

Leadership Insight

Governments Dealing with a Pandemic

by Pat Leahy



Pat Leahy is the political editor of The Irish Times. He is the author of two books and is a frequent contributor to radio and television programmes about politics.

How does a government manage a crisis?

Talk to anyone who has worked in government and they will tell you that often their life seems like dealing with one crisis after another.

They enter government expecting to implement new policies, improve old ones, make the state work better for its citizens and leave a legacy. They leave a few years later wondering why they didn't get time for all that and recalling only a series of crisis management meetings and media storms. In a political world where government is under constant media scrutiny and opposition from political rivals, the urgent often trumps the important.

Getting to the end of the day and the end of the week is achievement enough.

Actually, most political "crises" aren't actually crises at all. They are passing political rows which may be intense but ultimately will be forgotten, many of them quickly.

Occasionally, though, a crisis comes along that will define a government's political legacy. Its entry in the history books will be an account of how it managed the challenges posed by the crisis, and whether it ultimately overcame them.

Governments all over the world are currently faced with one such crisis, as the pandemic ravages their societies, threatens to overwhelm health systems and decimates economies. In the UK, the economic impact has been twice as severe as the financial crash; in the US, the pandemic has already killed almost four times as many Americans as the Vietnam War.

A decade ago, as the financial crisis raged, destroying the prosperity to which people had become accustomed after a decade and half of more or less constant economic growth, governments were two years into another existential crisis. A few years previously, the United States was faced with its most serious challenge in decades when it came under terrorist attack on its own soil. That's three times in the last 20 years. In other words, these major events, which have the potential to threaten the stability of society, occur more frequently than you might think. So how should governments deal with them?

1. Understand the problem

When a major crisis hits, the first need a government has is reliable, fast information. The better the information a government has, the better its decision-making is likely to be. While most governments have their own information gathering processes and networks – from intelligence and security force reports – they will also rely heavily on media reporting to construct an accurate picture. Social media and internet data is also increasingly relied upon to provide up to date information – a geographic analysis of Google searches for specific symptoms, for instance, can indicate where outbreaks of infectious diseases are most acute. It is the job of analysts and officials to collate all available information into a rapid briefing, likely to be constantly updated, for decision-makers.

The key for a government is to understand the problem and define its extent. If it is a security alert, where is its locus; if an outbreak of illness,



who is it affecting, and how; if a major incident, such as an industrial accident, what is its nature, and how will it affect people? How will things look in a week's time? What is the worst case and best case scenario? Major world powers, such as the US, have an always-on infrastructure which constantly monitors the globe for events and emergencies which could affect their interests. Nowadays, the EU also has an "EU Situation Room" which monitors and reports on worldwide events on a 24/7 basis.

It is the early phase of a crisis that the need for information is at its most acute, as a government seeks to comprehend the nature and scale of the unfolding challenge. In the hours after the 9/11 attacks, the United States government didn't know if the country was under general or isolated assault; only once all planes had been grounded and military control of US airspace established, did the panic and uncertainty abate. The Prussian general and military theorist Von Clausewitz called it "the fog of war". So it is in a crisis.

2. Plan the response

Once a government has the best possible information, it must rapidly begin to plan its response. This requires an up-to-date knowledge of the state's capacities and capabilities and how they can be applied to meet the needs of the crisis. When the pandemic hit, the first call of many leaders around world was to their healthcare systems to assess the dangers and capacities; the second was to their national treasuries to assess their scope to fund additional healthcare needs and economic supports. The question "What do we need to do?" is soon followed by the related question: "What can we do?" In whatever field, governments need to marshal their forces, realising the limits of what state action can achieve. The dangers of overreach are obvious: in 2008, the Irish Government believed it had the necessary financial firepower to guarantee to cover any likely losses in the banks. Turned out it didn't.

Crisis responses need to be planned over the short, medium and longer

term. Any crisis evolves: the measures required in the initial stage will not be those employed later in the process.

3. Communicate

For any government in any crisis situation – from Churchill's wartime broadcasts to the Irish Government's information campaigns on Covid – communicating with its people is essential. Managing a crisis successfully depends to a greater or lesser extent on managing the public reaction to it and this depends on effective communication from government.

Communications have to be clear, regular, honest and coherent. In a variety of different circumstances, governments will choose to provide daily or even more than daily briefings to the media but will also communicate directly to the public through live broadcasts of briefings and internet and social media-based channels. In many cases, this will be done through a small number of familiar faces, the same people giving the same messages to the public. It's hard to overstate the importance of communications in managing any crisis.

Equally important is internal government communications. It is essential that the different branches of government can talk effectively to another, to share information and agree strategy. Perhaps surprisingly to those of us on the outside, the different parts of government often find it easier to talk to the outside world than they do to each other. Governments often operate in silos; overcoming this is an essential part of effective crisis management.

4 Show authority

It is important for the government not just to be in control, but to be seen to be in control. Communications are an essential part of this. But so is showing authority. Sometimes this can be as simple as putting police on the streets; at times of terrorist threats, they will likely be accompanied by military personnel. It may not just be symbolic; in the hours after the 9/11 attacks, the White House gave the Air Force the authority to shoot down any more

passenger jets it thought had been hijacked.

At times of crisis, people want somebody to be in charge; they want the government to step up. In the early days of the pandemic, as governments all over the world took abrupt action, they saw their approval ratings soar – pollsters call it the "rally round the flag" effect. In such situations, people respond to swift action, efficiently executed, clearly communicated.

Within governments, clear lines of decision-making are essential. Any government doesn't just have to know what it wants to do – it needs to know how it's going to decide what to do. Stuttering decision-making and a lack of authority always make things worse. Accounts of the financial crisis often show European governments struggling to show financial markets that they had the will and the means to act.



In the subsequent Eurozone crisis, it was only when the European Central Bank brought its authority to bear – ECB chief Mario Draghi's famous "whatever it takes" speech – that the markets calmed, and the danger of a currency collapse abated.

5. Be flexible

The world moves fast; in a crisis it can move with lightening speed. Natural disasters, industrial accidents, cyber events – all change by the minute. Any government will have to adapt throughout a crisis, recognising that what worked yesterday may not work today. As the pandemic spread across the world, the WHO advised governments to act fast – don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Governments will also have to improvise in the face of a crisis. One of the decisive moments of the second world war – the evacuation of

the British Expeditionary Force from the French port of Dunkirk in part aboard a flotilla of privately owned small fishing and pleasure craft – was perhaps the ultimate improvisation.

Facing the future

Preparing for a major emergency is an important part of the work of any government; there are officials everywhere who spend a good part of their time thinking of all the terrible things that could happen, and then wondering how to prevent or react to them.

Ireland now publishes an annual National Risk Assessment. The latest edition outlines a series of geopolitical, economic, social, environmental and technological risks. At a time of global uncertainty, climate change, economic instability, public health threats and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, preparation for a crisis

has never been more important.

In his foreword to the document, then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar quoted the American poet Maya Angelou. We should always be "hoping for the best, prepared for the worst," Varadkar said, "and unsurprised by anything in between".

We should always be "hoping for the best, prepared for the worst," Varadkar said, "and unsurprised by anything in between".



Covid 2019
Axon
Isolation
Module for
Accountants

The Largest Irish Outsourcing Partner

Our greatest weakness lies in giving up.
The most certain way to succeed is always
to try just one more time.



axon outsourcing

Passionate Trustworthy Energetic

ACCOUNTING • BOOK KEEPING • TAX RETURNS
AUDITS • ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE • ACCOUNTS PAYABLE
• PAYROLL • YEAR ENDS • OUTSOURCED IT FUNCTIONS

Get in touch for free trial
E: info@axonoutsourcing.ie P: 00353 15394779 Ext 201
www.axonoutsourcing.com

