Northwest Colorado
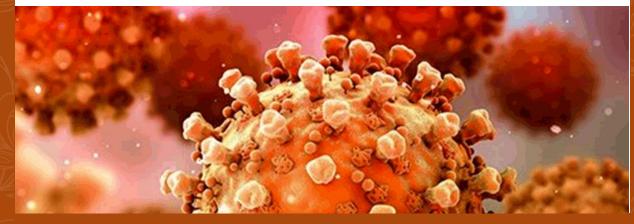COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

Lesson #4: Can intensive communications change social behavior?

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COVID provided many social experiments. We needed to change our behavior rapidly. How would we know what to do?

Prior to March 2020, in Eagle County and across the nation citizens and business owners had not been through a crisis with so many unanswered questions. Nor had most of us been asked to adapt to such rapidly deployed and fluid guidelines that would require immediate paradigm shifts in our individual and social behavior. There would be many questions.

Basic guidance was based on CDC recommendations, face coverings, 6-foot distancing, no social gatherings. As for the specifics of how that translated, this was left to local governments to communicate.

At first, we told ourselves the changes were temporary. It was a small adventure. It felt voluntary. Doing our part in a crisis.

The nation was about to begin a vast experiment in persuading citizens to modify their behavior but what to say, or how to behave wasn't defined at the national level. At the forefront of communicating were local governments. Eagle County did what any entity about to be inundated with questions would do. They set up a database.

Eagle county also set up a COVID call line and email. This alone was an innovation. They also went one step further so that they could organize and understand that data that the questions would provide. The questions and comments were recorded into a master Google spreadsheet which was sifted and sorted into a running scroll of feedback. This provided real-time data monitored daily by county leadership and the Incident Management Team. They could see what information people were hearing based on the questions. They modified their outputs to try to answer the questions as they arose. For a local government, using public input data in that manner to shape outgoing public information was not normal. That solution is a story unto itself. The County has been recognized by Google and others for that innovation. Another team of employees as well as the County Commissioners shifted gears to respond to every contact that hit the spreadsheet.

It soon became clear that the public health crisis had also created a massive communications crisis, and the County had both anecdotal input from those taking the calls and a growing history of data which could be observed. The county got an inkling of the riptides of inconsistent communications from various levels of government from observing communication trends that were aggregated through the spreadsheet. It might make an interesting Ph.D for someone willing to sort back through it all.

Working together within the County, a group of interagency public information officers monitored social media for the same purpose, as they did during all incidents in recent years. They were looking for mis-information that needed to be addressed during the next press briefing. In this case they watched to be able to anticipate questions, and to observe what people got worked-up about.

At Eagle County, manager Jeff Shroll was impressed with how readily county employees and elected officials stepped forward to be front-line communications responders. Labeling those on a call line in a crisis "first responders" may sound like hyperbole to some. Shroll would disagree. "When you look county wide, it's kind of an Eagle County "thing" but the (elected commissioners) BOCC were answering every single hotline call and email" that is, for each one that wasn't closed with a simple answer or referral, someone was calling that person back. They were replying to the complex, gray area questions about policy. Why the mask order? Why are you ruining my business? One can only imagine. Shroll said admiringly, "That was a heavy lift." He noted that offering up a COVID hotline was somewhat unconventional, yet distinctly a part of the county culture. Employees were ready and willing to take calls and answer questions. This may be taken the wrong way by some for its simple truth. "Typically, that level would get ignored because public health and emergency management teams don't have the bandwidth." And they didn't. It took a large portion of a county government.

The county communications team with the top administrative staff was fully occupied with the hour-by-hour incident response. While intake and response to public questions went on, strategizing how to respond to what they saw in the aggregated trends of questions fell to an ad-hoc team of county leaders and employees who were confronted with questions that increasingly turned hostile. "Answering complaints is second to responding to the disease. I look at the comments and spreadsheet." Shroll noted that as April wore into May, comments were getting nastier. "Both sides – my death is going to be on your hands. Or – you can't tell me what to do or wear a mask. That has been the Commissioners role (along with employees from various departments.)" It is one thing to put out information, another to take input and a third to put the two together into a feedback loop.

What is most important is understanding that there are multiple layers of communicating through a crisis. There is deciding upon and crafting messaging to push out. Another level is monitoring how that messaging is working (if it is working). Then responding to input from those who may be deeply informed and nuanced in their feedback who expect to be met with someone who is informed to that level, as well as responding those who are just frustrated and venting is another. Toggling back and forth was challenging. Eagle County was trying to act at all levels, and it was becoming obvious they could not do it internally, even with over 500 employees.

What those at the other end of the line were expressing was that changing behaviors is emotional, and disorienting. It required significant trust. Eagle County was trying to build trust on a one-on-one basis in real time.

What was happening at a national level only made their work at the local level all that more impressive. During the days prior to the Colorado Governor's March 10th news conference, while Washington D.C. remained in full public denial about the crisis, it turns out that Eagle County set a path of response to the health crisis that would provide signposts for others across the state. They also navigated a communications chasm through cross-messaging between federal and state governments, between governors and counties, and between messaging from other counties as well as by citizens through social media. Messaging was one of the most challenging aspects of the pandemic. Different messages were being used to sway public opinion and steer policy rather than just explain it. It was an election year. Layered over that, actual conditions, number of hospital beds, ventilators, etc., were vastly different from county to county meaning that messaging changed every 50-100 miles one traveled, in Eagle's proximity there were four others from which residents commuted in and out. Whatever progressive stage of public health ordered restrictions any particular county or state was in it was probably different where some of the population woke up from where it worked. The localized nature of risk factors proved a continuing challenge. It didn't make much sense to many why things were different from place to place. It was an advantage that Eagle County created a direct line to many people who provided an opportunity that the county was ready for – they called and asked, or they called and vented. It may not have felt like an opportunity to many county employees but it was.

Public communications would become even more difficult as the summer heated up across the country, while the pent-up pressure to travel and be social built as the seasons rolled along. With so many questions still un-answered about the virus, and with a presidential election rhetoric that had mostly been put on pause so far communication challenges grew. By that time, Eagle County had realized it needed another team of communications specialists to get ahead of the messaging. The climate for delivering frank, necessary public health directives and having it be received with the full attention of a nation of people was passing. Those willing to take messaging at face value and comply was rapidly passing. Even as social distancing suppressed the transmission curve in one state and in another, behaviors were told to relax, and the virus transmission began an upward trajectory. Social media and the fractured national media landscape were not helpful to local messaging.

Looking back on the pandemic after a year or more from when it began, it is difficult to recall just how suddenly leadership asked for so many of our behaviors to change. Our restraint from worst instincts was right at the edge. There were police stationed outside grocery stores. We binge shopped and created a shortage of toilet paper. We overwhelmed supply chains for many foods and PPE. The health crisis was real. So was the economic crisis our panic created. Mostly people took in the calming messages and it went fine. Many of us modified our spaces, and lives and worked from home. We suddenly stopped many of our activities, like going out to eat or gathering for events, even shaking hands. At a personal level, we added a piece of cloth to our face every time we were in public. We re-learned how to greet people, at first awkwardly, then with elbow bumps and air hugs. We kept children home from school. We stopped

many of our daily activities. We did what was asked of us.

Who knew how to keep messaging in the right tone and tenor to be accepted? Those who were listening. They were listening in Eagle County.

Where did people take their cues as to which actions to take? At Eagle County which through the summer was able to be ahead of other counties in proposing modifications and exceptions to state guidelines largely because of the degree of local compliance, there was a sense that these intense efforts to listen, take in what was being said, craft messaging, rinse and repeat may have been part of the factor in that success.

This project began with inquiries to numerous contacts at Eagle County about adaptations made within the organization during the first months of the COVID response. These conversations resulted in a long story about governance during a pandemic. That piece has been serialized into these enumerated COVID Lessons newsletters being shared as a series. The intent is to gather comments, reflections and stories from readers. At the end of each is an opportunity for you to share your story, or you can just email me directly at **jstavney@nwccog.org** . Note that the project focus is on organizational lessons which are likely long-term best practices for our member jurisdictions. The project does not attempt to dive into the nuances of science or public health policy.

Jon Stavney
Executive Director
JStavney@nwccog.org

We'd love to hear your experiences about social behavior and the impact of communications.
Please send your thoughts email to Jon here