CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Finding the Right Words in a Crisis

by Carmine Gallo

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Illustration by Simoul Alva

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When New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that all nonessential workers should stay home to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, a reporter asked why he had decided to issue a "shelter-in-place" order. Cuomo corrected him:

> “It is not shelter in place. Words matter, because people are scared, and people panic. Shelter in place is used currently for an active shooter or a school shooting. We are fighting a war on two fronts. We are fighting the virus, and we are fighting fear. When we act on fears, then we’re in a dangerous place.”

Throughout much of human history, leaders have relied on their words to spark action. And many economists and CEOs today swear that words are the most important tool in a world where “command and control” leadership has given way to power by persuasion.

Cuomo has mastered the skill. His press briefings demonstrate how in times of crisis, words are essential to capturing the attention and trust of your audience. Business leaders who want to serve as beacons of clarity and hope for their teams during this uncertain time can follow his lead by applying a few best practices to their speech.

Replace long words with short ones. In his groundbreaking book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Nobel economist Daniel Kahneman writes, “If you care about being thought credible and intelligent, do not use complex language where simpler language will do.” Effective leaders speak in simple language — and simple means short.

This is especially true during a crisis, when attention spans are flagging and noise levels are high. People are being bombarded by information, some of which is misleading or false. The clearer and more concise you are, the better your chances of getting your message across and persuading people to act on it.

In mid-March, when Cuomo issued the order that would upend life for millions of New Yorkers and shut down the world’s financial center, he had to make the news instantly clear and understandable. So he tweeted this message: “Stay Home. Stop the Spread. Save

Lives." The post spoke volumes — in just 39 characters amounting to seven one-syllable words.

If Cuomo had tried to come off as what many consider "professional," his message might have sounded like this: "For the preservation of public health and safety, I hereby order all residents not engaged in essential activities that impact critical infrastructure to remain in their residences in order to mitigate the propagation of the coronavirus and to minimize morbidity and mortality."

Consider the two messages side-by-side. The "professional" version is confusing and convoluted, full of the bureaucratic jargon effective communicators avoid. The Twitter message uses simple Anglo-Saxon words such as "stay," "home," and "lives." Compared with words derived from Latin, Anglo-Saxon words are more likely to be monosyllabic, concrete, and easy to understand.

As you think about how to share your next message, remember that language influenced by the Anglo-Saxon period has been used by many great leaders. Winston Churchill once said, "The shorter words of a language are usually the more ancient. Their meaning is more ingrained in the national character and they appeal to greater force." In a memo titled "Brevity," he urged government administrators to replace long "woolly phrases" with single conversational words, pointing out that brevity equals clarity and that directness makes things easier to understand.

Find analogies. Neuroscientists have found that our brains process the world by associating the new or unknown with something familiar. When presented with a novel idea, our brains don't ask, "What is it?" They ask, "What is it like?"

Analogies answer that question. They serve as mental shortcuts that help us understand complex events. Leaders who are great communicators in a crisis are skilled at finding analogies, because they have to persuade people to act quickly.

Cuomo used that strategy on April 4, resurrecting President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "fire hose" analogy to explain why it was in Oregon's best interests to send 140 ventilators to New York. "We're all in the same battle," he said. "You want to contain the enemy. Oregon could have a significant problem towards May. Our problem is now. It's smart from Oregon's self-interest. They see the fire spreading. Stop the fire where it is before it gets to my home."

Let's look at the original context. In 1940, with Nazi Germany having set its sights on England after conquering France, Churchill appealed to Roosevelt for arms and supplies. In response, Roosevelt proposed the Lend-Lease program, under which America would loan war supplies to allies while remaining neutral itself. Here's how he sold it to the public: "Suppose my neighbor's home catches fire, and I have a length of garden hose four or five hundred feet away," he said. "If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help him to put out his fire."

Roosevelt emphasized that he wouldn't ask his neighbor to pay for the hose ahead of time. If it was intact after the war, the neighbor would return it. If it was damaged, the neighbor would replace it. The message, in short: Although both sides are acting out of self-interest, they can work together to stop chaos from spreading.

After drawing on Roosevelt's analogy from 80 years before, Cuomo observed that "FDR had such a beautiful way of taking complicated issues and communicating [them] in common-sense language."

Personalize the crisis. The human brain is also wired for storytelling. In his best-selling book *Sapiens*, historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that it was only through stories that our species was able to conquer the world. Our advanced language skills — specifically, our ability to connect with one another through narrative — allowed us to cooperate in ways other species could not.

Cooperation is essential in a crisis, so effective leaders need to be strong storytellers.

Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House's Coronavirus Response Coordinator, is a case in point. She has built a reputation for using personal stories to connect with her audiences. On March 25 she told a heart-wrenching story to underscore the importance of social distancing.

Birx's grandmother, Leah, was just 11 years old during the 1918 flu pandemic, which killed some 50 million people. Leah caught the flu and infected her mother, who had a comprised immune system and died from the disease. "[Leah] never forgot that she was the child who was in school who innocently brought that flu home,"Birx said. "My grandmother lived with that for 88 years. This is not a theoretical. This is a reality."

Birx told the story to reinforce her key message: All Americans play a role in protecting one another. The message appears to be working. On April 8, she announced that expected deaths from Covid-19 had dropped from earlier forecasts because "Americans are... following through on these behavioral changes."

Observe the rule of three. Scholars of rhetoric and persuasion argue that people like things grouped in threes, because we can hold only a few items in short-term memory. If you give people three instructions, they're likely to remember them all. Give them five, six, or more, and they'll probably forget most of them. And people can't act on what they can't remember.

In a crisis, leaders who give fewer instructions — but more-concrete ones — are more likely to see people act on their words.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease at the National Institutes of Health, is widely admired for his straight talk and steady demeanor. CNN has called him "a public force" who translates complex medical information into everyday language. His strategy? "You don't want to impress people and razzle-dazzle them with your knowledge," Fauci says. "You just want them to understand what you're talking about."

To that end, Fauci often limits himself to three key points. For example, in an April 5 appearance on *Face the Nation*, he said the country would be able to relax social-distancing guidelines only when three things were in place: "the ability to test, isolate, and do contact tracing."

Fauci also stressed that Americans must continue to "physically separate" from one another by doing three things: staying six feet apart, limiting gatherings to 10 or fewer people, and avoiding mass interactions, such as in restaurants, bars, and theaters.

Like a virus, words are infectious. They can instill fear and panic or facilitate understanding and calm. Above all, they can spark action. So choose them carefully.

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