges people face in this situation and how they can be addressed or mitigated.

One of the best ways to handle the issue of pride is to assemble the best team possible. The best team will be people who work well together. There will be little pride amongst the members. The team will include a variety of people in the community who understand the challenges facing a diverse population.

Together, such a team can address a broad range of issues and will be more creative in the solutions it finds.

7. FORGET RULES AND CHANGE YOUR MINDSET

Everything in our world operates on a set of rules. Sometimes those rules are official (government policy) and sometimes they are in our minds, which means they are self-imposed ideas about how the world should operate. Those rules often prevent us from being creative in our solution seeking.

For instance, you may assess that the hospital is approaching capacity and more space is needed for those in need of care who are non-emergent. Someone may suggest that the school might be a good place to expand care options. You might think to yourself, 'no, they will never let us use the school,' so you don't bother to ask. Likewise, at the school, they may have a policy that says the school can't be used for activities not school related. Whether it is the rule/policy, or the presumptive mindset, a solution to an arising problem is ruled out inappropriately.

Forget the rules and change your mindset. This virus operates outside your rules and mindset. The solutions you create should be able to go beyond them, too.

8. BE PREPARED

This one isn't really about the current situation, but about the next crisis that unfolds. Once this one ends, and it WILL end, it is a perfect time to prepare for the next one. And there will be a next one. Being prepared as a community is usually thought of as having local emergency services in operation and coordinated. Police, fire, and ambulance are important emergency services for sure. However, being a prepared community goes well beyond those services.

The municipality needs to prepare beyond emergency services. Understanding resource limitations and capacity regarding water and waste-water, power sources, natural gas sources, and recreation capacities are important aspects of being prepared for an emergent situation. Having a team to call on and practicing desk-top exercises ensures some understanding of how to get up and running in short order. We don't see emergencies coming. That is why they are emergencies. Practice and prepare as a municipality.

As well, it is important to remind households what they can do to be prepared for the first 24 hours of an emergency. Food and water, basic hygiene care, light and heat sources, and some basic medicines are things every family should have on hand the first 24 hours. Being prepared for those first crucial hours provides time for the emergency services and the municipality to organize and gear up for the coming challenge. It also helps prevent hoarding and puts a lid on panic.

**Leadership in a time of crisis will calm a community —
and help prevent an emergency from escalating into
something drastically worse.**

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