

UNDERSTANDING RISK COMMUNICATION

Let's face it, we're all a little worried. The rapid spread and global impact of the COVID-19 coronavirus has already changed the way we live and work before it's even peaked. Adding to the worry in this type of situation are one of the many factors that are out of our control. It's okay, or even healthy, to have a bit of worry, but becoming so overwhelmed you decide it's time to bury your head in the sand isn't going to help you or your utility or your company get through this pandemic.

What makes us afraid is dealing with those things that are unfamiliar, out of our control, and makes us anxious about the future.

Yes, our workforce and colleagues will be impacted. So will your customers, partners and communities. But it's not all out of your control. You have options and decisions to make now to make things go smoother. Doing these things will help *'get it right'*.

Things will seem out of your control, but if you haven't done so already, sit down and work through a crisis plan. Planning to deal with coronavirus-related hurdles now will help ensure all have confidence in you after the fact.

If you don't have a crisis plan that includes considerations for pandemics you need one, now. It is here and it is real. Be honest as you assess your status. Ask and answer what you can do and what is truly out of your control. An honest examination provides you with a plan. Don't strive for perfection. Strive for a clear vision based on what you know. Then, be flexible. We talk about *'fluidity.'* This is a real-life definition of what that term means. Don't only plan for the next 30-60 days; think further out.

How about knowing what you'll say during the predictable next stages of the crisis? Keep this thought in mind. What you think you know now from what you gather from news, etc., is behind the curve. The reality is today's information is two, three or maybe seven days or more beyond what you know. You need to measure what you know today, and then project out where things will be in the future. Remember you don't have to be perfect – just realistically thoughtful – and then be prepared to reassess daily. Having a plan and adjusting as you go is more than half the battle.

That is not impossible. Emergency responders do this all the time. As an appointed Fire Commissioner, I am watching my own fire department do this daily. Use what you have seen three days ago and if nothing else, do the math. Just extrapolate out and you will at least have a sense of where things are going.

It's in your interests to help your stakeholders, customers, clients feel more confident. Be clear as to how you're protecting their safety, how you're going to continue to deliver goods or services, and how your employees can keep doing their jobs. Calm their fears by providing them honest, clear information. Be transparent. Say what you know and be honest about what you don't know.

As you do the planning process, don't forget this simple principle. You would rather apologize for being too extreme in your predications than expressing regrets for failing to plan far enough ahead. We ARE talking about public safety.

And, now is the time to reinforce your own credibility. With confidence shaken among everyone, including your own staff, it's critical that every message, and every action, reminds people that you care

about them, you're certain you're doing the right thing, or trying to do the right thing, and you're doing it well.

Winging it doesn't work. Spit-balling has never been a valid crisis management plan. The only honest answer is to address the issues up front, be as clear as you can be about what you know and don't know, and point the way forward with a plan that assures people you accept the situation and are providing them the best information and plan you can.

For more on Risk and Resilience, check out the AWWA resource page.

<https://www.awwa.org/Resources-Tools/Resource-Topics/Risk-Resilience>

We will get through this – together.

Be well and protect your family and colleagues.

Mike Howe, Executive Director
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