Leadership in the time of Coronavirus

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In January Chinese scientists reported a deadly new virus - coronavirus or COVID-19 - that spread from person to person and caused an acute respiratory disease. Of the first 99 cases 17% needed critical care and 11 people died. There was neither a vaccination nor a cure. The infection spread rapidly. In the past three months the virus has crossed international borders to trigger a global pandemic. Recorded figures, probably an underestimate, revealed a global death toll exceeding 150,000 by mid-April.

We know from earlier pandemics (such as influenza, HIV/Aids, Sars and Ebola) that the most effective interventions are too slow the spread of a virus by reducing or eliminating contact between people. Governments take the lead by enforcing social distancing, using 'lockdowns', closing businesses and schools, banning large gatherings and encouraging those who can work from home to do so. Containment of the virus is strengthened by testing, contact tracing and quarantine. Over time the number of people infected should reduce, with fewer deaths and lower demand for intensive care. For these interventions to work health and care services must be able to cope with demands and all 'front line' workers provided with protective clothing and equipment. An unwelcome outcome of these measures is that economic activity is curtailed, the economy shrinks rapidly, people lose their jobs and there can be severe hardship for people with few resources.

The experience of Covid–19 varies widely between countries and organisations. Some countries, like South Korea, Germany and New Zealand, appear to have done well. Others are struggling to cope with large numbers of very ill people. International comparisons give intriguing insights, but it is too early to say whether differences result from the quality of leadership decisions. Data may not be comparable and variables too many to discern which have been key to reducing deaths and economic damage. At this stage I have relied on impressions of what is working and what is failing in the society which is most familiar to me – the UK.

What kind of problem is Covid -19?

The Covid-19 pandemic challenges traditional ideas of leadership and strategic planning. In responding to this crisis leaders should first decide how they go about finding solutions. The way a problem is approached depends on the kind of problem it is. A simple problem can be solved by individual analysis and an ideal solution applied by command and control. Covid-19 is a complex, urgent, uncertain and volatile problem. It requires the capacity to learn rapidly. Solutions emerge by synthesising the ideas of leaders and the advice of a wide range of experts and specialists.

A complex problem – Covid-19 is more than a medical crisis. Mitigating its effects is bringing a severe economic downturn on a scale rivalling the great depression of the 1930s. Complex problems have interwoven causes and effects. They cannot be solved solely by linear, logical, analytical thinking, or by mathematical modelling alone. Action in

one area, to sustain employment for example, may have unintended consequences elsewhere, for example on fiscal targets. There is no single right answer to Covid-19. There are many possible answers, some better than others, each bringing their own problems. Most answers require behaviour change, which is notoriously hard to achieve. Solutions emerge from the advice and insights of a wide range of experts, specialists and advisers, described by one observer as an 'alphabet soup' of committees. Advisers need to present their findings honestly and courageously. Leaders need to be able to hear, evaluate and synthesise advice from a range of sources.

An urgent problem – the virus moves quickly, as has our understanding of it. Delays in imposing social distancing can greatly increase the number of infections. As Lenin observed 'there are decades where nothing happens and there are weeks where decades happen'. Urgency demands responsive action and at times of crisis leaders must make timely decisions. The danger is that they may assume the problem is simple and that they can act independently and impose solutions that have not been thought through. Urgency can be the autocracy and a desire to control, cancelling out the benefits that would come from listening to and synthesising the advice of others.

An uncertain problem – Covid-19 is new and we have much to learn about it. We do not know, for example, if people who have recovered from it are vulnerable to further bouts of infection. Nor can we predict with any accuracy the economic and social outcomes of our interventions. We do not know when social distancing will end or a vaccine will be available. We can mitigate some risks, but uncertainty remains. Leaders can deal with uncertainty by taking small steps at a time, by being open to new knowledge and adapting their actions in the light of it, and by being clear about their purpose and values.

A volatile problem - The situation is volatile because people are afraid and decision makers are under great pressure. There is fierce media scrutiny. Alarm can spread rapidly. Government messages need to be clear and reassuring. When people fear that they may be infected by others it becomes easy to blame outsiders and minority groups. Unrest may turn to violence against 'others'. Leaders need to ensure that their messages do not blame or vilify vulnerable groups.

What qualities would we expect to observe in effective leaders?

The ability to learn from experience – Covid-19 requires the capacity to learn from our own experience and, more importantly, that of others. We need the humility to learn from diverse, and sometimes unexpected, sources such as, for example, South Korea whose leaders appear to have limited numbers infected by taking early and decisive action on testing. Effective leaders will be comfortable in a learning culture and will welcome advice from people who are not afraid to speak the truth, who challenge conventional wisdom and offer alternative points of view. Effective leaders do not surround themselves by courtiers or 'nodding dogs' who defer to authority. They listen, even when messages are uncomfortable. They appoint specialists and experts. They look to Universities to learn from their best scientists, medics, technicians, economists and organisation change specialists. In February UK Government advisers predicted that if no action was taken up to 500,000 people in the UK might die of the virus. They failed to make their case strongly enough and leaders were reluctant to accept their dire warning. Valuable time was lost before action was taken.

Having self knowledge - Effective leaders know their blind spots. They will recognise their own cognitive biases, the familiar routes by which they seek solutions. In Asia there was experience of Sars. In Europe and the US scientists thought the virus was more like flu, which they had experienced. This assumption proved to be wrong. We are programmed to be instinctively cautious. We may carry unconscious stereotypes which mean that we only look for ideas from 'people like us'. Such cognitive bias may have meant that Governments learnt less from the experience of China and South Korea than they might have done. It looks like the early imposition of social distancing in the UK was opposed by advisers who thought that keeping people at home might be acceptable in an autocracy but would be resisted in a democracy. That assumption (that cognitive bias) proved to be wrong.

Admitting when things go wrong and being agile in putting them right – in this crisis we need leaders who are practical, open and who generate trust. We trust people who can recognise failure and ensure that it is not repeated, who respond positively when new information comes to light. We respect leaders who make their assumptions transparent and allow open debate, scrutiny and challenge. From open conversations new solutions may emerge. Our Chancellor has submitted at least four budgets this year with each improving on the provisions of the one preceding it. The first was tabled before the economic impact of social distancing was clear. The second brought tax reliefs and benefits for private businesses and their employees. The third supported self- employed people. The fourth brought help to the charitable sector. Far from undermining his authority, his agile, responsive approach to managing the economy was warmly welcomed and praised. It enhanced his reputation.

Recognising the importance of ethics in decision making - technical solutions to complex problems have their limitations and on their own may be dangerous. Statistical models which rely on direct and observable causality may give misleading results when applied to complex problems with multiple variables. Effective governance requires that we recognise multiple constituencies where decisions may have different consequences for different groups. It requires that we have emotional intelligence and are clear about our values. Early on in the spread of Covid-19 it emerged that it could have disastrous consequences for older people. It is becoming clearer that (in Europe) it impacts more on men than women and on ethnic minorities more than others. An ethical approach to leading in these circumstances means collecting data to understand the causes of these disparities and taking action to promote fairness. Ethical decisions generate and sustain trust when they consistently respect and care for others, and outcomes are perceived as fair. In Europe and the US there is a lively debate that pits social isolation, prioritising health needs and minimising direct deaths from the virus against allowing normal life, with the economy continuing to function. That debate and the choices that follow will be unifying if they overtly incorporate value judgements and are consistent with good citizenship.

In a time of fear and loss we need leaders who generate hope that one day things will be better. There are clear signs that we are valuing public services and essential workers more. Some leaders are demonstrating emotional intelligence and empathy. By allowing critical thinking they are sponsoring creativity. When this time has passed, I'm hoping that these demonstrations of effective leadership are sustained. These gains are also sparking local changes. In my neighbourhood we have formed a group that shares knowledge and supports vulnerable people. For the first time I feel like I'm living in a community which works constructively together. Long may it last.