



### 3 Leadership Lessons from the Covid-19 Response

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No one that I've read or heard in the media, from the World Health Organization to TV pundits, seems to disagree that the Covid-19 virus that originated in Wuhan, China is a pandemic. In less than 4 months, it had spread to almost every country in the world.

This corona virus has terrified individuals, governments, businesses, and stock markets across the globe. Based on the lines of crazed, masked shoppers inside and outside of major big box retailers scooping up toilet paper, disinfectant, and bottled water, the fear of this virus is akin to the bubonic plague. This bubonic virus, spread by fleas, resulted in the deaths of 30% of all Europeans in the late 1300's (recall the movie, *Search for the Holy Grail*, "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!").

Based on the data available as of the writing of this article--and assuming the data are accurate--Covid-19 has claimed lives of those who contract it ranging from 12% in Italy, 5% in places like China, France, and the UK, and 1% in the United States and South Korea. What is the comparison with the percentage of deaths in the US every year from seasonal influenza? Well, that is about .1%, or roughly one tenth the rate for Covid-19. This is a certainly a serious pandemic, yet 99 percent of those infected eventually recover.

In the midst of the global reaction to this illness, we have seen a range of responses from global leaders as the pandemic crossed their borders. What best practices can we glean from the actions of these leaders? Here are three leadership lessons from the Covid-19 response.

**Set Aside Personal/Political Agendas.** In late January, when other countries would have been helped by the "heads up", reports started to emerge that Chinese authorities may have delayed reporting the outbreak purposely, and then downplayed and covered up what they knew. This included restraining a doctor who tried to warn colleagues about the virus. China's actions early on may have unintentionally postponed the global response to a deadly pathogen and allowed it to spread further. According to a January 29 report in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, by authors from the Chinese CDC, there were already health care workers infected in early January, which is evidence of human to human transmission. But the public was not informed about this situation until January 18. People were still being told there was no strong evidence of human-to-human transmission. In the same article, there's other evidence that human-to-human transmission was occurring already in December.

Meanwhile, in Italy, during the first week of March, officials decided to lock down and quarantine 16 million people to fight the disease after it had been allowed to ravage Italians unabated for six weeks. The quarantine threatened to put those who disobey in jail for 3 months. What were their reasons in Italy, which has the worst death toll percentage, to not respond for six weeks, and then suddenly drop the quarantine curtain around massive population groups? In a shame/honor culture like China, it becomes clearer why they might have delayed announcing the virus, but what personal or political agenda stopped the Italians from acting immediately, as did the US and South Korea?

**Move Decisively, but Thoughtfully.** In the US, the CDC issued a travel notice for Wuhan a week after China announced the coronavirus discovery in their country on December 31st, and within three weeks, the CDC established a management system to collect and share information about the virus, issued a travel health notice for Wuhan, and began screening at three US airports. The NIH also began working on a vaccine, as the CDC urged all Americans to avoid nonessential travel to China. In early February, the CDC began shipping test kits to US and international labs (about 30 countries) and expanded a partnership with a private research and development company to expedite development of a vaccine.

In South Korea, leaders were meeting with medical companies one week after the first confirmed case in their country in late January. By mid-February, Koreans were shipping thousands of test kits, testing thousands of individuals, and imposing emergency measures in the city where the contagion was spreading most quickly. These decisions were made relatively quickly as new information was available and in collaboration with medical experts and government organizations in both countries.

**Communicate, Communicate, Communicate.** In South Korea, relentless public messaging urged citizens to seek testing if they, or someone they knew, developed symptoms. At walk-in centers, health-care workers administered throat swabs. Buildings started using thermal imaging cameras to detect fevers and restaurants began to check for temps before allowing customers to enter. Leaders concluded that limiting the outbreak would require keeping citizens fully informed and requesting their cooperation.

During January/February in the US, the President's Corona Virus Task Force was formed to help monitor and contain the spread of the virus, the illness was declared a public health emergency, and further Chinese travel restrictions were announced, including suspended entry to the US for foreign nationals who posed a risk of virus transmission. The news media began to communicate about the outbreak after the first case on US soil was confirmed on January 21<sup>st</sup>, and this information spread has increased sharply in the news cycle since the virus accelerated around February 21<sup>st</sup>. By mid-march, daily briefings were being held to inform the public about the most recent and accurate information about the spread of this illness.

Though these examples are specifically from the Covid-19 epidemic, the themes for leaders in a multitude of situations still hold true. When a crisis hits, set aside your personal/political agenda, move decisively and thoughtfully into action, and communicate as much as possible, as often as possible to keep people informed.