



Collaborating in a Crisis

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Leadership and collaboration are playing a huge role as the current pandemic evolves. There will be ample time to reflect on decisions and mistakes once this is over, but for now, those working through it do not have the luxury of reflection. Another non-crisis luxury is strategizing prior to acting. Typically, when taking a significant decision, a leader will analyze stakeholders and try to parse out who is (and could be) involved, as well as those who could be influential. They will try to surmise individual or group-based interests: how will they react? They will look at existing formal protocols and regulations for guidance.

Like work expanding to fill the space it is given, such analysis in the middle of the crisis can be replaced by simply paying attention to the conversations, interactions and conflict that happen in real-time. The most revealing collisions take place between Authority and Expertise.

Whether by design or as a result of our organizational structures, those who have formal authority (and the decision-making accountability that comes along with it) have to rely on others for expertise. In a crisis, accessing timely information may also be a problem, but experts have two very important roles to play in supporting decision-makers in making urgent decisions.

1 – Provide context

We are used to thinking about communication and positioning with wider audiences (e.g. customers, employees, the general public, etc.), but those in authority may need similar positioning. A businessperson who does not have technical or clinical experience needs to know if such-and-such a result is “bad or terrible” or “expected or unforeseen.” My experience working with those possessing deep expertise is they can fail to understand how the rest of us don’t understand the context. This can be pre-empting the plea to, “Explain it to me like I am 6 years old.”

2 – Dig in (and back off) appropriately

As a consultant that is tasked with helping the non-crisis time analysis, I often request some ranking of issues when it appears that “everything is super important!” In a crisis, this prioritizing can happen more swiftly. We expect our experts to put up a fight, but it is equally important to back off when your particular area of expertise does not rise to the top of the list. With the current pandemic, experts disagree on the importance of protecting individual privacy of information when gathering data that may help stem the spread of COVID-19. I would not be surprised if we see short-term intrusiveness that would not be normally acceptable. Humility should not come easy to an expert, but may be required when your particular area takes a secondary role... for now, of course.

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